



The Guardians of Br'thn Resonance

© 2006 Chris Patton.
proofread
© 2021 Chris Patton

Day 1

I am in the sea. The salt is saturating my skin. The effect begins and I can't stop it. I am too far from shore to get back in time. He is next to me ready to take advantage of the situation. He grabs me and I twist free. I am sore from his many attempts. All I wanted was affection. I am not ready for mating. I struggle with my emotions changing from the stimulation of the salt. I have to try and get away from him before I can't control myself, before I will be happy to give in.

I jet off as fast as I can, going deeper and deeper. There are rocks below that I hope I can avoid him in. He follows at a distance carefully watching where I go. Waiting for me to tire. This is not going to work. He can wait out anything that I do. There is only one way. The question is whether or not it is worth it. In the deep I will be away from him, but place myself at great risk.

All the monsters from my childhood come back to me, but especially the Nauti. I can see them watching me and waiting. As my eyes dark adapt I go deeper and deeper. I will have to go deep enough that he will not follow. How deep is that with the mating urges affecting him as well? I can feel the oxygen going. I am approaching the oxygen minimum layer. Below is where they live. The worst chased and eaten dream anyone can have. To go there is pure insanity. To go back is too. You only spawn once and without a triad it would be the last thing that I do.

The salt is having its affect. I am having a harder and harder time concentrating. Soon it will be . . .

When I come to I am on a beach. I have no idea how I got here or even where here is. The surf is low and the sun feels warm against my skin. I need to get into the shade before I dry out or worse. The mating sickness has passed. I am very weak and hungry.

The days dissolve into eights. I follow the shore eating what I find, crabs, snails, an occasional abalone. I hope he has not followed me. I look back often when I think I see him, but no one is there. I am growing in despair. How could I have ended up in so isolated a location? I miss my friends. The cliffs above me are too steep to climb I have no choice but to continue to follow the shore. I am so weak I am not sure I can continue. My body, in spite of the food I have eaten is fading. I was too late. The sickness has destroyed me. Here is where I will feed the others.

I wake with a start. I am breathing heavy. I slowly realize that I am in my own room, in my own bed, not his. HE is not here. I am safe. I relax back into room the feel of the wall comforting me. There is light coming in the door, so I am probably running late as usual. I am definitely not a

morning person.

It has been some six by eight days since I left him in the sea, but I still have the nightmares and the fading bruises. I thought his behavior went out with the last generation. I fell for the same lines and promises too. So stupid.

It has taken me over a year to adapt to my new home and be accepted. I was so sick I was surprised when they cared for me at all. Instead I have a new life. I owe them everything.

Mandhi set me straight. She took me to the Guardians to show with them. While there I saw the images of other victims. I got off real easy. I am still alive. Of course there is Mandhi too. One tough lady. Hard to believe she is a movement studies master student. I always thought they were supposed to be small nerdy types. Mandhi is nearly one hundred and eighty units and most of that muscle.

We have one other house mate, Sussi. A woman's woman. Loves to shop. Always dresses nice. A huge collection of shoes. Can't cook raw tree crab. No idea how she can afford to eat out nearly every meal, but she does. She has the largest room. Music major. Plays the flute. Was not too crazy about that till I heard her play. When she plays the larger flute I think I am in heaven. Who would have thought that I would learn to actually like classical music. I am sure my friends growing up would ink if they knew.

When I came of age I was raised by the one we all called Aunt Maggie. She was nice enough. Got me through the apprentice years, not easy for anyone. I learned enough that when I showed up here I was able to demonstrate a competence at a level high enough to be accepted into their master program. Lost a year, but I am alive. That is all that really matters.

Mandhi pokes her head in, ~Bath room is free. The princess has retired.~ She smiles and fakes a sign of respect. I smile back and get out of bed. Sussi takes forever to get ready. Mandhi finally convinced her that putting on her colors in her room was really a better way. She made some kind of fancy light system over the vanity that did the trick. I guess it makes sense that a movement studies student would know about that kind of stuff. It can even switch back and forth from daylight to indoor light.

So, then there is me, sculpture, specifically clay. I have the raw arms to prove it. Clay really takes it out of you. Go though an urn of hand lotion a month. Well, not actually an entire urn. Just feels that way. Going for a masters. My house mates let me use the crab shelter. Shelves and shelves of projects, both good and bad. I still have to go to campus to fire things, but at least I can work on ideas here without dealing with the

apprentices. I swear they never get off their coms. Ever try and throw a pot while on one? Teacher Sufi actually went so far as to fire a pot with one student's com inside. I really did enjoy that. The problem is that as soon as she leaves, they come out again.

I was scared to death Freng would find me and smash everything, but Mandhi saved me there too. She comforted me when I had the first nightmares. Even Sussi was understanding asking questions and giving me affection. I never had it that good where I first lived. Why can't more communities be like this? Mandhi just laughed and showed they were not that good. ~We have our share of politics, same as everyone. You just came at a time when there was an opening in the art department and you proved yourself. Nothing special there.~ I think it was more though. They could have waited till one of their own proved themselves.

The water feels good. I could stay in here forever, but we are all students and have to watch the rations allotted us. Mandhi comes in when I am toweling off. Only one fresher so we share. Just that no one wants to be in here with Sussi if they don't have to be. Hard to navigate all the stuff she brings in here with her.

Mandhi sees me watching her and flexes a muscle to tease me. She is hot. Sussi on the other hand is more normal shaped as befits her lifestyle. I look at myself in the steamed up mirror that Mandhi has wiped. Very thin. Only my arms are weird from the workout I get from pushing all that clay. For my small size they are nearly as muscular as Mandhi's. My ugliness doesn't stop guys from hitting on me though. Never again. They quit soon enough thankfully.

I dress quickly and head for the kitchen. I eat the left over grubs that I fry up with some leftover vegies and sea food. It is supposed to be better for us. Doesn't matter to me.

Mandhi looks over at me, ~At least it isn't that horrible porridge. Still don't know how you can eat that stuff. Look at the fat in there. We don't live forever Roo, time to start taking care of yourself.~

~You complain about what I eat, but what about Sussi? Did she even eat anything today?~

She shakes her head, ~Only trac as usual. Has to stay thin. She is jealous of you, you know.~

~No way, with her figure?~

~She is jealous that you can eat stuff like that and not gain any weight. No one is jealous of your looks.~ She smiles and I make a nasty sign.

I put my hands on my side, ~Freng showed I looked like a small boy.~

~There is nothing wrong with you Roo. You need to drop this poison that he planted in your head.~

~Yes mam!~ I salute her and she throws something at me.

I pick it up, ~What is this?~

~Small Ahi tuber. Great source of vitamin C.~ She pops one into her mouth and hands me one, ~You eat the whole thing.~ She pops another one into her mouth. I look at it. Sort of an oblong orange yellow thing. I place it in my mouth. The outside is not bad, in a soor flavored way. I bite into it and immediately spit it out.

~Sour! Very sour! How do you eat this things?~

~You get used to it. You mean you never ate sour candy as a crawly?

~

~I hate anything sour. Yes, even sweet and sour. Only you pale ones eat that stuff.~ She signals amusement.

~You ready for the tour?~ She grabs my plate and dumps it into the sink. Sussi's turn to wash up. I find this very amusing. I will have to redo everything when I get home, but it is still fun to make her try. The dramatics are priceless.

~I am scared to death I will make a fool of myself if that is what you mean. I know nothing about your world. I hated math and science. Just because I have a yellow color does not mean that I am good at anything academic.~

~Well you certainly have an eye for shape and color. I almost don't want to eat off the plates now.~

~Too bad they don't trade. It would be nice to have some extra materials.~

We make our way to the garage where my latest creation is waiting. I worked on this thing for months. An obsession of the highest order. I can't explain it, justify it or even understand how this thing came out of my head and hands. I sort of vomited it out. Then it took months to fine tune it. Sufi showed I needed one piece for my show that was a center piece, that summed up all that is in me, that is me. In some way I think Freng is the real reason this happened. All my anger and humiliation over what happened sort of crystallized into this.

~It is beautiful Roo. Let's get it loaded into the transport.~ I nod and she comes around me to lift it up. There is a special box waiting on the back with an inordinate amount of padding. She knows her stuff. We are taking it into the movement studies department to be scanned. It will become immortal in some ways. Now at least if it is damaged by Freng or whatever, I will have the shape preserved, not that I could ever forget it.

We make it to the loading dock without any problems. From there it takes only a few careful minutes to get it into the lab.

~Since this is a 3D scan, we have to put it on this turntable. The computer will take over for the actual scan.~

~There are pockets that are not visible from all angles.~
~This is an x-ray scanner. We go into the next room behind leaded glass for the scan.~
~Lead? How did you ever get permission for the environmental cost?
~
~Movement studies gets away with a lot of stuff. Besides, once in glass form it is harmless. Nothing leaches out. Getting it into the glass is another thing.~ She rolls her eyes.
I look around, ~You don't make it here do you?~
She laughs, ~No way. It has to be done in the most desolate desert to be allowed. Cost a fortune.~
~All this just to scan a piece of pottery? What else do you do in here?
~
~That I cannot discuss. Leave it that even I don't know everything. I am only a masters student myself. You would have to show to Teacher Raj. I would not recommend it. Say one thing about his work and you will get a three hour lecture that is way over your head.~
~But not yours.~
~Doesn't help.~ She sighs and I laugh.
~We are all set.~ She pushes a button and nothing appears to happen. She gets up. ~Let's go.~
~Nothing is happening.~
~This is not a picture we are taking. Takes about an hour. Low dose x-rays. Otherwise the cost of the glass would be more than our budget for ten years. I will show you the rest of the place.~
Maybe the lecture would have been more interesting. Nerds are strange even when they look good. The scan done, we load the sculpture back into the box on the truck.
~I have to get the transport back as soon as possible. So, we need to take the sculpture back to the garage before we have time to work on the results.~ I nod. It is all free at least.
Back to the lab. ~Okay, here we go.~ She shows me the results on the monitor. ~I will let you play for a bit.~
~I don't know anything about this equipment. I would be scared to death that I would do something wrong.~
~Can't. Already backed up several times. See?~ She holds up a hard crystal and then places it in her pocket. ~Not that it matters, but the equations are shown here.~ She points to the right side of the display.
~It looks a bit off to me. Since you have a backup. Is it possible to refine the shapes?~
~You mean you spent two months on that thing and it is not perfect?~
~I was limited by the use of clay and don't forget gravity movement

studies major.~ I smile and she gives me a dirty look.

~Fine. Here is what you do. Pay attention. I have work to do too.~ Oh, oh, getting annoyed. I try and concentrate. Looks easy enough, just like the graphics programs in the art department, sort of. I pay no attention to the equations which mean absolutely nothing to me. Soon I have tuned them out of my mind and am into the process. The absorption of the shape takes over again. As I work I become even more in turn with the shape.

It seems like only a moment has gone by when Mandhi taps me on the head, ~Time to go pumpkin.~ She bends over to look at what I have done.

~WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!~

I jump and wake up from my concentration and exclaim, ~Huh? What do you mean? I didn't do anything you didn't show me to do.~ I look up to her sure I have not destroyed something. She is pointing at the screen. I follow her hand. Not the graphic I was working on, but the equations. They are all lit up in green. I count. Nine equations. Looks complicated. Means nothing to me. I look back up to her all confused.

~They are all green. Weren't they red when I started? What does it mean? I'm sorry. I didn't know I could hurt anything.~

~You just solved a ninth degree differential equation by hand. That is impossible. Wait! I know those equations. Let me sit for a moment. Don't worry I will save the work. Oh, I will save the work.~

She sits and goes to work. She works like lightning. I see her accessing files and comparing them to what is up on the screen. I have never seen anyone use a terminal this fast. I have definitely a new found respect for her.

~Mandhi, it is going to need feeding soon if you go this fast. Even I know about the regen time lag.~

~You did it. You actually did it. This is amazing. Congratulations Roo, you are about to be an author on a ground breaking article.~ She takes out a solution from underneath the terminal and pours it into the mouth on top. I was right.

~Oh, that will look real nice on my resume. A movement studies article. What is that going to mean?~

~Let's go get something to eat Roo. My head is spinning. I can't believe what happened. Wait till Raj sees this. It will blow his mind.~

Normally we would go home. Master students do not have much to work with budget wise. Instead Mandhi leads us to a little place near campus that serves the best seafood in town. Okay, the best that I have ever tasted. I am sure the Teachers know of better places than this. The food here is good, cheap and lots of it. Maybe I will gain some weight

even.

~This is definitely not on your diet Mandhi.~

~No it isn't.~ She is smiling from ear to ear. So she does like real food.

~Does this mean you are giving up health food?~ I smile.

~I will worry about that tomorrow.~ She holds up a cube. ~This will be my thesis. You solved it for me in a mere five eighths.~

~Five eighths! I was on the terminal for five eighths?~ I am totally shocked. I look to where the sun is in the sky and I can see she is right. On the other side of the sky. It is late afternoon. We started in early morning. ~No wonder I am hungry. Normally this does not happen unless I am working on a pot.~

~Creative fugue. Happens to me too.~

I am not sure I even tasted the food I was so hungry. When we get home it is dark. We sneak in just under curfew. I certainly could not have afforded the fine after all we ate. Mandhi insists that we move the sculpture from the garage to the center of the center room. Looks out of place to me, but I don't argue. I am totally exhausted and head straight for my room.

~Wait Roo. Sit with me a minute.~ We sit together on a pile of cushions near the sculpture.

~What happened today is really important to me Roo. You did really good. I am just amazed that I did not see your shape in the equations until you tweaked them. There is something special about that shape. I don't know what it is yet. I just know in the center of my being that it is important somehow.~

~I feel the same, but never thought it would mean anything to anyone but myself. My pottery has not exactly gotten a positive reaction.~

~Every physicist in the world will soon know your shape. In the morning I want to see what else you have done. I would not be surprised to see variations of the shape in your other work.~

~Nothing else looks anything like that thing.~

~I don't believe that. For some reason you have an innate understanding of nine dimensional space Roo. Come to think of it, the plates we eat off of are a slice of a projection of a sphere into our space.~

~All I've noticed is that you two are the only ones who can look at them, much less use them, without throwing up.~

~Who showed anything about throwing up?~

~Welcome home princess.~ I smile at Mandhi's remark. She is lucky she was not caught past curfew. It is nearly impossible to see in here now. I know the way around by touch well enough, so it is not a problem.

~Watch out, Mandhi put my sculpture in the middle of the center

room.~

~Where?~

~About three arms to your right.~

~Got it. Could be dangerous in the middle of the night.~

~Get used to it.~ No one messes with Mandhi. I smile. Sussi sits down on the other side of me.

~So what's going on.~

~Roo solved my thesis problem today with her sculpture.~

~The solution to the ninth degree differential equation?~

~The very one.~

~How? You're a music major. How?~

~Silly girl. Music is based on math.~ She pauses, ~And I have no idea what a ninth degree differential equation is.~ She snuggles closer to me. She tastes nice.

~You two are the best, but I am falling into a rest state right here.~

~Can't have that. We all have long days tomorrow.~ They lift me up and push me towards my room. They stay and show for a bit. They have been friends since being crawlies at least. Mandhi will fill Sussi in on what happened today. I am totally used up and collapse into the resting state instantly.

Day 2

This time I rose before anyone else. No showing how long they stayed up last night. Sure enough the dishes are still in the sink. It takes me a few minutes to wash them. I can grab something to eat on the way. I am excited about the results from the lab. Imagine me doing anything that would help in the math area.

Everything is within walking distance, so this early it will not take me long to get to the studio. I check the color code for the day at an intersection. A few crawlies scurry away from me, but none of them has been tagged green. I still have a few more blocks.

I go slowly past the Matriarch's home. Don't want to draw attention to myself. It is not only crawlies that can end up eaten. I see a green tagged crawly just inside the entrance. Not worth it. I keep going. I think it knows it is safe, making no attempt to hide. That one will make it for sure. Lucky crawly. I wonder what it's like on the other side of the wall? The life of the Matriarch is not generally known. We all had favorite stories growing up in my district. I am so happy they allowed me to transfer here.

There are very few people about at this time of day. Some of the unseen are grooming gardens and clearing out waste. I stop to watch for a moment before continuing. There are so many. It is like my eyes are open. Is it like this every morning? When one sees me watching he ducks behind a tree to hide. I can see his eye peeking out from between the branches waiting for me to leave.

Safely past the house I see a green one wobbling across the path. I easily pick it up. It barely reacts to me, not even trying to hide. I certainly don't want to get sick eating a diseased one, nor would I want anyone else to. I toss it away from the path. Just as it hits the ground it takes off rapidly. I was fooled. It was only pretending to be sick. I had better smarten up if I am going to get breakfast. To my near right I see a group of three trying to blend in with the background. ~Safety in groups~, our cultural mantra. Doesn't work if the predator is too big and you are stained green. I faint to my left and quickly lash out with an arm. I snag two. The third makes it to a hiding hole. This time I don't examine them too closely and quickly finish my breakfast. My stomach is appreciative.

I am the first one at the studio and examine the duty board. I am up for helping the third years this afternoon as I remembered. That should give me enough time to get some work done on my own projects. I am impassioned by the final project meaning more than just a shape. Maybe I can come up with other shapes that will help others as well.

Teacher Sufi comes in just as I am centering clay on a wheel. I can feel her presence watching behind me. The wheel here is better than what I have in the garage and I can work more quickly. All my shapes are based, at least to begin with, on the Holy Circle. Using the wheel to get the basic sections done saves me a lot of time. When I finish what I intended I step back to make sure I have it right. It will need to set before it will be strong enough to safely remove from the base.

~Rooi, we need to show.~ Ah-oh, I only get called that when I am in trouble. I wipe my hands of the clay and give her my attention.

~What day is it Rooi?~

~2nd day. I am just getting some work done before class this afternoon. You would not believe what happened yesterday. I am hoping to build on that. Mandhi says I will be an author of a movement studies paper because of what I found in relation to her thesis project.~

~Rooi, yesterday was 2nd day. I came in to change the calendar to the 3rd day schedule.~ I am stunned and confused. I watch her go over to the board and remove the schedule I had just confirmed. She writes that I am to take the place of all the unseen. Everyone else is to take the day off.

That means I am to do the clay prep. From scratch. Powdered clay. That will take most of the day. Next I am to prepare the calligraphy materials.

~Calligraphy? We have not done that for ages.~

~The Dean says we have been neglecting the forms. She spot tested some of the fourth years and they were not able to recite them perfectly. I will check in on you at the end of the day.~ She leaves.

She could have let me go from the school. This is not the first time I forgot what day it was and messed up. She has to be hard on me or the board will get to her instead. I am glad she left. It is my fault. There is no reason for her to share in my mistake. If that had happened I am not sure what I would have done. Probably would have had to leave. Most communities do not take in strangers. It takes too long to achieve ones place in society. To let in a new person to mess up the line is very much discouraged. Alone I would end up in the belly of a Nauti. There is always the dart I suppose. Mandhi could carry on my work now that she knows the solution to the equations.

It is best I get started. I know the formula by heart having spent may years making clay. This will be the rough local red terracotta clay for the first two years of undergraduate study. It is cheap being locally made. I prefer the fine porcelain brought in by traders, but even I only get a small allotment once a year. Still I remember as an apprentice making moonstones by the hundreds before I passed the precision tests. I wonder what they did with all of those?

The clay can't be mixed unless there is an excess of water, but an

excess makes it impossible to use, so the right amount has to be removed after mixing. That is where the gypsum tables come in. Kneading the clay is a relentless task. It takes all my strength. To help concentrate I recite the eight rules of survival.

- 1) Hide well
- 2) Safety in numbers
- 3) Find a protector
- 4) Never trust your protector
- 5) Never trust a male
- 6) A Triad is the only stable relationship
- 7) Suspect change
- 8) Is was, was is.

Of course most are obvious or can be derived from the others. Not that hard to remember. Wonder why the fourth years were having trouble? The protector would not want them to recite the rules in ancient would she? Even I would have trouble there. All of our laws are derived from these eight, at least the ones that are known. For instance, don't pollute comes from the first law, Hide well. If you pollute it becomes obvious to everyone around you. Then you had better hide very well or you will face the most hideous form of death known. Pollution kills all of us. Better you than everyone else. This can also be derived from seven, suspect any change. We have no pollution, so anything new that appears is probably bad.

Of course this makes it very hard for the sciences and the arts. Ceramics is one the major sciences and what they find often makes it down to us. What I wouldn't do to work with the new ultraceramics. Nearly as hard as a diamond and jet black. Incredibly beautiful. I have heard that the clay is as easy to work as porcelain, which is admittedly not that easy, but is doable. The expensive part, from our point of view, is the firing to cone thirty. Takes a lot of heat.

The hardest part of designing the clay was getting the making of the raw materials past the pollution control board. They finally worked it out by making intermediate ceramics that were then pulverized to make the final raw materials for the ultraceramic. If they had taken short cuts to make it simpler and faster it would have potentially exposed all of us to harmful copper and boron compounds. I may not like math, but I love the complex chemistry in ceramics. So much is made from ceramics, how could anyone not? Maybe it is the shapes at the atomic level that intrigue me. I can almost see them in my mind.

Crab! Dropped a load on the floor. I have to stop day dreaming. Think of it like making bread, but with ten times the density and viscosity. This

was how my arms got to be the way they are. Whap, push, whap, push. I continue till my arms ache and I can hardly move. Rest. The clay needs it too.

I wipe my hands and get the materials ready for the calligraphy. The ink is easy. We have cake ink that is ground against a special ceramic stone to make a fine black ink. I set that aside to be done tomorrow just before use as it goes sour fast. Next I check the wood pulp. Left over saw dust from the woodworking shops is given to us. We let it ferment in pots to soften the fibers. Stinks. I pour some through a fine strainer and pull out a mass of pulp. The liquid will be placed on the compost pile to speed things up there. I add the pulp to the mortar and start pounding. The more I pound the finer will be paper, but the weaker it will be. I pound until a new set of muscles are sore and tired. The pulp is now like thick stew. I add a sprinkling of dried flowers and herbs. Besides making the paper smell better, it will add some interesting character. A treat really. Not required, just feeling silly I guess.

I measure the pulp carefully and add it to the cone forms. The students will use the traditional cone shapes with ridges. The ridges almost make the result look like the snails our ancestors first used to record their thoughts on. Of course snails last longer, but these are students after all. The ridges also help them to keep their characters straight. More advanced students will use the flat circular paper of course. No ridges there. Being into the shapes themselves I like the traditional snail shapes, but divide each spiral into three interweaving lines of writing. Hard to read, but looks pretty. No time for me to dwell on that. I add the cones to the drying oven to set. Two eighths of eighth in the ovens and they can be removed from the forms, stacked on the racks, and the forms are ready for the next batch after a brief rinse.

Meanwhile back to the clay. Whap, push, whap, push.

I never hear Teacher Sufi come in to check on me. By the time I have finished I am in the rest state in the lecture area. No way I would have made it home before curfew. The curfew was not a bad thing. I could not see in the dark and to use artificial light wasted resources. Not the first time I have stayed here.

Day 3

~Roo, are you in there? Time to wake up!~

~Huh? Where am I?~ I can't see a thing under all these blankets I must have piled on myself to hide from the light. Someone is helping me get out of my predicament.

I see Sussi peering in at me, ~There you are. You did not come home last night when expected. We started to worry until your teacher called saying you would stay here for the night.~

~Yeah, I got into trouble again. I should have called, but was so absorbed into my work that I forgot.~

~You mean you spaced it again and rested before you thought of it. That's all right, let your house mates think a Nauti had gotten you.~

~Silly, Nauties can't move on land.~

~Really? I hadn't realized that. How about a giant tree crab.~

~They only eat dead things.~

~Could have been fooled by the way you looked just now.~

~Ha-ha! So, what's up?~

~Dry day. You left your shade at home. I brought it in for you.~

~Thanks. It means a lot to me that you care.~

~Mandhi remembered. I was closest, the music building being across the way.~

~Thanks to both of you then.~

~There is one more thing, but that will have to wait till you get home.~

~A hint? You are going to drive me crazy with curiosity.~

~Curiosity killed the shell crab Roo.~

~They are tasty. A little slug oil and barbar root.~

~Here is a bun for breakfast. Special center, beetle grubs and merk.~
She hands me a bundle wrapped in a cloth.

~You are spoiling me Sussi. I still want a hint though.~

~Darn I thought I could distract you. One word, resonance.~

~That's it, resonance?~

~That's it. See you for dinner.~ She waves goodbye and is out the door just as Sufi arrives curious herself why Sussi is here. Then she sees me emerging from the pile of blankets.

~It was not necessary to work all night Roo.~ Ah, back to normal.

I give a sign of respect to her, ~Share breakfast with me honored one.~

~Let me make tea.~ She goes to the stove. There is enough sun peaking over the horizon to heat the water quickly with the lens. I open

the bundle prepared to split my precious bun in two to find that there are two buns instead of one. Wow! I unfold the cloth to make a table cloth over a low table in the center of the room. I fold a blanket for each of us to use as a pillow to sit on. Sufi comes over with the tea and sees the buns.

~Those smell good.~

~Beetle grub centers. Sussi brought them for us.~ She raises an eyeridge.

~You did a good job yesterday Roo, except . . .~ Oh now, what did I do wrong now? ~You made twice as much as we needed. Don't worry, it will not go to waste. I am surprised that one person could do that much in one day though.~

~I may not be able to move my arms today. I can't believe I did that. I wanted so hard to do things right. I really don't mean to miss my duties.~

~I know Roo. Otherwise you would not still be here. Now show me about this movement studies paper.~

~You have seen me working on my thesis project.~

~I have seen some of the parts, but not the finished piece. I am not really supposed to until the evaluation.~

~Right. Well, I finished the piece. Mandhi thought the shape was fascinating and wanted to scan it into the movement studies computers. She showed that way, if anything happened to it, they could recreate it with the replicator.~

~I have heard about the replicator. Uses some kind of spray ceramic doesn't it?~

~Never got that far. When we scanned it in I noticed the flaws and asked if I could correct them before storing the image. Mandhi was surprised because she thought I was finished and it was perfect. I explained to her why that would be impossible with clay, due to gravity effects and limitations of the structural integrity of the material.~

~Clay 1A. Surprised a movement studies grad did not realize that.~

~They don't always have much in the way of practical experience. Your demonstrations really glued it into my mind.~

~Go on.~

~I did not realize it, but I spent nearly the entire day at the computer. When I was finished, the equations on the side, that were keeping track of what I was doing, had all turned green. I had no idea what it meant, you know me and math.~ She nods. ~Mandhi showed that I had just solved some 9th something equation of some kind that was very important to her. No one had apparently solved the equations before and I did it in one day and with a three dimensional representation to prove it.~

~Hence the article.~

~Right. Also explains why I messed up. I was so caught up in the process I completely forgot about my duties here.~

~It may be that I will need to see the form at least before the year end show. Who is Mandhi's advisor?~

~Teacher Raj.~

~A male?~ I nod. She growls, ~Don't trust a male Roo. Be careful.~

~Mandhi has the results backed up several times.~

~Good. It is also good that you have told me. I will engrave a snail with what you have told me and have it dated.~

~That is expensive. I don't mean to make a fuss.~

~We both have work to do. You get back to your project. I will finish the ink for this afternoon.~

~Thanks.~ I definitely was not expecting that. I think I have found a protector. When do I not trust her? Does this happen right away? What are her real motives? Nothing is simple.

I go to retrieve the shape I made yesterday. I see an unseen one disappear around the corner as I enter the curing room. Kind of late for them. The room has been cleaned up well. I will have to remember to leave a thanks. That's strange. My shape is missing. There is my storage space, but nothing is there. I look at the adjoining storage spaces. Geeni has a few things in her space, but not my shape. I check the others and still nothing.

As I come out of the curing room I happen to glance at the waste pile. There it is smashed to pieces.

~Teacher Sufi, do you know why my project ended up on the waste pile to be recycled?~ She looks up in surprise, then comes over to see for herself.

~That is the shape I saw you working on and I did not put it there. I approved of your project and have no reason to interfere. You and I are the only ones who have been here, so how did this happen?~

~I did see one of the unseen a moment ago, but if they had done it surely we would have heard it happen.~

~Unless it happened while you were resting, but then even the unseen should have been resting as well. Hmm, you did not get up till your house mate came in.~

~No way would she do it. She does not even know the layout for the studio and she is in love with the last version I did.~

~Well, start again. I will lock the curing room tonight. I don't like the feeling of this.~ Nor I.

It does not take me long to get back to where I was. It is never the same the second time. I do the best I can and then finish parts two and three before it gets time to clean up. Three other students are now

present. Fourth day mornings are our time to work on our projects without the younger students being present. Hard to get anything done with so many questions. At least the sixth, seventh and eighth years can work independently.

Since the first years coming in this afternoon will not be using clay today, Sufi carefully watches everyone place their work in the lockup and she makes sure the room is locked. Not even an unseen can get in now. They will wonder what is going on, but there is always enough work to do. They will adapt. I feel bad about not leaving a treat for them, but I can't be totally sure now it was not one of them.

Calligraphy class went well if you don't mind being splattered with black ink from mantle to hand. First years are so uncoordinated sometimes. Amazing that they can write their own names sometimes. Granted the traditional methods taught here are not easy, but still. Oh well. I head for the shower to clean up.

~Goodnight Roo. See you tomorrow. Don't forget you are up for assisting me with the third year with all that fine clay you prepped.~

~I won't forget Teacher Sufi.~ Even if I have to tattoo it on my arm I will not forget.

I rush home wanting to find out what Sussi meant as a surprise. When I round the curve to our housing group I notice people gathered around. I can see the black hats of the Guardians when I get closer. Strange, they are at our place.

Mandhi comes up to me, ~Roo, someone got into the garage and destroyed all your work. I called the Guardians. They are doing a DNA sweep. We have to stay clear for a bit.~

~Someone destroyed what I was working on at the studio as well. Something is going on Mandhi.~

~Yeah, I can't help but think it is related to your visit to the lab. Teacher Raj chewed me out good today for letting you in the lab and then got real mad when he heard you were instrumental in solving the equation. He claims that the equation had been solved ages ago. He says he gives the project to first year grad students to 'test' them. Problem is, is that I have thoroughly searched the literature and can find no reference to a solution. A few references to people working on it, but no solution. A pretty esoteric project, so it is not surprising that only a few people have worked on it. He told me to clear it off the computer and he would assign me a new project to test my skills.~

~Did you do it?~

~I had no choice, but don't worry I have multiple backups. I even went to the general computers to make a few more. Something is up and I don't trust him.~

~Never trust a male.~

~That old rule. Come on, you don't subscribe to the old rules do you?

~

~No, just that the dean of the art department is pushing them right now. She caught a few fourth years who could not recite them and inked. I certainly have more reason than most to not trust a male right now, but most I have met are well behaved.~

~I agree.~

~Teacher Sufi was concerned enough to say she was going to record a snail about our conversation about the shape. Now I am beginning to think she is right. Oh my, what about my thesis project?~

~They won't let us in to the house yet. I moved it before they arrived. It is in my room carefully covered in old blankets.~

~You don't trust the Guardians either? Most of them are female at least.~

~We are the stronger gender. Males are such weaklings. But at the moment I don't trust anyone. There is Sussi, let's get over to her.~

She is a few eights of a farn away.

~Sussi what was it you wanted to show me?~

~Blank Roo, not now. Wait till they leave.~ We switch to hand communication to avoid being overseen.

~Should not take long now. Looks like they are packing up.~

~Think they will find anything?~

~Not a chance. Someone big is behind this.~

~Raj would not do this would he? Is he that will connected? I did not even know he was part of a Triad.~

~Not as far as I can know. I certainly have not noticed a tattoo claiming him as property.~

~Who would want him?~

The inspector comes over to us, ~You are free to go in now. We will have the results in a few days if we find anything other than the three of you. At that time you may press the question if you want to pursue it any further. I doubt you can claim anything of value was broken. Student work is not considered worth anything.~

~Yeah only recognized masters can claim value. Of course all the work they did as a student suddenly becomes valuable the moment they reach master status.~

~Hard to prove ahead of time when you look at the failure rate for art and music grad students.~ Sussi and I both give Mandhi a playful shove in protest.

We play it cool till we are sure they are really gone and then even wait more. We paw through the shards in the garage. They even broke my

wheel. Fortunately it was an old hand me down I got for practically nothing. Will be hard to replace though. I will have to use the ones at school now.

~You get the garage back for storage at least.~

~For music practice. I will explain inside.~ Huh? What is that all about? Usually her group practices in the center room as it is the biggest room and provides a good sound buffer from neighbors.

When we are inside Sussi shows us to bring my sculpture out to the center room. Mandhi and I retrieve it. Fortunately it looks intact and unharmed. They must not have known it was inside the house. Two days ago it wasn't. It was only because Mandhi liked it so much after our success in the lab that it ended up here.

~Now watch this. My group gathered here to practice yesterday afternoon. Some of the group did not feel comfortable in its presence, but we decided to start anyway.~

~A lot of my work used to have that effect. Don't know what it was. Most people were indifferent, but a few really got sick and a few really liked it. Too few apparently.~

~We all liked it. Anyway, we started playing and something strange happened. I will demonstrate in a moment. The ones who had a negative reaction actually threw up their lunch when it happened. We had no choice but to leave to practice elsewhere. I promised we would move the sculpture before the next time my turn came up.~

She brought out her flute. ~Okay, sit and relax, this is going to be weird.~ We sit on some folded up blankets we keep here for that purpose.

~When I play the higher notes of the opening to the sonata we were working on . . .~ She starts. At first nothing, then the sculpture starts to sing. First it is low and barely noticeable, but when she hits certain notes the singing lasts longer. Past the time of the note that Sussi is playing. She sees that we have noticed.

~Now for something really weird. I need each of you to play with me.~

~Whoa, I don't know how to play a flute.~

~It is easy Mandhi. Besides I only need each of you to play one note each.~ She gives us each a flute and shows us how to cover the correct holes and how to blow into it. Each time we try the sculpture sings in response.

~We are each going to play the same note, but one third a circle apart.~

We distribute ourselves more or less correctly. Mandhi is not satisfied and has me move a few eights of an arm to my right. Sussi rolls her eyes. I giggle.

~Okay, I will begin and they you two come in.~

She starts to play and comes to the note we are to play. The sculpture starts to sing. I go next and add my sound. The singing gets louder. Mandhi comes in and the sound gets louder, but it also starts to glow. A sphere forms around the center of the sculpture at a place where there is no actual sculpture. Sussi motions us to stop which is good as I was running out of breath. The singing stops, but the glow remains for a time.

~Roo showed that the shape was not perfect. I wonder what this would do if it was?~

~Mandhi, what just happened?~

~Resonance explains the singing.~

~That would stop when we stopped.~

~Not necessarily. Think of a bell. It can ring for some time after being struck.~

~But what about the light?~

~That definitely should not have happened by any means that I know of.~

~Does this explain why someone wants to destroy my project?~

~A curiosity for sure, but I am not sure it warrants risking a dart for.~

~I wonder what the DNA will show?~

~That someone was hired to do it for someone who cannot be traced back to. A rotten corpse.~

~Definitely. Still not enough to risk it. Are we sure we have the right note? Could it be close to one on the flute, but not exactly?~

~I can play any note or partial you want. It would take some time to teach you two though.~

~Try it then. Even with one flute it had a response.~

~Wait a minute. I have a recorder.~ Mandhi goes into her room and comes out a moment later. ~I am not supposed to take it from the lab, but this one was all dusty in a corner. No one will miss it.~

~Gee Mandhi, do we really want to risk getting into any more trouble?~

~I will return it okay?~

~Play Sussi before I melt.~

~All right Roo, don't tie yourself in knots.~ She begins with the same note as before and the singing starts. This time she varies the note around that point. When she goes a little lower the singing gets softer. She then raises the pitch and suddenly it goes VERY loud. The glowing also starts. Sussi is so startled that she stops immediately.

~I have it. I will loop it back to so it stays on the same note.

~Are you sure you want to do that? I am worried we will attract notice.~

~As soon as it starts glowing I will cut the sound.~

Mandhi starts the playback then slowly raises the volume. It does not take much when it is the correct note. As soon as the glow starts she stops the sounds and the resonance stops instantly also. The glowing does not. It gets brighter in fact.

~Wait, look! It is like a window! Come closer quick!~

~Don't touch. We have no idea what it is.~

~We need more equipment. Could be harmful effects like radiation in wavelengths we cannot tolerate.~

~Huh?~

~Will you two come closer and look!~ Sussi is nearly screaming.

I look into the hole, for lack of a better term, and see strange flower like things. The view is pink and beautiful. It is so clear I feel like I could just reach out and touch them. Without thinking I reach in with my arm and snag one of the flower things. It comes loose easily. I am surprised.

I hang onto it with the intention of checking it out later. It is so fascinating to be looking in on this alien landscape.

Mandhi finally notices that I am hanging onto something, ~Roo, what have you done? Put it back quick!~

~Huh? Why? It is just a flower thing of some kind. Whoa, it is melting in my hand. I think it is dying.~ I set it down on the floor.

~Likely we are toxic to it. We need to close the hole before we attract attention.~

~How do we do that? It is not closing on it's own. Where did you get the flower from Roo? All I see is rock and ocean.~

~I see both. I see a hillside covered with pink flowers next to a rocky shore.~

~That's it! Of course. Think, in our world which direction are each of us facing?~

~We are inside, how should I know?~

~Well I know. Roo is facing uphill. I am facing the ocean and Sussi is somewhere in between. We are each seeing the same landscape on this new world that we would see on our own if our house and the other buildings were not here.~

~We don't have any flowers that look like this on our world.~

~Preciously. We are not looking at our world. We are looking at a parallel world through a dimensional interface. Those equations were the result of thousands of years of work into theories concerning the possibility of just what we are seeing. We still need to close it however. Someone suspects us. They are probably watching the house right now. I think they destroyed Roo's work to prevent us from doing exactly this.~

~Dissonance. If resonance helped open the hole, then dissonance

might close it.~

~Worth a try. What do we do?~

~We have to play nearly the same notes as before, but all just slightly off. It is tricky. Roo, you start. Play the note I taught you.~

I raise the flute and blow.

~Now, move your finger from the third whole, just slightly. Notice how the sound changes? It makes it a little lower in pitch. Remember how to do that. You can stop and breathe now.~

~Your turn Mandhi. Same thing, but I want you to move your finger over the first hole. This will raise the pitch slightly. Good. Now when I show you, both of you start. I will fill in the necessary middle range.~

I start blowing, Mandhi starts. It sounds weird. Even I know when two notes don't work together. Sussi starts and it actually gets painful. There seems to be a secondary wah-wah sound that makes it worse.

~Perfect. Now Mandhi, I want you to record it and play it back.~

~Are you sure this will work? I did not see the hole change any. The first time we saw the glow before it opened. Shouldn't we be seeing it diminish or something?

~I am ready to try.~ Sussi nods to Mandhi. She starts it low and then slowly raises the volume.

~Nothing happening.~

~Except we will be hauled in for noise pollution any minute. It's going to make me throw up.~

Suddenly it just pops with a loud snap and disappears. Mandhi is startled at first and then stops the playback.

~Hide the sculpture and the equipment, then get back here quick. I want it to look like I am trying to teach you two to play the flute. GO NOW!~

~Roo help me with the sculpture. Back into my room, under the blankets.~ Takes us a few minutes. It is heavy. Maybe I should have made a smaller version first.

~Now the equipment.~

~We can leave it. We are recording our sessions to play back so Roo and I can hear how awful we are. We made a mistake and turned the volume up too loud.~

~Good idea.~

~We might as well practice to keep up the cover story. You now each know two notes each. Look closely. Here are the rest of the five notes I will show you today.~

~Not eight notes?~

~There are eight total, but the last three are trickier. Not for the first lesson. These five will be enough to play a simple tune.~

It is actually kind of fun. Turns out I have a different size flute than Mandhi, so we each have different fingering to reach the same note.

We nearly have the simple tune down when they arrive. I was concentrating so much on what we were doing I had completely forgotten.

~We have reports of a disturbance.~

~Please come in and share our space.~ Sussi is the perfect hostess. I was too freaked to say anything coherent. Two Guardians of the peace come in, in full body shell. Seems extreme to me.

~We accept your hospitality. Please excuse our appearance. We just came off duty and agreed to visit you at the last moment.~

~I am sorry we have interfered with your desires.~ Sussi bows and we follow suit.

~We are surprised to find that we have been called here for no apparent reason.~

~Maybe we can help. What information was the reason based on?~

~Strange sounds that could not be accounted for were heard to be coming from this direction. I hear nothing unusual however.~

~We wish to apologize. I am attempting to teach my house mates how to play the flute. This is their first lesson and I am afraid they are not very good at it. We recorded the sound and accidentally played it back too loud. There should be no further disturbances.~

~We understand that property was abused earlier today at this residence.~

~It has been a long day. I thought music might lighten the mood. We will be quiet now.~

~That would be the easiest way. Hide well.~

~Feed well.~

They leave.

~I nearly inhaled when I saw their body shells.~

~You did? You appeared so calm Sussi.~

~Only on the outside. Let's move the equipment now before someone else shows up. The same ruse may not work twice.~

~I really should just take the equipment back to the lab.~

~Wait a few days. We are being watched I am sure. Do you recognize those unseen across the way?~

~Unseen? Who ever pays any attention to them?~

~Roo, you are getting paranoid. The unseen are harmless.~

~Are they? Someone broke into the drying locker at the studio and broke all the projects that I was working on. Only mine.~

~I think you should drop this project for awhile. Clearly too dangerous. I am beginning to wish it was only Nauti after us.~

~I will be doing the same. Raj has forbidden me access to the computer we worked on. He has assigned something 'more befitting my skill level', a project I solved as a first year eight years ago. He apparently did not read my records.~

~Or cares. The writing is on the snail. We all need to forget this. It is not like no one has ever been here before. Raj showed it was only given as a test.~

~I am guessing from what we experienced tonight that it might be part of some forbidden knowledge. Solving the equations was one thing, opening a bubble is another.~

~I forgot my flower.~ I reach down to where I set it. ~That's strange. I put it right here.~

~We need more light. It is getting dark.~

~It is nearly curfew. Make it fast.~

~Mandhi retrieves a glowball and shells it carefully so no one is likely to notice outside our home.~

~Whoa! Look!~ I point to where I sat the flower. All that is left is a gooey black mess.

~We had better clean that up. Definitely do not want to be accused of pollution. If it could not survive here, chances are we would not survive there either.~

~Wash your arms carefully afterwards and watch where you step. I don't want evidence tracked all over the house.~

We are exhausted. That stuff was really sticky. We bury the remnants and all the rags we use to clean it up with. We dare not do this outside. Instead we pry up a few loose tiles and dig there. Feels really creepy. I feel dirty, like a criminal.

~We stink. Into the showers all!~

With no light it was hard to not touch anyone else, even in the large shower we have. Soon we stop worrying about it and are freely scrubbing each other.

~I love the taste of clean bodies.~

~Do we really want to go there?~ I ask. I am the odd one out. The new comer.

~I think we are all in this together. Mandhi and I have not had this much fun with any of the other house mates.~

~That's for sure. Remember Yurri? She was something else.~

~To fill you in Roo, Yurri was an athlete. Some showed she could out swim a Nauti. Dumb as urchin spines.~

~And show about boring.~

~And what she ate! All her food was cooked. Everything. She even cooked the crawlies she brought home. Claimed it was better for

maximum health. Made her taste horrible.~

~Our energy compensation was horrible.~

~What happened to her?~

~She was picked up by an all athlete diad. We were not upset.~

~That does not sound very stable.~

~It's not. They broke up a few years later. Parasites can't live off of other parasites.~

~So why me? I have gotten us into trouble within two months of my moving in.~

~This will pass and we have all learned a lot. How many have seen another world? We read about it in the oldest journals and if you are lucky you do a trek to the telescope. But I would suspect that extremely few people in the last million years have actually seen another world up close.~

~Not to mention taste it. What did it taste like Roo?~

~I'm sorry. I was so fascinated and freaked at the same time that I don't even remember. Not bad certainly.~

~Could not have been great either.~

~Enough show. Either we rest or~

What followed was the most wonderful experience of my life. I will never associate with males again.

~You taste good Roo.~

Day 4

I awake in the center room, still coiled together with Sussi and Mandhi. We all taste of the nights activity. I slowly uncoil myself and head for the shower. Certainly cannot show up at the studio tasting like this, not that I would be sampled by anyone. Still, it could happen by accident. Embarrassing, but nothing wrong about it of course. It is what any triad would do. I wonder if we will become a real triad? I had thought that it would never happen. I would never have taken up with him if there was a chance. I was even thinking that they would come and get me and accuse me of being a lethal mutant. I would have ended up feed for some farm.

Almost makes up for losing my project.

I arrive at the studio ahead of everyone else again. Again I noticed the unseen. I even wave to the one doing the gardening near the Matriarch's house. He has the same pattern as the one I saw two days ago at least. He tentatively raises a hand and makes a slow wave back. I won't embarrass him by going any closer. Last thing I need right now is a pet.

Sufi comes in shortly after me and goes to the lock up.

~Roo, come here please.~ I was setting up for class today. I am now glad that I made so much clay. I wipe my hands from giving the clay a fresh kneading.

~Yes Teacher Sufi?~

~You can show me Sufi when there is no one about. I allow all my master students the same privilege.~

I acknowledge her, then look where she is pointing.

~Did you see this?~

~No, I went straight to setting up. I did not think I would be able to get to my work until this afternoon.~ I examine the door. It has been opened.

~I did not open it. Please come inside with me. I have not been in yet. Do you acknowledge this?~

~Sure. I heard you just come in. You did not go near the locker until just now.~ She acknowledges me. We go inside. Total devastation. Every shelf is empty. All the projects from undergrads, grads and other faculty are in a pile smashed beyond recognition.

~Sufi. Someone came to our house yesterday and destroyed all my projects. No one else's materials were touched.~ I do not correct the impression that my thesis project was not among the destroyed.

~I am sorry Roo. This has never happened before in my memory.~

~We discussed it. Mandhi has been forbidden to work on the project

also. We think it would be best if we all stayed away from it for a time at least.~

~I agree Roo. It has become too dangerous for all of us. What do you want to do?~

~I was thinking paper. I actually started to enjoy working with the pulp during prep and it is different enough from clay that no one should be worried about me any more. I have received the message bright and clear.~

~Hide well.~

~Exactly.~

~I approve. Help me clean up this mess. It is bad enough to see your work destroyed without having to see how thoroughly and intentionally they did their work.~

Others come in as we are working. Seeing the mess they say nothing and immediately move in to help. When we are done Teacher Sufi addresses the group.

~Someone is coming into the studio and destroying our work. At first it was directed at only one individual, but it has escalated to everyone's work. If you want to work on your projects I would recommend that you practice new techniques for which you do not expect success. This way if the attacks continue you will still have benefited from your practice. Alternatively you can work in other media.~

~Metals?~

The group laughs. Metals are very expensive and we are a small school.

~If we worked small the expenses would also be low.~

~Small is also easy to steal or smash.~

~Something that is not expected to last then. Rooi, whom you all know, is moving to work with paper. Another alternative would be sand painting. There are many traditions that consider this the highest art form as it demonstrates selfless beauty.~

~Tattoos?~

~Excellent. Then they would have to eat us to destroy the work.~ That gets more laughs. Uneasy ones.

Someone comes in the door announcing, ~The water folk have caught and killed a giant Nauti and captured a young one alive. Everyone is going down to the docks to see it.~

~I am going to recommend that all of you take this day off to go to the learning hall after seeing the Nauti and do some research. Tomorrow we meet early and discuss what you have found. Then we all benefit. Let us define the criteria.~ I can show they are very anxious to leave.

~Indestructible or ephemeral?~

~Affordable.~

~Non polluting.~

~That goes without saying Frayi.~

~No, she is right. It needs to be showed. We are attempting to be creative here. It is important that we do not go too far away from established practices. Let her statement stand.~

~Something we have the knowledge to do. Either in ourselves or in our instructors.~

~Good. It would not be wise to risk injury by attempting to reinvent evacuated glass. Let us disperse now. You may work in groups of three if you wish. Be creative.~

The others leave showing about possibilities. I stay behind.

~I hope you do not mind that I did not leave with the others. I have seen enough Nauti in my lifetime.~

She smiles, ~I was hoping you would stay. Let us work together. What did you have in mind to do?~

I think for a moment, ~I want to do something new. I was thinking of working with strips of flat paper and building up a three dimensional shape from there.~

~Like a shell?~

~Not exactly.~

~Hmm, well, what do you need?~

~Flat paper that I can bend easily. I want to cut it into strips about two aharn wide and as long as the paper we have.~

~Flat paper is rarely used. It might be easier to make some. We can use the dryers to speed up the process.~

~We can use the clay rollers to help flatten it out.~

~There is a better way. If the pulp is allowed to settle on a mesh screen it will be uniform in thickness. The mesh allows excess water to leave evenly.~

~I never thought of that!~

She shows amusement, ~That is why I am the instructor. Come I have some meshes ready to go. We will need to go into storage.~

All of our school buildings are shaped like giant Nauti shells. The storage areas are in the larger chambers closer to the outside and are therefore less protected. It is hard to work on art, with the concentration needed, if you are worried about your own safety. Attacks are rare, we are civilized, but the racial memory is strong. Hide well is our first law.

The storage area is very dusty. Does not look like anyone has been in here is quite some time. We work together to move several storage shells.

~This place is scary. Those shells look like small Nauti shells.~

~What do you think was used as the mold? It is a strong shape and

works well. The same reason this building is based on one.~

~Hope I never encounter one THAT large.~ She laughs at me.

~Ah, here we go.~ We pull out several circular screens about an arms length in width. ~There will be some waste to cut the paper into strips.

Do all the strips need to be the same length?~

~No. If I am careful waste should be minimized.~ Meaning that I will really have to use my ganglions.

~We can recycle any paper that is not needed. The fibers will be shorter, but mixed in with a large batch the effect will be minimized.~

~It is clear that I am not as used to working with paper as you are.~

~Nor with clay. I am working with you, but I have been at this much longer don't forget.~

~Sorry.~ I show respect.

~Back to the studio. We have lots of pulp from the mills. This time you will not have to pound it. The unseen did their work well this morning.~

~Too bad we can't ask them what happened.~

~I suspect that it was before they arrived. The unseen tend to disappear when a person arrives, especially a stranger.~

~You've seen them?~

~I do have eyes Roo. Just because our culture does not see them does not mean everyone is blind.~

~I am not doing well today.~

~Part of the learning process Roo. You are doing well.~

Back in the studio we place a screen in a tub of dilute pulp. The stirred up pulp flows over the screen. Sufi raises and lowers the screen several times to evenly distribute the pulp. Then she raises the screen as steady as she can. The excess pulp flows over a lip on the screen, but the lip also retains some of the pulp. She places the dripping screen on some felt pads that absorb some of the water from the bottom of the screen. More water is drawn off and the pulp flattens and sticks to itself in a mat at the surface of the screen. Once the pulp sets she turns the screen over onto some rough fabric screen. She carefully peels the wet paper off the screen. The paper on a new screen goes into the drying cabinet.

~It is not as easy as it looks. Want to try?~

~I suppose so. Do you have any smaller screens? I am not sure I can handle one as large as you. I can see where it would be very hard to get an even layer of pulp.~

~Good that you see. It does take practice. You can see where the potential problems would be. Show me one more place that would give trouble.~

~Removing the paper from the screen. Still wet it is likely to tear or

fold over on itself.~

~Here is a screen.~ She hands me one. ~This is a thick pulp and the resulting paper will be fairly thick. Thinner paper is harder to make.~

~A slight change in a thick paper would go unnoticed, but the same change on thin paper is likely to mean holes and lumps.~

~Preciously. Now pull up as evenly as possible.~

I try and most of it spills over one side.

~As you can see gravity works against you. Once you tip some the weight change tends to make you tip more in the same direction as the weight shifts. Try again.~

It takes me several more tries before I have something even enough to proceed. At least the early attempts are not wasted. The pulp just goes back into the tub and I try again.

Getting the paper off the screen is not so easy. Again my mistakes go back into the tub.

~Why don't you fill the screen and I will remove it from the screen. That way we will produce more paper in the same amount of time. If you really want to work with paper then you will have more opportunities."

~Looks good.~ We make about twenty pieces before the pulp gets too thin and shallow.

~The first ones in should be ready to proceed.~ She pulls out a dry sheet of paper.

~Could we use the screens to make the initial paper and then the rollers to flatten it even more?~

~Yes, the roller can be used to give the paper a specific texture or even a lack of texture. Smooth rollers will produce a very flat shiny paper.~

~Add to this the materials that can be placed in the pulp and I can see lots of possibilities.~

~It is a recognized art form.~

~How come more people do not follow this path?~

~Paper does not last. It is structurally weak, burns easily, bugs and crustaceans will attack it, feed off of it or make nests with it.~

~Okay, I get what you are saying. How do we cut the strips evenly?~

She shows me using a ceramic knife. The results are not as even as I would like. Maybe it also takes practice to cut a straight line.

~You can make longer pieces by pasting two strips together using this vegetable paste. The down side is that the vegetable paste takes a while to dry.~

~How long?~

~Half a day maybe. Depends on the weather. A good day like today, it might take all day. On a bad weather day it might take only an eighth

day.~

~I hate dry days.~

~Think of the farmers who provide your food Roo.~

~Their skin is like leather. That has to hurt.~

~I am told you get used to it.~ What am I missing?

~So is there an alternative?~

~There is a glue made from the boiled down beaks of Nauti. It is thick and dries quickly.~

~That has to be expensive.~

~I have a small supply.~ She goes to a cabinet, unlocks it and removes a small bottle.

~Don't waste this Roo. Listen carefully. I want you to concentrate really well. Ignore your sight and see in your mind the shape you envision. Concentrate on that shape. Move around the shape and now over the shape. Go inside and see if from that perspective. When you feel you truly have the shape fixed begin. Take your time. This is not a race.~

I know what shape I want even before I begin. I have not been able to get it out of my mind. Can I do this in paper is the question. Like a brush painting I need only a scaffold not all the detail. I only need to suggest the form not recreate it. I layer strips of paper over the image in my mind. Yes. This will do. Slowly I build up the shape to make the complex form. It is almost like tracing it is so easy.

~How long has she been at it?~ I hear a strange voice in the background.

~Five eighths already.~ The sound fades.

I am beginning to hear the sound. The sound of the door opening. I know it is only in my mind, but still, it is so seductive. I give up and give into the music of the spheres. The shape before me unfolds and the portal opens. I seen into my beautiful world. My world of pink. I can see rolling hills of pink flowers. I can see and hear the sea in the distance. The taste of the air is wonderful. So clean and pure.

~She did it!~ I awaken suddenly and the bubble bursts.

Standing next to Sufi is a strange male. I freak and hide myself against the wall and floor.

Sussi bursts in, ~Where is Roo? I must find Roo!~

The two figures point to where I am and I see Sussi looking down at me.

I see them showing.

~Who are you?~ Sufi asks.

~I am Sussi, Roo's housemate. What happened to her?~

~How much do you know about the sculpture?~

~Ah, it happened here then?~

She comes up to me, ~Roo, it happened to me too, just a few minutes ago, I got here as fast as I could.~

~Both of them can do this?~

~Apparently so.~

~They can't stay here.~ Mandhi comes in apparently seeing this last statement.

~No we can't. We need to get out now. Guardians are looking for us. They will most certainly come here soon.~

~Why? I was alone with it happened to me and Roo was right here.~

~I wasn't alone. There was a lab full of master students and Teacher Raj too. He was VERY upset. 'I told you not to work on that project.' I think he assumed that it was something that I did on the computer, but I was not even near it when it happened. I was waiting for him to give me a new assignment as I had finished the last one. Veri was on the computer. I was day dreaming, must have been about the equations, and it just happened right in front of me. I was as surprised as they were.~

~All three of them then. The prophesy is true.~

~There is no time. Raj knows. He will not let this pass.~

~Roo, I need you and your house mates to trust us. I want all of you to go with Teacher Gero. He will take you to a safe place till this is sorted out.~

~What about our home?~

~They are probably already there waiting for you. Raj is very powerful. You do not want to mess with him. He has the sight of the Matriarch. There are no rules or laws for such a one. Being darted would be the least of your worries. There are much, much worse things that can happen.~ Like being fed to a captive Nauti. Why did they have to find one now?

~I will look after your home. I can move in there for the time being and watch over things. Gero, go now before they come here and take us all in.~

I finally become aware enough to participate, ~Sufi, what about you? I can't lose you after all that has happened. It is all my fault.~

~Roo, you could no more stop the prophesy than stop the sun. I will be alright. I did not get to be this age without some abilities. This is not the first grasp for power that I have seen.~

~NOW!~ Gero is ready to ink.

~Hide well Sufi!~ I give a sign of respect as I am being dragged away at the same time.

~This way.~ We are led down into the storage area again. Behind a false wall is a passage that goes deep underground.

~We will have to swim part of the way. This is part of the storm water

system. No rain today so the flow should be mild. Thank goodness for little things. Mandhi you look like the strongest of us, please take up the rear.~ She falls behind me as we go in single file.

~The light will get too dark to show. Use hand communication till we get there.~

~Where is there?~

~You are about to join my expedition. I am an earth historian and life scientist. There is much you need to learn. Ah, besides surviving that is. Seemed to have missed a few lessons there.~

~Thank you.~

We crawl and swim in silence. The water is cold being from underground. Never realized how much the sun warmed the surface water. In this dark I will rest soon. I keep loosing attention and Mandhi pushes me from behind.

She shows me, ~Long days in the lab, often in the dark have given me lots of practice. You get used to it. Helps if you hand. Be sure and let me know what those in front are handing.~

~Not much. I think we are all scared to death. I was going to have a nice quiet life. Make some pottery, contribute as best I could to the whole and live a long time.~

~Nothing is ever what it seems. Can we trust Gero?~

~I don't know. The fifth law says to never trust a male.~

~Yeah, but who wrote the laws? Is there anyone you can really trust?~

~Our Triad.~

~Wish we had made it official before this happened.~

~So do I, but even I know it was too early. Bonding occurs through surviving adversity. Guess that is what this is.~

~I have a feeling there is much more to come. I really did a thorough search and even asked the other physicists. No one has heard of anyone solving the equations. I think Raj lied to be able to take credit for himself.~

~Gero says that is why he left Raj's group fifty two years ago. He as once in the same position as you.~

~Gee, how old is Raj?~

~No one becomes a Teacher before eight by eight years. He was old when Gero was his student. At least two hundred then?~

~That would explain the power base. You don't live that long without consolidating a lot of power.~

~And killing a lot of enemies.~

~I did not hear how the portal opened for you Roo.~

~I had switched to paper as a media for sculpture. I really thought it would be safe, but my mind kept going back to variations on the shape.

Finally one fit what I could do with paper and I became obsessed. I was totally drawn in. Just like in the lab the first time. I lost track of time. Do you know what time it is?~

~Must be after curfew. Ask Sussi what happened to her.~

~Sussi, how did the portal appear to you?~

~I knew that I could not stay in the house. They would be watching for sure. So, I went to practice and worked there at least an eighth just to keep up appearances. I then got permission to use one of the isolation caves. A good place to work on new compositions without driving everyone else crazy with the repetition. Anyway, I started trying to work on something new, but I kept drifting back to the sounds. As you can guess a portal opened and then immediately closed with a loud pop. A spherical stone fell to the ground and nearly rolled over me.~

~There was no equivalent cave in the other world. Must mean that people dug the one you were using, or enlarged an existing one. The portal took out a portal sized chunk of stone. The pop would be the sudden expansion of air.~

~Crab, I just passed that all onto Gero. How much does he know?~

~Ask him?~

~He says he knows much more than we do. Be patient.~

~A power mad male is out to eat us or worse and we are to be patient?~

~

~Well it is nice to know that I am not the only one that has this effect on men. Better watch out Gero, Sussi will probably get you next.~

~I'm not passing that on pest.~

~Who me? You mean this is not a free day activity? I was having so much fun.~

~Do you want me to let go of you now?~

~Sorry.~

~Gero says we will stop soon. Pass it on to Mandhi.~

We still go on for a good length of time, but finally get to a sort of clearing in the total darkness.

Gero uses a glow ball and we can see our surroundings finally. Looks like the inside of a normal home. Smooth walls for comfortable resting areas in little niches.

~This glow ball will not last, so memorize where things are. The waste facilities are through that passage way. No food till tomorrow morning. I'm sorry, but I was not expecting trouble today.~

~But this place does exist.~

~All people who have made it to the Teacher level or above have something worked out. Fortunes can change suddenly. If there is an addendum to the first law it would be 'always have an escape route' as

hiding is rarely enough. Normally one would never show anyone else one's escape route.~

~Then why save us?~

~It is time to rest. We have a long day tomorrow.~ I hate it when someone hides information. Patience Roo, patience.

It tastes strange here. This is not my room and not my blankets. Still, I am exhausted and it does not take long before I am resting.

Day 5

Becoming aware proved much more difficult. My dreams were intense. I had a lot of material to work with. Stones falling out of the air at the sound of a flute. Paper shapes inverting into holes to another world. Someone being able to just think about these things and bringing forth a hole. We are doomed.

~Roo, time to go. Drink some of this it will help.~ Gero hand signals me. His skin tastes different from everyone else. I don't think it is just because he is a male.

~What is it? Tastes horrible.~

~Don't taste it, drink it. A plant extract with a compound that will help wake you up.~ Still tastes bad to me.

The 'tea' works, but we are not allowed into the light for the entire day. Food consists of dried snails that one has to chew on forever to get anything from it. My jaws are so sore by the end of the day.

~How long are these passageways?~

~They were once a series of caves carved into the soft stone. Over time people expanded the network and interconnected the caves. Without a guide a person would soon get lost and perish. I sometimes find fresh remains and there are countless remains from times past. Can't show you how many shoes I have found. To answer your question though we have two more days of travel. Moving underground takes much longer than on the surface.~

~I have a crazy idea then. When it gets to be dark we move to the surface and travel at night instead of the day.~

~You think I am the only one who knows of this plant? How do you think all those break ins occurred in the studio? Hired bullies do the work of others. They will be on watch during the night. It would not take long before we are noticed, even this far from the city proper. The powerful worry about attack as much as we do.~

~There is another way Roo. How about we go to Pink, travel the distance we need to there and then return?~

~You forget the flower Sussi. Roo's flower was a smelly mess when it died so quickly. It is possible the same thing would happen to us in its world. Besides we have never tried to make a portal big enough to fit through.~

~You did not show me there was life on this world you have found. I would very much like to see it.~

~We would need protective gear.~

~Not entirely. If the air was bad we would have noticed that. We just

need to prevent contact. A normal dry suit should work for that purpose.~

~How do we decontaminate the outside of the suits when we return? I for one think we are in enough trouble without being accused of pollution as well.~

~It is interesting to see how the three of you work together to solve problems. Unfortunately in this case I think we should proceed as planned. After we get beyond our enemies we will have time to work out the details of visiting your world.~

~Even three days underground should get us a good distance away.~

~Assuming we have been going in a straight line. I doubt we have. No cave I have seen is linear.~

~Right you are Mandhi. We will emerge only a half days walk from where we started.~

~Crab, three days to go half a day. What does that serve?~

~Three days of their looking for us and not finding any trace. They will assume we are quite some distance away by then.~

~Ah, good point.~

~Breakfast time.~

~Hand me another dried snail and I will throw up on you.~

~Nope. Ran out of those tasty treats. Try this.~ A shrimp is handed to me. Tastes of wet leaves and dirt. But it moves! I pop it into me mouth. A shrimp of some kind.

~What is it and more please!~

~A cave shrimp. Not that easy to find. We would not want to clean out the caves. We will be closer to the surface soon where there will be lots of slugs maybe even maggots.~

~Not my favorite food but better than dried snails I suppose.~

I spoke too soon. It is hard going up hill over mud. The wet rocks are easy to hold onto, but when we run into a patch of mud there is nothing. I have the bruises to prove I am not good at this. Glad Mandhi is behind me though I am not sure she likes it.

We get much closer to the surface. ~I taste fresh air!~

~We will not be going outside, just close enough to the surface to gather some food. A special treat.~

A few more bruises and we are there. Four of us crammed onto a ledge. Gero leaves and returns promptly.

~Try these.~

Slugs alright. Taste strange. I bite into one and my mouth puckers.

~I wish I could see the look on your face Roo. If it is anything like mine it should be hilarious.~

~I am not so sure of your gathering ability.~

~Eat up, it is likely the only thing we get today. These are yellow in

the daylight in case you see one in the wild. They secrete a bad tasting slime that makes them less often chosen as prey.~

~I kind of figured that one out.~ I stuff the rest of my down hoping it won't be coming up again soon.

The travel is very boring. If it was not for the fact that my entire body is now one big bruise I would think I was dead. Half the time I think I am and this is all just a bad dream. Maybe I will wake up and I will still be in his house. No, that would be worse. At least Gero seems to be able to control himself. Of course three women all stronger than him helps.

~Rest stop. Tomorrow we reach the surface.~

Day 6

~Keep very quiet. Gero has noticed a search party. Hide well.~
Not my idea of the best way to wake up, but it has definitely gotten my hearts beating.

I see a glow to the far right behind part of a curved wall. Shadows move against the walls. I hear sounds of people moving against the mud floor. They are in an easy to transverse portion of the cave. They must have come in the entrance we were at last night. We re not too far from it now. The air is fresher here and it is nice to be able to hear some of the outside world when you rest. Seeing would be better.

Their light gets closer and I change my color to match my surroundings now that I can see where I am. I notice the others do the same. One shows himself at a passage way. We can now see what she is showing.

~I can't see. Hand show me what she shows.~ Sussi is just out of view. Also means she can't be seen. I would trade with her if I could.

~Let me concentrate Sussi.~ The searcher is still some distance away and hard to see. Just chance that she appeared where she did. The light is not right either.

~. . . you go this way?~ She turns out of view and then back again. ~ . . .no point. Waste of time.~ She is gone. The lights bounce around and get darker. They are leaving.

I pass on what I have learned. ~They think this is a task of little chance of success. They are not putting much effort into it. Something about no way we could have made it this far is my guess.~

~Good pattern recognition Roo. We will wait till I am sure they are really gone and not just waiting for us to make a move.~ Show about the longest arm. Not having much to eat the last few days does not help. Water only goes so far to fill one's stomach.

Finally we are on the move again. I spend the rest of the day looking at every every dark corner I can't see wondering if they will jump out and grab us. Then suddenly we are in the light. Rather nearly light. Either sunrise or sunset. I can not longer know where or when I am. The trees are huge here! I cannot see their tops. If it were not for the caves it would seem dark.

I ask, ~Is is safe to show?~

~Sorry I can't understand a thing you are showing Roo. You are all covered in mud.~ Gero is using hand signals to get his point across, being just as mud covered as the rest of us. He motions for us to follow. I look to the others. We are a very miserable lot.

Gero leads us to a stream where we all wash in the cool water. My bruises are mostly on my arms, so I should still be understandable. Lots of cuts that I was not aware of either. I look to Mandhi. She does not seem to be as bad off as I am.

She notices me looking, ~I am stronger than you Roo and do more athletic activities. It helps with the coordination.~

~But we were in total darkness.~

~And you were ahead of me. Every time I heard you thump something I knew what was coming.~

~Oh yeah.~

~Most of my bruises are from you and Sussi falling on me on the more vertical slopes.~

~Blame it on the mud and I have more bruises than you do.~

~Pay attention. We have a ways to go before we reach base camp. This is not where I wanted to come out but now that they are looking for us I thought it might be better to put some distance between us rather than hide any more in the caves. The trail is well traveled and in good condition, so we should be able to make some good time.”

His idea of a good time is my idea of a lagoon full of Nauti and now it is a different set of muscles. By the time we get there I am totally exhausted, covered in both dust and dried mud and barely able to stay aware in spite of the pain.

I barely hear him whistle. No flute either. That has to take practice. He is flashing a name, ~Fari~, female name. I wake up some and look about. No one and nothing moving. There is a fire in the center of a clearing. It is dark enough that the only light in the sky is a partial moon and stars. I am so used to the foggy overcast skies at the coast that I am momentarily mesmerized. A tap on my arm brings me around.

~Something is wrong. Fari is missing. The mounts are here, as are the supplies. No sign of Fari. She would not abandon the camp. She knew I was coming.~

~How did she know that?~

~Sufi told her. She had the speed advantage and was probably here yesterday even having to lead the mounts.~

~Wouldn't she be expecting you tomorrow instead of today?~

~There was no set time. I had done that same run in under one day. No offense, but this was your first time. You did good. It gets easier with more times and I have done that crawl many, many times.~

~We wait and see if she turns up then.~ I'm hungry for some real food.

~If a wild animal got her the camp would not be set up. She made it this far.~ He is looking at something on the ground. ~Slugs! Guardians

are here! Get into the woods NOW!~

~Too late Teacher. All of you are to come with us.~ Six Guardians surround us having come from the shadows.

~Where is Fari?~ Gero is mad, very mad. There is no answer from them.

Mandhi leaves the fire and walks towards the one that told us we were under arrest, ~We are not leaving. You are so outnumbered that to even show to you is pathetic.~

The Guardian looks amused. She and the others are in full shell. She pulls four razor sharp ceramic sabers from behind her back. The others follow suit.

~Is that all you have?~ Mandhi, what are you doing? Those things sever an arm with barely a move.

~Go easy and your death will be quick.~

~I love it when they don't listen.~ A blade glows bright at its base and shatters. Another one, then another one. I get into the act and soon the three of us have used our ability to make dust of all the sabers using our ability to form transworld spheres. Besides the infinitely thin interface where our two worlds meet, the shock wave produced shatters the ceramic nature of their blades. Not dust really, but small enough pieces that they are not tempted to pick up pieces to use.

Gero is staring at us, then looks at the Guardians, ~That just as easily could have been your cerebral ganglia. Don't mess with us.~ Good thinking. Don't let them know he cannot do this too.

Sussi steps in, ~Take off your shells. I will not have you trying to escape and gather support.~

~As you thought nothing of Fari's life there is no reason we need to save yours.~

~Gero, they did not do this alone. They were ordered to. They are not at fault.~

~We still can't trust them to just walk away. Nor do we have enough supplies to take them with us.~

~We have all killed when we had to, to stay alive. No one our age hasn't. One could be used to feed us for quiet some time.~

~I have a better idea.~ I walk forward towards the leader. ~Pick one of your team.~ I do not say for what. She probably thinks we are showing about a victim, so she will pick the weakest team member. She looks at us and then motions one forward. One brave person, and yes the smallest.

The others are not sure what I have in mind, but trust me. ~The rest of you should fall back some so you are not caught in the field. Everyone else gather closer to the fire. Gather the mounts too.~

When they do so I form the largest bubble that I have ever tried to do.

I surround all of us. In a moment we are on Pink. Outside the bubble is Pink, inside it is still our world. Back home the four will be seeing the opposite. They will see a bubble containing Pink.

~Good job Roo, you have just killed us all.~

~I don't think so.~

~The flower died Roo, now we are surrounded by them.~

~That's weird. It was dark on our world and here it is at least two eighths earlier.~

~Still only one moon at least.~ The Guardian looks up and points.

~The flower died because I pulled it in two. I held onto to it for sometime and suffered no ill effects. We all cleaned it up and suffered no ill effects.~

~We are here now, let's make the best of it. We need to make some distance before going back.~

~The fire is here. That means there is a field of pink things on our world. Hope they don't cause problems.~

~Once the bubble collapses this will be totally Pink again. We need to get outside the bubble if we are to make use of this escape plan.~

We pull the mounts over. They are not too happy about going someplace strange. Neither are we. Once everyone is on Pink I let the bubble collapse. The fire is gone as is any trace of our world.

Gero has carefully pulled up one. He takes a hand lens out of a pocket and carefully examines it.

~If you are careful they don't die. It is strange. I have seen a lot of different forms of life. It is not a plant as we know it. The roots are almost like arms. Wish I had a microscope.~ He pauses to look at it some more carefully then realizes, ~Slugs! Bind the claws on the mounts before they start eating them. We have no idea if they are poisonous if taken internally.~

~Too late Gero.~

~Do it anyway. Let's at least limit the amount they eat.~

~Your life depends on this too, so help or stay here. We have no reason to bring you back home.~ Sussi admonishes the Guardians. Gero shows us, the Guardians already know how. I remove some flower material from the jaws of one of the mounts.

Gero sees what I am doing, ~Stop that right now Roo. They can take an arm off. Those jaws are like sabers.~ I look at my arms. All there. Can't say I was always that lucky. Who hasn't lost a limb or two while growing up. Would hate to have to grow a new one at my age. Probably take a year or more. The transports we use in the city are all designed without mouth parts for safety reasons. They are all fed using a solution pumped directly into their stomachs. I think of the one that was used to

move my sculpture to and from the lab. A long way away now.

~Light is running out. The two Guardians will share one mount. Roo and I will share another. Sussi and Mandhi each have their own. The remaining one will carry the supplies already loaded on it. Normally we would distribute, but there is no time. The terrain looks very similar in an overall way. Small stuff is different. That makes sense as we have had some impact on our world's shape at the arm level if not more.~

At least I know how to get on and I am used to being in the rear. Gero operates the controls. I am curious but also very tired. Soon I am resting. Good thing I am strapped on.

~Whoa! Look!~ Gero shouts. I can barely see him in the growing darkness. He points towards the ground. As we move along the plants move out of the way. We had been stepping on them for the last eighth.

~It's as if they are plants during the day and animals at night.~

~We are not on our world any longer.~

~Who are you people?~

~Didn't your keeper show you?~

~We were only told to bring you in. Charge of pollution. Being a death sentence means we did not have to be careful. No offense.~

Gero makes a nasty sound. Didn't know we could do that either, at least not on demand. Guess I was taught to be more polite.

~The question is, do we go back now or spend the night here?~

~Night without a fire is not safe on our world.~

~May not be here either. Better a danger you know than one you don't.~ I can't believe Mandhi showed that.

~So far we have seen only flowers, er whatever. This place seems safe and they stay away from us.~

~Then why do they move away from us. Seems like some kind of survival mechanism to me.~

~Don't forget the horrible goo they turn into when they die. The mounts are covered in it up to the first joint. Doubt we will ever get it off.~

~Bet it keeps the parasites off back home. I hate removing borers.~

~I don't want to know.~ My imagination is already going wild.

~I am hungry, tired and did I mention exhausted? I say we eat and rest.~ Yes please!

~What about our new friends.~ Don't get off topic. Eating and resting are more important.

~What about them?~

~Tie them up, eat them, what?~ Take too long to prepare them.

~Leave them be. Where can they go? They do anything to any one of us they die here. Dying of starvation is not pretty.~ Did I say I was

hungry here?

~She's right. It is clear you are much more than we were told about. We are not stupid. We recognize your strength.~ The two of them lower themselves to the ground in subjugation.

~We are not your masters. I am taking our group to see something that would also benefit your knowing. Come with us and you will not be harmed. I loved Fari, but she is gone. The truth I serve is much greater than one person.~

~Show us that truth then, so that we may serve also.~

~A truth that cannot be shown, but must be seen. Once seen you will serve.~

I hate puzzles and I really hate anything spiritual. Simple is best. Survival of the lucky. Simple as that. I think of all the credits I have spent on charms and lucky prayers. Worked so far.

Food was better. Dried mashed insects in a rice base heated over a compost gas stove. I was surprised at that, but Gero showed having a fire was polluting and made it easy to see ones position. Not a problem here of course. No dead wood to burn anyway. Full, I settle into a nice soft blanket and am resting easily.

Day 7

~Roo, we need to get back to our world.~

I move over and pretend I did not see him. There is just enough light from the false dawn.

~Something has eaten a large amount of the flower things. We could be next.~

Crabs! I get up and look around. Sun ward there is a large path empty of flowers.

~What did that? Could they have moved on their own?~

~Look at that hill at the end of the path.~

~No flowers on it. So?~

~Wait and watch.~ It is moving! The entire hill is alive. I look around. It got to within several arms of our camp. No flowers near us is what saved us is my guess.

~I doubt we taste good. Not very fast.~

~And what eats it? Would certainly be easy to find. Any lump at the end of a path of no flowers.~

~Sort of like us.~

I concentrate then stop.

~I am not sure I know the way back. Gather everyone. We may only have one chance.~

"We are two eights behind here, so it should be full daylight on home world.~

Mandhi comes up to me, ~What's wrong Roo?~

~I am not sure how to bubble up home from here. Will the same concentration work the other way? Or do we need to invert the shape?~

~Make a small one first. We can look through the globe to see if it looks right.~

Sussi comes up on the other side, ~Besides where else would we go? We have only ever seen this one world.~

~The equations are very clear. There could be thousands of worlds. We have been very lucky to have ended up on this one. Some possibilities I do not even want to imagine.~

~Like molten rock or something?~ Sussi squirms. The Guardians looked concerned.

~Let Roo work. Try concentrating just like you did before. That will be our standard. Think small.~

I am scared. I try and concentrate and nothing happens. Does it not work here?

Sussi sees my reaction, ~Let me try Roo.~

Immediately a bubble forms. I am relieved. Sussi and Mandhi look through the small bubble from opposite sides.

~Sussi, do you think you can do a big one?~

~No. These small ones are easy and fun, but I have a hard time opening my mind enough.~ They both look towards me.

~What did the small one show you?~

~We need you to make one Roo. Sussi and I probably think differently than you do.~ She turns and calls Gero, ~Gero, you are the only one who will know what our world would look like from here.~

I concentrate, knowing that there is no reason I should not be able to do this. A bubble forms a little smaller than the one Sussi made. Mandhi gives me a concerned look. Gero comes up to look.

~I have never been this close to a small one.~ He peers through.

~Yaahi, come over here and look.~ I never thought to ask her name or look at her tattoo now that she is no longer wearing the shell. Her companion is a small male. Nothing to get excited about.

~It looks right. See that ridge over to the right? There is a lookout up there. If we come out here they will see all of us.~

~But is it our world?~ Mandhi asks.

~Definitely!~ They both answer at the same time.

~The ridge on this world is not as pronounced. We will have to be careful of direct comparisons.~

~The trees are different too.~

~Sticky snail.~ Obvious.

~We need to move. Remember as soon as it gets light the flowers will stop moving.~

~Follow the lump creature. The path is clear. I would like to get a closer look at the same time.~

~Yaahi, we don't have your sabers to protect us. Is it wise to entice the locals?~

~Everything I have seen so far moves as slow as slugs. This world is very different from ours. We are more of a threat to them than they are to us. Besides you can just glow ball them.~

~I hope you're right. But just in case, why don't you take the lead.~ She raises two arms to show respect and acknowledge Gero's request.

Mandhi and I share a mount. Sussi is with Gero and the Guardians share one. The supplies are on the last one tied to Gero's mount. We follow the trail to the first lump creature. We stay back as Yaahi pokes around at it to no effect. ~It doesn't respond at all. It just keeps munching along as if it is the only thing in the universe.~

~You move so fast you probably do not exist for it.~

~Or it has no point of reference. There may be nothing bigger than it

that poses a threat. Therefore we do not exist in its world.~

~But something smaller could pose a threat. Even a matriarch can be taken out by fungus.~

~We have problems of our own and the day is not getting longer for our benefit. Where to from here?~

~Yaahi says they are on the ridge watching for us. We need to be on the other side of the ridge. That means we climb on this world. On the other side of the ridge we go down a ways till we are out of sight then go back to our world.~

~I have to ask. What is on the other side of the ridge on our world?~

Gero thinks about it, ~Oh, I know what you mean. We can't bubble back into a forest. The trees would come down right on us like spears. The stream should be safe. Do a survey bubble first to be sure.~

~I intend to. We are experiencing things that no one has before. There is no one out here to help us. We are on our own. If you think of something no matter how crazy say it.~ Mandhi says looking at me, ~Just as Roo has just done.~ The point was more for the benefit of the two Guardians though.

It takes several eights to reach the top of the ridge. I hate uphill even on a mount. I am not sure the mount likes it either. This landscape is so monotonous. I don't know how Gero knows where we are. I look back. You can see all the way to the sea. Thank goodness I did not forget my lenses. I take them off for near work, but I can't see ten arms without them. The sea looks the same. The waves and the shore. No, the shore is not quite the same. The harbor where our ships dock is the most changed. I had thought that we had not changed our world much. The laws are very strict about pollution. That includes changes to our environment. It looks like we have done more than we thought. It might have happened so slowly that we did not notice. How long have we been on this shore line? The required history class showed something about fifty thousand years or there about.

~Roo pay attention. It gets tricky up ahead.~ I pull my attention back to the front. Everyone has stopped showing and is watching the ground ahead. There are lots of rocks. We have left the pink flowers behind. This is all gray rock. The crab knows what to do and does it well. With Mandhi controlling all I have to do is stay on. This is not city driving any longer. A moment later we are over the ridge and in yet another new world.

~That's really strange. We just went from everything pink to everything blue green.~

~This looks more like a forest too.~ The 'plants' are much higher here. The entire landscape is covered with them below the rock line.

~How do we get through that?~

~We don't. Not knowing what is down there. Forests are never just trees.~

~Why didn't you say that before we walked through one to the camp clearing?~ Yaahi looks at me like I am as dumb as a crawly. She might be right. I look at her shoes. They are shelled. Mine are the old carbon fiber composite. Students can't afford the good stuff. Bet they make it easier to ride for long periods of time.

~We follow the ridge down as far as we can then move to our world.~

~After checking it out first.~ Sussi adds this time. The Guardian's partner never says anything. The best kind of male is a quiet one that follows orders well? Gero doesn't. I think I trust him more. Never trust a male.

I amend my previous statement. Going down is much worse. Being on the back is also worse than the front judging from the amount I am bouncing into the air compared to Mandhi. I glance sun ward. Only a few more eighths till sundown.

Yaahi comments, ~We need to get back to our world before dark and this world is behind ours time wise. It must be near sundown now.~

~Okay, hold up here.~

~We can't get into a circle here. How will we bubble home?~ The ridge is too narrow and unstable. Several times we have sent cascades of rocks down on both sides. It could have been us.

~Let's see if we are alone first. Make a small bubble Roo between us." Gero gets his mount to turn around. Didn't know they could do that.

~Everything alright Roo?~ he asks.

~Right, bubble.~ I make one easily this time and a chunk of flesh falls to the ground. It is worm shaped and still moving. I pop the bubble immediately. Gero immediately go to the stuff which is still moving. No, just split into two parts. Goo is coming out of it.

~I'm sorry Yaahi. I'm sure it was quick. Make another bubble Roo.~

~What is it?~

~Better that you don't know Roo. It was not your fault. I ordered the bubble.~

It flips over a bit and I see part of a tattoo. It was a Guardian or part of one anyway.

~Why the worm shape?~

~The bubble caused a fatal wound and gravity from the falling form brought through the rest.~ Mandhi adds.

I make another bubble, this time higher. Gero has to stand up higher to look but does not complain.

~No one else within sight. Let's go before someone comes to see what

happened.~

~They will find our tracks. Go down over the ridge some. The tree line should be similar on both sides.~

That woke him up. Sounds like he is on our side now. Nothing like seeing someone you knew die.

We go down the ridge. Steep and hard going. A pack slips off the supply crab. Mandhi jumps off in front of me to retrieve it. She passes it to me to hang onto, then hand leads our crab down slowly. The other controllers do the same. Where did Mandhi learn all this stuff?

~Sound should carry. We need to be as quiet as possible when we go through.~ Sussi knows better than I do about that one.

Gero comes up to me as best he can, ~Roo, I want you to make a large enough bubble for one crab to go through. Not too big. It is lighter here than there. I don't want to draw any attention to ourselves. Everyone else see me. Get ready to go through as fast as we can. Be careful of the edges. Head for the trees as soon as you are through.~ The are only several arms away on this world.

I make the bubble and the ground is lower than here and covered in soft soil. A few branches fall into the center. A few rocks at the edge of the bubble fall in from our new world. There are weeds growing in the ground. Our world is more aggressive at least in this way. Gero and Sussi go first. The Guardians go next and Mandhi and I last. As soon as I am through I close the bubble. I look back, but there is no one visible. If they saw us come through I am sure they hid. Especially if the four we left behind showed anything to the others. I am sure they have long sights to communicate with.

Mandhi hand signals me, ~This will be hard. There is no trail. Watch for branches snapping back at you. Stay as low as possible.~ I look up as it is so much darker here. We are in for a storm. The sky is menacing with no clear sky visible. Was not there yesterday. The wind is picking up too.

A few arms in the forest I see Gero say through the trees, ~There should be a stream up ahead. We can follow it down lower much easier than this brush.~

~Aren't we making a lot of noise this way?~

~The wind will prevent any sound from carrying. I am more worried about animals. Not all are as nice as Gero showed.~

~When did you ever do this kind of thing?~

~I haven't, but I have spent a lot of time on a crab and I do read the scientific literature, even the life study ones. Many expeditions have gone into the interior.~

~What do we do when it gets dark?~

~Be afraid Roo. Hope we find the stream first. It will lead to a lake eventually, or the ocean. Then we will be safe.~ Are there rainwater Nauti?

Crab. It is getting dark fast.

By the time we reach the stream I have scratches all over my body. Bugs are starting to notice us. I swat as many as I can. Some get through anyway. I am slowly losing parts of my body to them. One small bite at a time. Then as it gets so dark it is hard to see anything I notice something really beautiful. The trees start to light up with little lights in them.

I hand Mandhi,~What are those? The trees are alive?~

~Of course trees are alive. All plants are Roo. But if you mean the lights, those are Star Nauti.~

~Nauti! Crab, they will eat us alive!~

~Not likely. Too tiny. They use their luminescence to attract insects to eat and mates of course.~ Of course. I have never tried the more kinky forms of pleasure. Cover your body with luminescent bacteria. Supposed to be something else.

~Wish they would attract the ones wanting to mate with me.~ We both swat something in unison.

~Going down. I hear splashing ahead. Gero has found the stream. Keep you arms out of the water if you can. It should not be deep here this close to the top of the ridge.~

What's in the water?~

~Don't worry, it won't get through the reinforced crab shell.~ But definitely through me. Crab.

~Do we get to eat or rest today?~

~I don't know. Better than being served for dinner.~

~You mean I am not being served already.~ Two more swats.

The lights from the Nauti get thinner and further away. Further on we angle up. We are leaving the stream. We reach the end of the stream bank and then level off. I can't see a thing. Someone has lit a glow ball. I think it is Gero. Mandhi brings our crab around so we all end up facing the glow ball. There is just enough light to see what Gero is showing.

~Let the mounts roam. They have not been able to feed at all yesterday and most of today.~ Gero and Mandhi take the supplies off the one crab. I undo the restraints on the claws of ours and immediately the crab starts pulling up ferns and small plants from the ground and stuffing it into its mouth.

I go up to the glow ball. It will not last long. From there I try and see our surroundings. I can't really see very far. A bolt of lightening to my right. I wait. The thunder finally follows. Still some way away. It will be wet soon. Most of our storms come from the sea, so the lightening also

shows me roughly which direction that is. Each time the lightening happens it gets closer and becomes bright enough to see my surroundings. We are in a small clearing surrounded by trees and the stream itself south of us. Trees on the other side of the small stream. I can feel drops hitting me occasionally.

Gero comes up to me carefully looking at my body, examining it for some reason. He finally picks up the glow lamp and moves it around me.

~What's the matter Gero?~

He says nothing, but continues his examination. He snorts and pulls out a small knife and stick. There is something hanging from my side. He wraps it around the stick and slowly pulls.

~Resist my pulling Roo. You have a vampire worm. The reason you do not feel it is because it uses an anesthetic to mask its presence. I have only found one on you. Sarra had three.~ Sarra? That must be the name of the other Guardian. Once he has the work out he uses the knife to carefully slit it along its length. That is a strange thing to do.

He sees me watching, ~The only way to kill them. If you cut it into pieces, each piece can become another worm.~

~How did it happen? I didn't feel a thing.~ It starts to rain harder. Another bolt of lightening and almost immediately thunder. We are in the eye of the storm.

~They hang from trees and brush and latch onto anything that passes under them. The reason we have so few is because we are not its normal meal. I'll show you in the morning if you are still interested.~ He leaves me just as the rain really hits. The water feels good. I stretch myself out to be cleaned by the drops. Also feels good to be out of my shoes. Essential for walking any distance, but binding all the same.

Sussi and Mandhi come up to me and lay beside me to enjoy the rain and to show.

~This has certainly be an interesting experience. Eaten alive by insects and worms.~

~Does it hurt?~ Sussi asks.

~You did not get one?~

~The only one who didn't I was shown.~

~No, no pain yet anyway.~

~It will.~ Mandhi adds. I guess the anesthetic wears off. ~The rain will help to prevent infection at least.~ Crab, one more thing to worry about. Maybe the dart would have been a better choice. At least it would be over. I rest quickly again. Exhaustion does that.

Day 8

There is a lot of noise at night. Mostly what I remember was the crunching sound of thousands if not millions of insects, slugs, snails, crabs and who knows what. Why can't they like us? Mandhi was also right about the pain. Not the worst I have felt recently, but definitely noticeable.

~Roo wake up! We are under attack!~ I scramble into my shoes and see where the others are going. Gero, Sarra and Yaahi have picked up small branches and are wacking objects flying towards us. There are hundreds of them about the size of small fruit. Mainly fly in a straight line, but occasionally do some tricky curves that are hard to hit.

~What a racket!~ A loud buzzing is coming from the creatures. I catch up to the others. One lands on Sarra and he emits a loud shrieking whistle. I concentrate and bubble it out of our world. I don't really need to take the entire thing out. I narrow my focus and make tiny bubbles that kill the things without endangering Pink. Not that I think they could survive there.

~Roo concentrate. You don't want to be bit.~ One lands on my arm and I bubble it dead. I find that I can make more than one small bubble at a time and I can move them! I make an array and use it like a large fly swatter. I stand as high as I can and am actively searching them out to hit. Not as effective as I thought it would be. I am wasting most of the bubbles. Rarely more than one hits at a time. I see if I can move them independently of each other. I pop the ones I can't control and soon I have five zooming around going after the things instead of waiting for them to come to me. Kind of fun actually.

It seems like only a moment when I suddenly find that I can't find any more.

Sarra and Yaahi are staring at me like I am some kind of horror.

~What? Are more coming?~ I look behind me and the rest are there staring at me. I am confused. What is the problem?

~Roo how did you do that? You were MOVING the bubbles and at such a rate that I could barely see them. We all backed up to get out of your way for fear we would be killed by one."

Oh! ~Ah, sorry. It seemed to be the best way to take care of them. What were they?~

Gero comes up to me holding one that was not too damaged, ~They are a sort of flying clam. Distantly related. They came on land about the same time the insects did. The two valves lost their calcium carbonate and became the wings. Can't see very well. They just fly until they run

into something, stick to it with slime and then bite it to see if it is food. Breed like crazy. Fortunately these are the small ones. Harder to hit though, at least for most people. Glad you are with us Roo.~

Yaahi comments, ~Those bubbles could just as easily take out an entire army. No resistance to movement. Oh yeah, you are dangerous Rooi.~

I don't know what to show. No one else is showing anything either, just staring at me. ~I am not too crazy about killing people if I can avoid it.~ I finally let out. True, though probably not believed at this moment.

~We need to get moving. Though it is unlikely they will follow us this side of the ridge I want to be further away before we chance a fire. Do not eat anything you find. Only eat what I give you from the provisions. Everyone see me on this?~

~Why?~ Mandhi always curious. I have had enough surprises.

~Because it is not only things outside our bodies that want to eat us. Most of the life here is heavily laden with parasites that are not familiar with our body plans. That means they tend to eat their way through vital organs and nerves unintentionally.~

~Gee, what do they do intentionally?~

~They kill you much more slowly. Meat tastes better fresh.~ Great, you had to ask Mandhi. Now I won't be able to rest or eat.

~We have a problem Gero.~ Sarra is next to one of the crabs. It is behaving strange. Sort of wobbly. It finally collapses to the ground. Not normal at all.

~Get the supplies off of it NOW! It will die otherwise.~ We hurriedly remove the packs and throw them onto the still wet ground. Just as we do so the back of the carapace splits in two and the body starts to emerge. I had seen it in smaller crabs, but this was truly impressive. The sounds with all the stretching, popping and cracking. I wonder if it hurts or feels good.

~Molting. Why now? Don't they normally do that in the summer when it is warmer?~

~Normally yes, but under stress the process can be speed up. It does present problems.~

Sarra and Yaahi seem to know what to do. Along with Gero they are helping the crab get out of the old shell. I have seen lots of crustaceans molt of course. Just never one this big. Process seems to be the same though. I go over to move the shell away as they pull pieces off.

~Roo, leave it here. She will want to eat it for the protein and calcium. You, Sussi and Mandhi, see if you can get the shoes off. We will want to reuse them.~ The tips of the legs are metal. The shell is getting really soft. I try pulling it out of the metal tip, but it just rips off at the edge.

~It would help to have a knife.~

~Not a knife. A knife could harm the tips. A piece of wood works well. Look around for a branch or something. We are almost done and will help in a moment.~

I find a twig small enough and start scraping the inside of the tip in my hands. It comes out fairly easily. I reach for my second shoe when Mandhi exclaims, ~I think this is the reason why she molted.~

She holds up a patch of shell. Looks like from the under carapace. On one side there is a still live buzzer working away on the shell. Apparently it does not know there is nothing on the other side. You can see its radula poking through searching.

~There may be another reason. She was the one who ate the most of those pink flower things on the other world.~

~Check the others. I want no more molts. Yaahi, you are Sarra seem to know mounts. Start with the ones over there. Mandhi and I will start here. Sussi and Roo finish the shoes. You are doing a good job. We need to get them on before the shell sets. If we don't the shell could split when it hits a rock or hard surface later on. For the same reason, be sure you really get them clean. Any protrusion can also cause a split.~

Gero is only slightly larger than Mandhi. Yaahi may be slightly larger than him, but we all seem to accept him as our leader. He clearly knows more about what is going on having obviously been here before.

~Sussi, why is the life here so different from where we live? We never had to worry about half of these things.~

~Showing of which I would stay further away from those trees if you don't want another worm on you.~

I look up to see several waving in the non existent wind. Crab. I pick up two shoes and move further away. They had already moved the crab itself while it is vulnerable with a soft shell.

Sussi joins me, ~I can see two possible reasons. The climate is different here, much dryer, warmer and no salt air. Different creatures live under different conditions. Second, we have removed everything dangerous from near our homes and work.~

~Home sounds really nice now. I will never complain about my duties again. I will never be late for teaching or complain about the quality of the clay or the wobble in the student wheel.~

Sussi, amused, adds, ~I promise to always do the dishes on my days.~

~You knew? I had thought you were always so busy that you just forgot.~

~I'm sorry Roo. I know you did them most of the time. It just did not seem important to me. What I would not give for a clean bowl, especially one of yours, now.~

~We don't have a kiln available or we could make some. The clay at the stream looks fine. Better in fact that what we are able to get locally.~

~Imagine the cost of transporting it back though. Must weigh more than a matriarch.~

~We would have to dry it out as much as possible. Too bad we are going in the other direction.~

~Roo, you could take on a matriarch with your abilities.~

~That is crazy show. I know nothing of poisons or bribes.~

~What you did earlier was amazing.~

~That would get me in the hollow, but I would not be able to keep it more than an eighth.~

~You are probably right. Think of all the changes you could implement though.~

~I don't want to be in charge of anything Sussi. I would be happy just to lead a quiet life. Here they come.~

Mandhi explains, ~The shoes are set using the nanocoat mix. The mix is then smeared all over the rest of the shell. It will bond with the hardening shell making it far harder than the normal shell. Crabs this size cannot support their weight for long without engineering and structural help.

Don't look at me that way. It was in the training you get when you learn to drive.~

~We lost three eighths with the molt and buzzers. Let's move out. Distribute the supplies among the other crabs for now. It takes a few eighths for the shell to harden completely. We will load her up tomorrow first thing. If we make good time we can risk a fire and have fresh cooked food tonight.~

~I would rather have fresh raw food, but cooked is better than more nutrient goo at least.~

~We need to get more water in our systems. Too dry here and we are not getting in any soak time.~

~A soak in the stream would be the last thing you do. We boil the water or put it through the ceramic filters before touching it.~ I hate running away from mad matriarchs.

At least traveling in daylight is easier. You can see the worms before they try and attach to you. Of course the shaders help keep them off as well as the sun. Gero and his group know what they are doing. Sorry she got messed up in this and ended up dying for us. I wonder who the last member of the Triad was?

Being in the back allows me more time to see our surroundings. Some of the trees look the same. Not as many ferns of course. Even I know they like it wetter. The soil is different. Not as much sand and less iron too.

The creek silt looked like it might make good clay. The ground away from the stream does not. The rock on the ridge was gray on both worlds. That gives me an idea. Since I can move a bubble now I make a medium small sized one and suspend it near one eye. I can now see both worlds and compare them.

Very different. As strange as my own world seems on this side of the coastal mountains, Pink is far different. Huge flower like trees open to catch the sun. Plants that move when something disturbs them. The sun has not been up as long on Pink and there is still some low fog clinging to the ground.

~Mandhi, you showed that according to the equations there should be thousands of different worlds. How do you suppose we reach the other ones?~

~It all has to do with the nine dimensions the equations are based on. We need to learn how to twist the bubble in the other dimensions without moving it in ours.

~How do I do that?~

~Roo, you are asking me? I never expected to be able to do what we have done much less see you go way beyond that. I would say go with your instincts. Don't think about it, just try. If it does not work try again and again. We know it must be possible.~

~Crab, I just sliced through a tree or something.~ I look back to see the tube of oddly shaped tree parts rotting on the ground. At least I don't have to worry about it taking over on this side. Hope all those buzzer parts did the same on their side. What if one of them was with eggs? I could start a plague so easily.

~I would not worry about it Roo.~ It is as if she could read my ganglia. ~The chemistry of the two worlds are just too different. I also don't think we sent anything through intact. You really made a mess of those buzzers.~ She gives an affirmation sign to enforce what she has showed.

~It was fun.~ I pop the bubble so I don't have to worry about doing any more damage. ~Sussi says I should try for the matriarch. I would rather stay with the two of you.~

~I don't think you are big enough for that position, but the Matriarch is part of a Triad too silly. I think we would have a lot more to learn before we could do anything like that, even if we were to decide to. A few tricks and more weight won't be enough.~ I can dream can't I? I am so tired of hiding and being afraid. Of course I am assuming that being the Matriarch will solve this problem. I am not so sure. You would have to be worrying all the time that someone else like us was just waiting for the right time to take your place.

~There is smoke coming from that direction.~ Sarra points just to our right.

Gero responds, ~That is where we are going. Hopefully they will let us stay the night.~

~You don't know them?~

~Didn't even know they were here, just hoped that someone might be. Homesteaders have been getting more and more frequent lately. Part of the problem I want to present to all of you.~

~Just when are you going to do that anyway?~

~Soon.~ But not right now. It is not like you don't have an attentive audience. Of course having to watch the ground means the drivers may ask to have things repeated a lot. Maybe not the best time. Bad enough the crabs stand out in this landscape without all of us flashing as well. I have been lucky so far. I have a feeling that this place has more surprises. What if I don't come up with something that works in time, next time?

Takes more than an eighth to reach the fence. That is strange in and of itself. Why use a fence out here? Nothing I have seen would care it was there, going over, under or through it.

~Look! A pond! It looks clean too!~ Rain water not seawater, but it is better than all this dust. I must taste something terrible. The air around us certainly tastes bad. I wonder if it keeps critters away or attracts them?

~Sussi, do you have any of your flutes?~

~Just the one I was carrying when this happened. I have been afraid to play it for fear of giving us away.~

~Play it so they know we are coming.~ Is that a good idea? I get ready for them to protect their homestead from us. Gero has had some experience and I have not, so I keep quiet.

Sussi starts playing. It is a tune I have heard her practice many times. A light happy piece that contrasts with all that we have been through, but on the other hand will not scare anyone.

Two figures emerge from a simple small home. There are several cows grazing near by. A distance away I see more. Not a large herd by any definition. We all visited a farm at one time or another. Most were small operation such as this, but closer together. I still prefer seafood as do most people, but cow is better than hunger when the weather is too rough for the harvesters to go out.

Gero greets them, ~Hide well.~

The larger one, probably a female, though I might look like a male next to Mandhi. Can't make out the tattoo from here on the smaller one. Anyway she responds, ~Hide well.~ Interesting. She responded with the more conservative 'hide well' rather than the more friendly 'feed well'.

Sussi is the first off her crab and motions for the rest of us to wait. Gero affirms her desire and stops where he is. She goes up to the gate and is granted permission to enter alone. That looks dangerous. They don't know what we can do so we don't have that advantage before anything happens.

Gero shows us, ~Let her do her job. She will do well.~ Huh? What job? How is a flute player going to help here? He further instructs us to turn away so we can not see what she says. A courtesy but it makes me very nervous.

Isn't it taking too long?

Surely she should be done by now.

Why can't we know what is going on? If they don't want us here, we can move on. Surely this is not the only homesteader if what Gero showed was true.

I feel a tap on my arm and then a hand message, ~Roo turn around and follow me back. I need your help.~ The others remain motionless.

I turn around. Only one of two farmers is present. Where is the other one, the smaller one? I hand message Sussi, ~What help do you need?~

She answers, ~They have a problem with some pests. I mentioned you have some special abilities that might help. I did not show them that Mandhi and I can do anything. I want to hold that in reserve in case something happens.~

~Then why mention me?~

~Their problem will take more than I can do. You are special Roo. These are simple people. They need help. In exchange we will learn more.~

~I just hope it does not involve pain this time.~

As we get closer she speaks so the farmer can see, ~The pest is called a racer. It is a crab or spider like thing that runs in very large packs. Their bite is poisonous if you are bitten enough times. They have killed three of their cows in the last two weeks. It is only a matter of time before the whole herd is gone. They are being lost far faster than they can breed them.~

~Certainly cows are not their normal food?~

~I am no life scientist. We would have to bring Gero in on that aspect. I suspect though that they eat anything moving they can catch. The main nest may be huge. Pegi has not seen it so does not know.~

~No males. We don't trust em.~ Pegi seems like she has had some experience with them too.

~I can relate. We are not sure of Gero's motives either. We are being careful. Sarra is nothing to worry about. Just a small Guardian or former one. I doubt either of them could go back to that life now. They have

sworn allegiance to us.~

~Trust Guardians even less.~

~Sound advice.~

~Since I just arrived in this conversation I have a question. What do you know about racers? What do they look like? How big are they?~

~Biobi went to get one for you. Figured you would want to see one before agreeing to help. I would of.~

The smaller female comes up to us with something in a cage. It looks like a small ball with lots of legs. Upon seeing me it rams the cage sticking legs out towards me.

~They have absolutely no fear. They will attack anything that moves. Smash them or pull legs off they will keep fighting till they are dead. Not easy to kill either.~

~Crab. They sound horrible. Maybe it would be better to move.~

~We searched for a long time before finding this place. It is perfect for raising the herd. Lots of water even on dry days. Ferns grow like crazy here. If we leave now it could be years before we can be set up again.~ She nods to her partner. Where is the third one?

Instead Biobi lets the thing loose!

~Crab, why did you do that?~ Immediately it zeros in on me.

Everyone else had remained motionless and not showed a thing. I had made myself a target. Before it gets anywhere near me I create a small bubble in it's interior or as close as I could considering it is a moving target. It immediately collapses dead on the ground. Biobi goes up to it carefully and pokes it with a stick, finally whacking it a few times.

~Dead alright.~

~Could have been luck. Maybe something wrong with it or something else got it. We'll find out at dusk. Won't be long now.~ Pegi looks to the west. Being on this side of the ridge sunset will be earlier than it is on the coast.

~What happens at dusk?~ I really, really don't want to know the answer.

~They come a hunting of course. We will be all locked up inside the house. Not enough room for anyone else. Have the herd to watch out for. Kinda a tight fit.~ The herd had been moving closer to the house. I had thought nothing of it till now. Even they know it is no longer safe out at night.

~If you survive, light a fire in the pit there. We can see it from the house.~ With that they slowly move to the house. Once the last cow is in they shut the door. Bet that don't get many visitors that show up for a repeat visit.

~Guess it is okay to bring the others into this now Sussi?~

~There is no way we could have left the area in time, so it is still better to know than not.~

~I'm not so sure. My imagination is pretty good.~ Thousands of those things eating me alive.

We fill in the rest. Gero examines the body of the racer.

~Well designed. Not sure how we are going to deal with so many. They will be hard to track in low light.~

~We only have to survive till dark. Even they can't see in the dark apparently. We skip to Pink wait there and then come back.~

~And how do we account for the lack of bodies? Might as well keep on going while there. We could never be welcome here again. I gave my sign we could deal with this, let's do it.~

Mandhi is taken back, ~I didn't know you had it in you Sussi. I am not one for running either.~

~Well, we are not going to be leaving if the soft ones are staying.~ Yaahi and Sarra agreeing with her.

Gero looks at me like I am a trapped animal. Which I am.

~Crab.~

~Alright Roo. What do we do?~

~You don't know? Crab, this is getting worse and worse.~

~Every time we do this you do something different Roo. Calm down and think.~

~They can only get us because of their legs. Their bodies are useless without them. We need a way of taking their legs out. Bubbles are not going to be fast enough.~

~“Pretty flimsy legs too. Would not take much to make them useless.~

~I am thinking fire. Not something they would be used to, nor prepared for.~

~Another weakness. They are attracted to movement. At dusk I am guessing the more dramatic the movement the more attractive the reaction.~

~Something moving and something lethal.~

~Fire.~

~Fire does not move.~

~You have not seen a forest fire.~

~The plant life is not dry enough here to burn and if it did we would be doing the racers job. No food is just a slower way of killing the herd.~

~I can move bubbles. We know that. Sussi and Mandhi might be able to. The bubbles weigh almost nothing I am guessing. How much does fire weigh?~

~Just hot gas really. Weighs less than air actually. That is why fire

goes up from the source.~

~I need a fire.~

~Won't they think that is weird. It is not time for the fire.~

~It does not need to be in the fire pit. Any place will do.~

~We are running out of time quickly people. Let's make a fire.~

The Guardians and Gero gather some wood from alongside the fire pit and bring it over to us. Gero has a starter in his pocket and with the little remaining sun focuses the sun and quickly gets a fire going. Not a big one, but enough I hope.

~Here is what I am proposing to do. Someone get one of the legs off of the dead racer and hold it up.~

Sarra is the quickest. Not sure anyone else even wants to touch it. He brings it over and holds it up in the air.

I concentrate and form a bubble around the fire, but as soon as I do it goes dark.

Mandhi helps, ~Don't punch it through to Pink. Just wrap it around our world. Not as deep.~

~Deep.~ I concentrate again. The glow lasts a moment then dies.

~The problem is that the air inside the bubble is used up quickly.~

~Then I need to move it quickly before it gets used up.~

~Better hurry, there is something moving from down hill of us. I think they are coming.~

~Mandhi and Sussi you are our front line till Roo gets this worked out. Yaahi you come with me with whatever you have to use as a weapon. Whacking them still takes them out and we can do that at least.~ They take up position behind Mandhi and Sussi.

It is just me and Sarra. I concentrate. As soon as I form a shallow bubble I move it as fast as I can towards Sarra.

~Faster!~ Sarra yells. I start a system of constantly throwing bubbles as fast as I can. Eventually it gets easier and I get faster.

~Stop!~ Sarra whistles at me. I look over at him. The leg is char and Sarra has lowered his body to the ground to make himself as small as possible. He goes up to the others. They fall back to behind the fire.

~She did it. Get behind her. Let her take over on the front. We need to take care of any that get through.~

Everyone works as a team never taking their eyes off the high sporophytes in front of us. I get ready. As soon as I see their bodies above the fruiting bodies I start. As the light gets lower it actually helps. I can see by fire projectiles as bright sparks in a line. I move the line of fire back and forth across the line of advancing shapes. A few hits on a leg and it goes up dramatically. They must be very oily inside for that to happen. The bodies never catch. If they are like spiders they must suck

the juices out of their victims. A cow would not be a good source, but they may not be able to distinguish ahead of time.

Even before I am done the farmers come out to watch more closely.

Soon there is no more movement. They apparently are not smart enough to do end runs or anything tricky. Probably never needed to before. Hope they don't adapt quickly.

Biobi takes a branch from our fire and starts the big fire pit. The two of them pull out food from inside the home to cook over the fire. They live here and even they cook everything. Scary.

Gero is examining the racers again. A few are still moving a little. I didn't kill them really, just made them unable to do anything, though I suspect that having your legs burned off is not pleasant. He pulls some hot mitts out of a tool pouch then grabs a body and walks over to the fire.

I follow him curious about what he is up to. He holds the body over the fire and roasts it till we hear a loud pop. He immediately pulls it out and examines it again. The body has exploded as it cooked out of it's shell.

~I noticed that the body was pretty well shelled. Thought this would happen. Wonder if they taste good?~

~What about the poison?~

~Not much in just one. Even the farmers showed it took many bites to kill. I am also thinking that the cooking may have helped kill the poison. All the same it would not hurt to avoid the mouth area.~ He uses a knife to pry some of flesh free and pops it into his mouth.

~Oh wow! Wow oh wow!~

The others notice and come up.

~What did he do Roo?~

~He is eating a cooked racers.~

~Is he dying?~

Gero responds, ~If I was dying it would be from pleasure. Get me some more.~

Soon we have all tried it. He was not kidding. They are wonderful.

~Not only have you saved us, but it looks like you many have changed our business. We will raise cows to attract them and then work out some sort of cage to capture them. Pull the legs off and they are ready for market.~

~Might want to wait on that till just before they are sold. Would certainly discourage thieves.~

~You're right about that. One bite and they would not forget.~

~I am been meaning to ask, where is your third?~

~Racers got her while she was trying to protect the herd.~

~The cows can stay outside tonight. May even get fat again now that

they can feed at night too. All of you are welcome to share our home.~

Only if we can share the pond in the morning and put the crabs out to pasture inside your fence tonight.~ Good idea Sussi.

~Done!~

~Oh, these are so good. I am going to eat so many I won't make it to the home without help.~

~We still have a problem. They will come back in the morning and the following evening.~

~Probably not for a while. They appear to be a colonial life form. No army sends troops to the same location where no one returned without at least checking it out.~

~Are they that smart? No matter, they will be back eventually. This is where the food is. We won't be here, what do they do?~

~I can't believe they don't have some means to defend themselves.~

~Ask them?~

~Good idea Roo. Go ahead.~

I make my way to the home. I peak inside. They have a small glow ball going. I see the two waiting for us to arrive.

~Please come in. Excuse the taste. We were not expecting guests and the cows don't help.~

~I came in to ask a question. Don't you have some way to defend yourselves out here? You certainly can't depend on Guardians to get here in time. You must have something.~

They look at me like they have been caught doing something wrong.

They pause before answering, ~We ah. That is. Well, it broke.~

~What broke? Show me.~

When we get outside I signal Mandhi to join us. She comes up to me and hand coms, ~What's up Roo? Why did they not have protection?~

~We are about to find out. They showed it is broken.~

We go around to the back of the home, which, since the home was built into the side of the hill, in classic style, it really meant on top of the area behind the home. We continue over the top of a small hill and down the other side. Ah, a compost pit with a methane collector. They are burning off the excess gas. Normally that is not done unless there is some excess build up.

Biobi explains, ~We have a flame jet that runs off of the methane produced here. Having cows means we have a lot of raw material to generate gas with.~

~That would be very similar to what we just used. As you can see it is very effective and would be an excellent defense.~

~If it worked. The valve is stuck open on the emergency release. If we did not burn it off it could kill everyone in a toxic cloud. Stuck closed it

would build up to eventually explode.~

~Methane gas rises. It is unlikely you would suffer, but it is considered a pollutant if released all the same. You are right about the possibility of explosion though. Let me see the valve.~ Biobi takes her over to the burning gas and points out the valve.

~Anyone could have fixed this. Why didn't you just do it?~ She picks up a rock and taps in a few strategic places then closes the valve. The flame goes out. We can't see to show in the dark unless we had com. Instead we head back to the home.

Inside Mandhi continues, ~That will hold till the morning when I can deal with it to be sure it won't happen again. Didn't anyone show you how to service the system?~

~We ah, left, in a hurry. We barely had time to pack and get out. We were afraid we would break it completely doing what you just did.~ Mandhi is good. I would not have tried it. As to leaving, that can happen to anyone. Upset the Matriarch and you leave or feed the rest. Was is, is was.

~The valve was in bad shape. You would have been better off with a ceramic one instead of the metal one you have.~

~We could not afford the ceramic one and being in a hurry we took what was offered. Besides, we only have rain water out here. No seawater to corrode metals. Ali thought we would be fine. She was the one who understood that kind of thing.~ The third member no doubt. If we had known these things killed people would we still have volunteered to help?

~That illusion is gone. All metals corrode eventually, except for the sealing metal and that is too soft to be of much use.~

~And too expensive to make valves out of even if it could be used.~

~Not necessarily. Put a thin coat on a harder metal it prevents corrosion and helps make a good seal.~

~Till it wears off. Even a clay thrower like me knows that much.~

~You are not a Guardian?~

~No. Just a ceramicist in training. And not very good at that.~

~Then you are not here to take us back?~ The others make their way in as if to emphasize that point.

~No. We are ah, on our way to a study site. Teacher Gero here is showing us his work. Says there is something important for us to see and understand. Being master students it is best if we obey.~ Good save Sussi.

~We never made it that high. Farming suits us just fine. Being out of the politics is better for us.~

~There is that.~

~Best we get some rest.~

~The pressure should be high enough tomorrow to try out the flame jet. We will need to use up all the gas momentarily if I am to work on the valve anyway.~

Day 9

The only thing that made this night worth it was the promise of using the pond in the morning. The taste of this room that I am in is horrible. It might even be better in the composter itself. Finally light comes in through the skylight. I disentangle myself from the others and go outside. Someone has to be on the lookout for the racers.

There is just a dim glow on the horizon. All is quiet. No movement. I go to the fire pit. There is still a warmth from the coals, but no visible flame. The flame is also out over the composter. I blow on the coals and achieve a small temporary flame. Then it hits me. I go to the pond and get a container of water, bring it back and douse the fire pit. The racers eat large creatures. Large creatures have residual heat. If the racers sense heat as many insects and other species do they would be attracted to anything that emits heat. Fire is not something they would have evolved to know about. Certainly not here where there are no intelligent species. The farmers did not have problems with the racers until the valve stuck and they needed to burn off the excess. It is like a sign saying come and get it. Once the racers come close to the flame they then sense the cows and people. Their desires are confirmed and they feast, bring the excess back to the colony.

With no fire, no super stimulus to bring them here over other locations. I know of no colony life form that hunts all the time in one place. Best to distribute your feeding so as to leave some to reproduce for a future time. On the other hand maybe I am giving them too much intelligence. The cows and our crabs are wondering in the enclosure eating what they can find. Glad I am not one of them I would grow tired of liverworts, mosses and ferns. We eat some plant life for a balanced diet, but too much just gives me gas. On the other hand pine nuts are not bad. Mixed with a little shrimp paste and garlic. Maybe it is the fat that I like.

I have an idea. I go up to the crab that molted yesterday. I lead her towards the water. She immediately gets the idea and goes in splashing with excitement. The others hear and come over as well. The cows are much slower and don't seem to get the idea. I go up to one and try and lead it, but it refuses, preferring to eat instead. I never could know the gender in these things. They taste great anyway.

~Roo, what are you doing? Why are the crabs in the pond?~

~Help me get this thing there too.~

~Roo, what . . .~

~Just do it. We are running out of time. Please.~ The dim light is

definitely getting brighter. They will be here any moment. If they are coming.

They stop asking and lead the cows to the pond. They are not as fond of water as the crabs, but we eventually get them into the pod.

~Now get in with them.~ I see movement in the higher ferns at the fence line. Then they arrive. So much for learning to stay away. They run right up the edge of the pond. They are good. Did not even look towards the fire pit or the compost pile. Crab, that's right. The compost pile emits heat because it is composting! Hotter than a large body even, but insulated by the ground. Was it in the compost that attracted them?

~They are stopping at the edge. They won't go into the water!~ Mandhi is fascinated. I am terrified.

Gero responds, ~Of course, why didn't I think of that. Look at them. No way they could handle water on those thin legs.~

~There must be thousands there now. Snails! They are climbing on top of each other. The ones underneath are being sacrificed. The pond is not deep enough to hide the crabs or the cows. We are safe, we can go under, but are they? A few bites and what happens?~

~Looks like it's time to try the flame jet.~

~It is in the storage shed. I hooked it up last night. I know what to do.~

~Let Roo go with you. If something goes wrong she can do a lot to dissuade them from coming near you.~

~I can? No fire pit. I doused the coals.~

~A bubble spray should work in the growing light Roo. Mandhi and Sussi will back you up.~ Right.

I am surprised that it is Biobi that is helping. Usually it is the larger one. On the other hand I am the smallest in our group.

~Is there enough hose?~

~It was how we decided on the fence line. Also the only length of hose we could get. 'Take the whole amount or none of it' he showed. Never trust a male.~

~That male may have just saved your herd and life. Let's go for it. You saw how I worked it last night?~

~I think so.~

~We don't know how long the gas will last. Aim low, the heat and flame will rise. If you aim too high the flame will go right over them and do nothing.~

~We are going to need to go to the side of the pond or I will burn everyone else. I have done this before.~

~Yes, of course.~

~This ought to do it.~

~Good, I was worried you would want me to go closer. If the pressure is high enough we should have plenty of range.~

~Hope the gas pressure is high enough then.~

She opens the valve at the trigger and uses the scratcher on the jet. It does not catch the first few times. I think I am about to ink when it finally catches. As soon as the flame starts the racers start to react. They ignore the pond and occupants and come towards us. Thousands this time. Not the hundreds I faced last night. Biobi holds her ink. Wish I could say the same.

She presses the expansion valve down and the flow increases dramatically. At first she is aimed high, but quickly corrects and fans the lower edge of the horde. Their legs catch first just like last night. This time there is fuel behind it, not just hot gases. I know this from having to maintain the kilns. Same principal for both. Just the flame jet is open to the air and a single nozzle. Anyway, it appears to be working.

~Whoa! What was that?~

~The layer herself. They have a lot of fat in them that gets transferred to the eggs.~

~Makes sense.~

~That should do it. Should be safe for everyone to come out of the pond now. Your mate did a good job on that valve.~

~She showed she needs to look at it again. Only a temporary fix.~

I see the others of our group going to one side of the pond. They are knocking the rocks loose that make the pond possible. That's strange.

~What are you doing? Are you crazy? We need this pond to water the herd and keep the plant alive for food.~ They keep working.

Biobi starts to scratch at the flame jet. Crab, she is going to use it on us!

~Do that and die Biobi. Don't think I won't. If they are knocking the pond out they have a good reason.~

She hesitates. I don't think they are sure of my abilities. Seen from a distance in the dark is not much proof. She raises the jet to start it again. I don't give it much thought and cut the jet in two. Past the valve. I am not stupid. It gets the point across though.

~Try anything physical and your left ganglia goes next. Show Pegi the same before she gets any ideas.~ She does so and sits silent.

The pond slowly drains to reveal a strange rock formation. Reminds me of a sea urchin bed, except more to it. Mandhi is cleaning it out. It goes much deeper. Those aren't the work of sea urchins. Strange they are about the same size as a folded racer. Not that large a hole though. I go over to the corpse of the egg layer. Hard to know her original size, but it might have been her. Her legs are much smaller, at the least the charred

remains of them. She would be more flexible about what she could fit into than the workers. I think we are looking at an old colony mound.

Then Mandhi pulls out something rotting. Lots of things rotting. Some of them look like cocoons of some kind.

~Crab, they raised the pond to down the colony. They were attacking for food, though I am sure they would use what they captured. The egg layer and workers escaped, but the pupae could not. They all drowned.~

Gero comes up to the stone with some of the bodies. He pulls the poison sac carefully out of the front of one that is fairly intact. He then mashes the sac on the rock. It starts to sizzle. This confirms that they made this structure. It also confirms that we helped them commit genocide. I am sure there are more colonies but this makes me sick.

Gero says, ~We move out.~ We are all in agreement. Nothing is shown, we just pack, get on and leave.

Once we are out of sight of the farmers I comment, ~I cut the valve system on the compost.~

~So did I.~ Sussi.

~Same here.~ Mandhi.

Most of the day is silent. I just want to get as far away as possible. Fortunately travel is easy. No downhill or crevices to climb over. No more trees either. The ferns are getting sparse as well. The ground is getting mushy. I look down to see the tips sinking in nearly to the top of the shoes. Moss. A peat bog maybe? Not always. That leg hit solid ground. Lots of dry moss too. This area is not always wet. Drying out. The distance is deceiving. Looks like water, but it is shimmering. Could be an illusion.

~As if we were not in enough trouble.~

~I am more worried about the smoke. Easy to find us. Might as well have put markers up.~

More of the same. Lots of mush and moss. The distance is looking more and more like water though.

There are sticks or something rising above the 'water'. They are growing taller as we get closer.

We are past the fourth eighth now. The sun has moved to the west side of the sky. I am itching under the shaders. I should not complain, at least we have them. Gero seemed to have thought of everything. How is that? How was it possible under the sudden conditions we found ourselves that he had everything ready. He showed he sent word ahead before we entered the caves, but we were with him the entire time and I didn't see anyone else.

~Mandhi, how does this nine dimensional thing work?~

~It takes practice Roo. Normally we only think of the normal four,

length, width, depth and time. Try this. Imagine a dot.~

~Simple enough.~

~First dimension. Now imagine a short line.~

~Still easy.~

~Now the second. Imagine a circle.~

~Fine.~

~For the third a sphere.~

~Yes.~

~Now expand that with your mind so that the sphere rotates in a circle.~

~Harder.~

~Now rotate that circle of spheres so it too is a sphere of spheres.~

~And continue the process, till . . . my shape! You have inked me my shape, or at least part of it.~

~Thought you would recognize it.~

~How do I see the other worlds then?~

~I am not sure. The important thing about this is that all those spheres you have imagined are all the same size. It is only your perspective that sees them as different sizes.~

~All the same size.~ I play with the shapes in my mind and I see it sort of unfold like a mountain flower in front of me!

Without thinking I form a bubble in front of me and watch as it does the same. They are all the same size! I float through the different worlds in front of me. Many are dark right now so I can't see much from just the light our world casts into it. A few are barren with only rock visible. Suddenly water squirts me in the face and I am woken from my practice and the bubble pops.

~What was that?~ Mandhi got wet too.

~You were right. There are many worlds.~ The water is salty and stinky. Tastes horrible. We are at least an arm above the water level. What world was that?

~You amaze me Roo. It takes most people moons just to be able to think they can visualize nine space and you actually do it in less than an eighth.~

~It is like the thoughts I had are real Mandhi. I have thought for a long time that the bubbles were just some kind of accident. Now I KNOW it is real. That is amazing Mandhi. That is amazing!~

~You speak the truth there Roo.~

We are silent the rest of the afternoon. The shapes that I thought I saw disappeared and then appeared again more to the left and then disappear again. I think they are some form of larger whisk plant. Too full of silica to eat by us. A mirage of the heat on the wet ground acting as a sort of

lens. We heard about it in glass class. I loved all the things that optics could do, but I could not follow the math. I was far more interested in the formulations for the different kinds of glass. I have a new respect for the makers of far seers if they can see through this.

Gero stops in front, ~We stop here for the night.~

~It is still light out. Why stop here?~

~Look around you Sussi, this is the only dry land in sight. Do you want to rest in the water?~

~What would be wrong with that? Sounds good to me actually. Might be cooler and easier to rest.~

~Till about ten million worms decide you are dinner. Any more questions?~ There were none.

I look over the edge of our crab, ~I am going to stay here tonight~ Not really wanting to be dinner.

~Then you can walk all day tomorrow Roo. The crab needs to rest too.~

I tentatively slide down. The ground seems stable enough. I look around. Lots of whisk plants and a bed of succulents. No ferns. That means this place probably dries up later in the season. The plants will go into senescence until the rains come again when their alternate generation blooms briefly before becoming a succulent again. We had rain recently, but that may be the last one of the season. Certainly the last big one. We should be safe here. Unless the water rises from run off. I have no idea how much water the stream we followed down here normally has. Has it gone down or is it rising?

~Roo, what are you fussing about now?~

I wake from my concentration, ~Sorry. Nothing important. What do I do?~

We set up a sun shade. It feels much better underneath. Most of the supplies stay packed. I have no idea what is in them, but don't ask or peek. There is no way that Sussi is going to help with the meal, so Mandhi and I take it on with what we are given. Gero brings over some water.

~Wait! What about the worms?~

~Extra protein.~ He looks straight at me, laughs and then says, ~They will be cooked Roo. Dead. Safe.~

~Right.~ I am still not sure. I keep looking into the pot to see if I can see any of the worms. I want to make sure they are dead.

Sarra comes up to me, ~Roo, may I ask you a question?~

~Sure Sarra.~ He is normally so quiet.

~I am curious, where did you get those scars?~ He points to my body in various places. I am not used to a male noticing me other than the fact

that I am female.

~I don't know. I had them when I recovered from mating sickness.~

~Ah, then you are spawned.~

~Not that I am aware of.~

~You would not be aware of it Roo. The sickness insures that. So, Sussi and Mandhi took care of you. Maybe they know what happened.~

~No, I was not part of their triad then. Others found me when I came out of the sea. I don't even remember who it was.~

~Then you should be dead. No one survives spawning alone. Who was the male then? Maybe he helped?~

I look straight at him like his ganglia have rotted, ~No male has ever helped. I was alone. He was not present. If I spawned they were unfertilized. I was below the oxygen minimum layer when I blanked out if that helps you believe me.~

~Where the Nauti live?~

~I don't know. I don't remember anything.~

~Those scars are caused by Nauti Roo. You could be a Guardian Captain any time you wanted. It would be an honor to serve you.~ He does a formal bow to me like I am the Matriarch herself.

~Sarrah, I am afraid of the worms in our stew. I am no Guardian. Please don't tease me.~

~I tease you not. Ask Yaahi if you don't believe me. She bares scars also. She got hers in the arena though.~

~I have heard rumors of that. So it is real?~ They catch a small Nauti and Guardians who wish to advance enter the arena alone to face the Nauti. If they survive one eighth they can claim an officers title.

~Only one in ten comes out alive. Those that don't, feed the Nauti. Rank is assigned based on the size of the Nauti, the length of time in the arena and the number of scars. You could be a captain, no questions asked with all those scars. Took Yaahi years and several times in the arena, or so I have heard. She does not speak of it of course.~

~Then why did you ask me? Should I not also have not spoken of it?~

~I sorry, but you are not a Guardian, so I thought you would not follow the convention. I will not ask again.~

~It's okay Sarrah, you have told me more than I knew. Thank you.~

He looks in the pot, ~Gero must like this stuff. We seem to have it nearly every meal.~

~Certainly not imaginative, but makes it easy to decide what to have for a meal.~

~You are funny Roo.~ He turns and goes to Yaahi to assist her with the crabs. Not much fodder for them here. Hope their fat reserves hold out long enough. They bind the claws to prevent them from eating the

whisk plant. Nothing worse than a flatulent crab. Makes the ride very bumpy. Of course a hungry one is hard to steer in the direction you want to go.

The stew is bubbling. How long to kill the worms? What if they have spores or something?

Mandhi comes over to see how it is going.

~Roo, those vegies are going to taste like slime and the slime from the snails is going to taste like glue. Enough boiling. Let's eat.~

~Worms.~

~They're dead Roo. Very dead. Besides, show to Gero, we all have lots of things living inside of us. We are more of a community or an eco system than an individual.~

~I really did not need to know that Mandhi. You serve. I am not going to be able to eat now.~ Instead I relieve myself over the edge careful not to touch the water. Technically I should have gone in the methane digester but I did not want to get that close to 'dinner' now.

I look out over our world. It will be dark soon enough. A cool breeze is starting to blow. They will have to lower the shade soon or have it blow away.

I go up to Gero, ~Gero, why are we here?~

~To get away from those pursuing us. I thought that was obvious.~

~We have gone too far for just that. No one is pursuing us.~

He looks at me for a moment, ~Get everyone together, then I will show you.~

We are not far from each other. I whistle to get everyone's attention and then ask them to come here.

~What's up Roo? Sure you don't want some stew?~ I signal no.

~Roo has asked me to show everyone the real reason we are here.~

We all relax and take off our shoes and place them at the edge of a carbon weave tarp. I am sure those worms are not just in the water or Gero would not have done this for us.

He takes out some recycled paper and a carbon stick. Will make good fire starter later after it is completely used up. He draws on one corner to preserve as much of it for later.

~The problem is our knowledge growth. We live in a very stable culture. Stability means very little change. 'Was is, is was' is not the eighth law without reason. There is much comfort in stability, especially if you are on the top of the hierarchy. But even on the bottom, knowing what to expect and no surprises is somehow reassuring.

This has served us well for a very long time. It is estimated that we have had communication skills for over a million years and written forms for over two hundred thousand.~

~About the same time the Nauti drove us from the sea.~
~As our history has been told, yes.~
~You doubt our history?~ Yaahi is clearly upset. People have disappeared for spreading untruths and the Nauti truth is a big one.
~I will let you decide when you have seen what I have.~
~I am honor bound to arrest you for judgment.~ Sarra and Yaahi are both ready for action.
~If we go back we will likely be darted and I have no idea why. Gero is the only one keeping us alive at the moment. You are not going to endanger that. If after seeing what he has to show us you want to go back, then we will take him ourselves. This has come too far to back out now. Something is going on and it is not something as trivial as historical interpretation differences.~ Go get them Sussi.
~As I was saying.~ He draws a standard graph on the corner of the paper. ~If we plot time against knowledge we get a nice tight spiral as expected. One revolution is a thousand years here. We do change, just very slowly. So slowly in fact that normally only historians would know.~
~And a sudden change like what Roo, Sussi and Mandhi have found could not be tolerated. We all got that.~
~That is not the reason they and we are being pursued. If I may proceed.~ Gero appears to be getting annoyed with the interruptions.
~Here is what has happened in the last two hundred years, less than one revolution.” He draws a line nearly going straight away from the center.
~Nauti, you aren't just showing about a slight change. How long as this been going on?~
~I have drawn the graph accurately.~
~Two hundred years. The Matriarch is at least that old. She would at least be aware of the change. All of us are too young to have noticed the change, just attributing it to our own lack of knowledge. It takes fifty just to get to our level of training.~
~We grew up expecting change. Only it was never explained as change. I have always seen us as a small community just now getting the benefits that larger communities have always had. I never realized it truly was new.~
~I have a question related to what Mandhi just showed. Is it just our community or is it everywhere for all people?~
~There are no large communities. Comparing your community to the fantasy large one was used world wide to hide what was going on.~
~What about the histories? We have all had to read them.~
~Ever notice that they are written on paper cones, not shells, easy to change, and they rarely discuss technical issues? Does it really matter

who the fifth Matriarch of the third eighth in the north west green stone period was?~

~You are old enough to have noticed though. How come you have not shown anything until now? We are already under a dart sentence, but there are worse ways to die. It is beginning to sound like Yaahi is right.~

I can't help but look outside the group shader. It is nearly impossible to see anything in the landscape now.

Sussi asks for attention. The light from the glow ball is weak and it harder to make out what she is saying.

~You are saying the real reason we are being pursued and under a dart sentence is not because we polluted our world with material from Pink. The real reason is because we are somehow a threat to this plot to introduce knowledge, specifically technical knowledge faster than our culture could absorb safely.~

~Precisely Sussi. Very good.~

~How could we possibly be a threat? A single Triad, not even officially declared. We are not crawlies or unseen, we are named, but still, the resources the Matriarch should be able to draw on would dry up quickly. I doubt even the tricks that I do are much really against such numbers. Why even bother coming after us? Out of sight, out of mind. We are no longer a threat out here.~

~There you are wrong. With each passing day you become more and more of a threat little one and the rest of your Triad is not far behind.~ Crab, why do I have to be reminded that I am the smallest one here? Mandhi and Sussi both poke me to fill the shell.

He is teasing me, I hope. I look towards Yaahi. Certainly a Guardian would not fear me. Her look is not reassuring.

He continues, ~We are not moving away from them, but towards them.~

Crab! He is a shell crab out of his shell!

Sarra has the last comment, ~Out here? There is nothing here. Look around us.~ I can't see a thing, too dark, but I agree. Only a few bushes and lots of succulents and such.

~Best get some rest.~

Day 10

My dreams were intense. Freng, Guardians, racers and crabs all chasing me. I wake up dry as dust. My skin will crack and get infected out here if I don't do something.

I make my way to the supplies and find the water filter. I take it to the edge of the water, which has gone down several arms since last night. I fill a lightweight spun ceramic pot with water by pumping the filter. I then use the sprayer to coat myself with the clean water. It feels so good.

~I taste horrible, save some of that for me Roo.~ I am surprised seeing Sussi up so early. She takes my place at the pot and sprayer. Sarra and Yaahi are up of course. They and Gero don't seem to be drying out as fast.

I am not really happy with Gero at the moment and I don't know what to make of Sarra. I slide up to Yaahi.

~I am hoping you can help me Yaahi. How do you prevent your skin from drying out in this heat.~

~Roo, this is not heat. It will get much worse in the summer. You need to spread oil on your skin to stop it from drying out.~

~Isn't that dangerous? We breath partly through our skin.~

~Old Nauti's tale. You will be fine. Look for the pot labeled crab molt oil. It helps during a difficult molt. Hopefully we won't have any more on this trip. They only molt every five years, so not likely. The supply crab was a year early, but it worked out.~

~Thanks Yaahi.~ I check out her scars that enabled her to become a captain. They look deep. I wonder what they use to make them with.

Yaahi sees me looking at them, ~Sarra told you? Most people don't know about them.~

~How?~

~Nauti beak. Can't be faked either at least not on close examination. Dart sentence if someone tries.~

~Is everything a dart sentence?~

~No, there are things that get you being torn apart in a Nauti pen, even if it takes years before they catch a live one.~

~But you have been in the Nauti pen several times?~

~I had a ceramic knife and knew what I was doing, having seen many successful bouts. Convicted get no knife and are blinded first. They rarely last longer than the time it takes for the hungry Nauti to get to them. The Nauti is so confused it rarely kills before starting to eat.~

~So much for curiosity. If they do that to a convicted person, what do they do to a Guardian who goes bad.~

~Doesn't happen. No 'bad' Guardian has ever been brought to justice alive.~

~That bad.~

~Every live Guardian in the area gets to help torture the person to death. Some of the descriptions are so horrendous that I am sure it will never be needed.~

~Good imaginations. If we are awaiting the dart and you are pledged to us, what happens to you if we are all caught?~

~I pledge to a new person if I am still alive. The master is the one responsible. We however have to do everything we can to prevent the one pledged to from coming to harm. We aren't stupid though. If we are so totally outnumbered. . . .~

~You don't throw away your life.~

~You don't get to be my size by doing that.~ She flicks at a bug that landed on her. ~I have a question for you. I know something of your past from what I have picked up traveling with all of you. You are eno.~

~Twice over. I was an outsider on the first beach I crawled out on. That is obvious from my skin color. Then after the mating sickness I washed up on a new beach, again not my own. The edicts say that as a named I was to be granted a living situation and I have.~

~There are edicts and there are ways around edicts. If you don't reproduce, you don't really exist. There are worse things than death.~

~Are you saying that what happened to me was not passion, was not an accident?~

~Your surviving was an accident. I am sure that was not intended. A simple accident that would have passed any judgment. You are a lucky one Roo. That is why I am with you, not because of your tricks.~

~That would suggest that my tricks are not that uncommon.~

~Or they are not the worst that I have seen. It will take more than your abilities to survive this one Roo. It will take your luck too.~

~You know what is out there?~

~I have seen stories. That is all.~

~Food is ready!~ Smells like more of the same. A nice live shrimp looks good about now. Not going to be.

The sun was fully up by the time we were back on the crabs and moving again. Another hot sunny day. I pull my shader tighter against me. I hope the oil works. I ate as much of the stew as I could, more to gain liquid than because of hunger. I am sure I am losing weight. Not the direction I need to happen. What is out there that scares a Guardian captain into accepting us and going on this adventure?

We are rising again. Away from the salty mud flats and thankfully the worms. We start to see more bushes and a few trees, less succulents.

Nothing like the redwoods from the other side of the valley. Short things only a couple of arms tall. A long time before anyone will be collecting seeds from them. Lots of bracken ferns along that slope. Probably all the same plant propagating by runners. At least they do a better job of keeping the soil together than the tiny bryophytes and such that usually cover a forest floor. Salt is probably what keeps them this far up the slope. Look at me I am becoming a life study student.

The plant life starts to get even thicker and Gero steers us along a path that looks well used. By whom? We have seen nothing larger than a beetle out here.

We reach a small clearing and pass through. There are a few large slugs grazing in the patch. Those slugs are nearly market size. I have seen no evidence of any farming though.

More trees and some wood ferns now. Much taller trees and bigger ones up slope from us. I keep thinking I am seeing movement but when I concentrate on one location I see nothing more.

We enter a larger clearing and suddenly stop. I am thrown against Mandhi. I look around and we are surrounded by strange shapes. I know those shapes. Without thinking I reach into my personal pouch and remove the two operculums that I had no idea why I had been carrying all this time. I dismount and stick the operculums into my breathing hole. They fit perfectly.

I raise my arms in a fan shape facing the new shapes and blow through the operculums. They buzz out a pattern. ~Buzz, eh, eh, eh, eh.~ I repeat the pattern over and over. The shapes assume the same fan shape I have been holding and I hear the pattern repeated back at me by many.

I feel a tap on my mantle. ~Well done Roo! Well done!~ The air tastes of Gero. He was not expecting this to happen to us.

I stop the sound but maintain my fan shape. I relax my concentration though and look about me. The others come out of their camouflage and start to assume the same shape. Gero must have given the order, though I did not see it happen. The shape closest to me comes forward. I taste ink in the air. Someone was scared really good by this. The shape sort of looks like a giant Nauti. But even I know there are no land Nauti. Well, except for the tiny tree ones that come out at night.

The shape changes. It opens up and there is a person inside. Not a normal looking person. There is something different about them. Their tattoos are not like ours. I have never seen the designs before.

The exposed one comes within two arms of me and stops. I can see now it is a male. It starts to flash words rapidly, but I have no idea what he is saying. How can that be? It looks like he is showing, but it is nonsense. Not even whole words are formed. The designs are all wrong. I

am confused.

I turn my concentration to Gero on my left. He is flashing the same way. Again incomprehensible. It takes me a moment of watching the two of them to realize that they are showing to each other. Only why can't I understand them? I adjust my position to try and concentrate better. Doesn't work. I relax my vision to more of a blur and it starts to make some sense. I catch a word or two. It is similar to the what I know, but not identical. A variation on ancient I think.

~They are showing a different set of words! It is possible to communicate in different ways!~ I am so excited about the possibilities. I had failed to notice everyone else has backed off and grouped together a ways off. Then I see that the other shapes have all disgorged their people. They are all armed. There is ink on Sarra's side. It was him. Yaahi looks okay though. Explains why she is the leader.

I whistle for attention and then say, ~Triad form up!~ Mandhi and Sussi hesitate and then come towards me. We form a triangle with each of us facing out. ~Yaahi and Sarra, get inside of us.~ They don't hesitate and quickly pass between us.

Sussi whistles as loudly as I have ever heard her. Gero stops for a moment and looks our way and sees us in a defensive stance. The others have noticed as well and have raised their short swords. I look more closely. They are made of wood and flaked stone. Very primitive, but still effective. I had only seen weapons like this in the library of knowledge. On the other hand we appear to be unarmed. I wish we could have a large pattern that says stay away, but we don't.

Gero turns to the one close to him and not that far from us and quickly flashes to him. A rapid exchange ensues.

He turns to me, ~He refuses to believe me. I am afraid he will need a demonstration Roo. I tried to explain that you three are the prophesy fulfilled, but I am afraid we really don't look like anything out of the ordinary.~ He waits for me. What prophesy?!

I make a small observation bubble to check out where we are in relation to Pink. It appears safe enough. The height difference is not much. Less than half an arm lower on Pink and no trees either. Not pink either. These plants are a more of a dark red color with wider leaves. I collapse the bubble. Sussi and Mandhi have also made bubbles but do not collapse theirs. For some reason I feel the need to itch but resist.

I turn to Gero. I see a bubble in front of the stranger too. Gero looks nervous. It would appear he can also do the equations. Those bubbles are dangerous and Gero knows it.

~I am ready when you are Gero.~

~Now Roo!~ Ah, before the stranger does something with his.

I gather my concentration and form a bubble large enough to take the seven of us, including the stranger. His smaller bubble instantly collapses inside of the larger bubble, so do Sussi's and Mandhi's, but they quickly form new ones back to our world. We are surrounded by the red plants and hills to our right going up higher in elevation. Now he is outnumbered six to one and is the nervous one.

He flashes to Gero who appears much calmer now. Even a giant clam is food for others Gero. I don't like unknowns no matter how curious I am.

Mandhi is ignoring the two of them and has left our bubble to examine the plant life with her bubble trailing behind her. A few of the reds move slowly out of her way. She turns over a few 'leaves' to find other more quickly moving things. I find myself watching. Sussi pulls out her flute and starts to play a tune. Her bubble orbits her mantel. It makes it seem like we are used to this world and are therefore in control.

Sarra and Yaahi get the idea and sit down to pretend to be playing a game of chance. Arms rapidly moving over cast shells. Lots of conversation and excitement as one or the other makes a good cast.

I look back to Gero and our stranger. He is looking at me. I make another bubble inside the one we are in and cast it towards him. He quickly moves out of the way. He knows what they can do then and his bubble was not just for show. I collapse that bubble and make dozens of smaller ones all rapidly orbiting him. He stands very still. I cast them all into the distance rushing past us very closely. The all pop in succession a ways out.

He then says in our way of showing, ~Take us back.~ Gero raises the affirmative sign. I collapse the larger bubble and we are back home.

The others are rapidly showing all at once. Something is wrong.

Gero translates, ~Roo, one of them entered the bubble on this side to try and reach their leader. She is now trapped on Pink.~

~I understand.~ I make a bubble just around myself and enter Pink. Once there I see her barely. She has hidden herself as best she can in this red and pink world. I leave my bubble and collapse it. I then make a larger one where I know no one was standing on our world and hope no one is now. I motion for her to follow me into the new bubble. She runs towards the bubble and we enter at the same time. Once inside I collapse the bubble and we are both back. She then bows to me and goes to be with the others. I would not want to be near me either.

~We are to follow them.~ Gero says to all of us, ~To be their honored guests.~ He then adds, ~And not their evening meal thanks to Roo.~

I go to Sussi and Mandhi, ~I want both of you to learn to do the big ones. It is too dangerous only having one of us this way.~

~We agree. If they had darted you we would all be stew right now. I see no reason why we should not be able too. We can all make the smaller bubbles. I have been practicing while riding. The smaller ones are easier to make, but being on crabs all day has not allowed much practice on larger ones. Sussi is getting good at moving many of them at once. I can see the other worlds as you can.~ Good, progress is being made. I was really worried that there was some fundamental difference between us. I wonder if the others can be taught as well.

We have strangers before us and behind us. I am not happy about that as the trail appears to narrow ahead. Yaahi drops back and assumes the end position. Gero is in the lead near their leader. I am guessing because he can show to them he has been here before or at least knows something of these people. When I came from my former home to the new place on the coast I did not need to learn to speak again. None of the sailors I have met were different either. So, who are these people and why are they different?

The path winds through the trees increasing in size. It would appear that the valley we were in is ringed by trees on on hills on three sides at least. The fourth side is a salty bay connected to the ocean at some point? This area would make good farm land and would easily support a community of good size. Yet there is almost no evidence of farming. Where do these people live?

A few crabs and large insects rush past us and into the forest. Smaller ones scatter across the path from time to time. Lots of wildlife here. I look up into the trees and see nothing unusual. Bet there are Star Nauti at night.

We eventually come to a small clearing barely able to fit all of us. I look around and see nothing here. Why have we stopped? The leader is showing to Gero.

Gero informs us, ~Transportation will be here shortly. That's all I know.~

I hear noise above us and look up. ~Amazing! Look up!~ The others look where I am pointing. In the trees are walkways and small huts of some kind woven against the trees. How come I didn't see them before? A basket is coming down towards us. Not big enough to hold all of us. I don't like the idea of being separated. Nor am I fond of heights. Our bubble talent will not be of much use up there. Too dangerous to use, though we certainly could cause a lot of damage.

~The basket will take two at a time. I will go with the leader. Since Sussi and Mandhi also have the talent I would suggest that one of you go with each of our Guardians. Roo, you are our strongest. Do you mind going with one of them?~

~How about the one I rescued from Pink?~ I see her in our group and motion her over. She has a slight yellow color to her skin just like I do. They all do in fact.

When she is next to me the others notice.

~Roo, they are the same color as you.~

~I noticed.~

~Roo, are these your people? Is this where you came from?~

I give the negative sign, ~I came from south of our current home. We are now north east of there.~

~But weren't you a stranger there as well?~

~Yes, but imagine the distance from here to where I first was. If there was some sort of dispersal, against the current remember, would you not have seen others before I arrived? They would not all bypass our home and end up south.

Gero, please ask what her name is.~

~It is written on her side just like we do.~ He points politely to the tattoo on her side. Problem is, is that I can't read it. I concentrate till I can mimic the design. I am not perfect. It does not have the 'i' addition to indicate female so I don't add it.

~I will call you Paff then.~ I turn to her and point at my symbol.

She is better than I am and gets it right the first time, ~Rooi~

I correct her to ask her to call me just ~Roo~. That is strange. I am the only one I know who prefers to drop the 'i' mark and here are an entire people who do not use it.

Gero and the leader, who I now see is called Kerr are already in the basket on the way up. When this starts the rest of the people disappear. They apparently have other tasks to attend to. It will only be the eight of us then who go up. That makes me feel a little better even though I can see that there are many above us.

When our turn comes I hesitate. This is scary for me.

Paff gets in and offers an arm to assist me. I acquiesce and accept. I am not as graceful getting into the basket and immediately plop to the bottom and hang on like I am in a cooking basket. We are the lightest pair or it is my anxiety at the speed we are moving. Up we go till I am dizzy and dare not look down.

When we stop Paff literally jumps out grabbing onto convenient branches. I start to do so and make the mistake of glancing down. I immediately plop back down into basket. Where is the rest of my Triad in my time of need? I have been abandoned.

I have to do this. I slowly reach out and grab a branch with one arm. I reach out with another arm and grab another branch. So far I am okay. As I reach out with another arm I run into trouble. The next branch is too far

away, barely. I swing the basket trying to get to it and find myself falling out of the basket hanging by two arms. I am very thankful now that I did so much clay work.

~Roo, quit hanging around and get up here with the rest of us.~

~I'm stuck.~

~No you're not. Pull yourself up to the next branch. These trees are just like any other. We are only five arms off the ground. It won't kill you if you fall.~

~Hurt every spot of me, but not kill me. How reassuring. I do so love pain.~

I look up and see the next branch. I pull myself up and grab on. Above that I see an arm reaching out to me and reach for it. I am finally hauled up to a platform in the trees. I am nearly dry from fright and cling to the sides of the wobbly path strung between two trees.

~Roo, you are on one of the main paths they use. Others need to use it too. Come on. Quit being such a crawly.~

Mandhi swings with the path like she was born up here. Sussi does not look as relaxed but does alright. Gero is showing with the Kerr. Arms are going up and down excitedly. I am clinging for my life.

Then the horror happens. The entire path flips over. I find myself hanging on with two arms and slipping fast. I look down to the forest floor below as first one arm and then the next lets go. Falling is actually kind of peaceful. Just as I am about to hit I black out. This is becoming a habit.

I awaken in a bed of crushed mushrooms and ferns. To my right a person is camouflaged against a tree. They are good, I can barely make them out. ~What happened?~ There is no response. Maybe they don't realize that I can see them. I attempt to get up to go over to them. I hear noise from the other side and when I turn back to find the person again they are gone. Strange. No one can move that fast.

~Roo, are you okay? That was some fall.~

I get up the rest of the way and examine myself. Not a scratch or bruise this time. Maybe the mushrooms saved me?

~You're fine Roo. Lucky as usual. Now quit playing and come up to meet our guests. They really have done a good job on such short notice.~

~Huh? When did they get here?~

~Less than an eight day ago. Oh, don't move from where you are. Trapdoors all around us.~

~Those little bitty things.~

~These are half an arm across and the bite hurts like death. If it doesn't kill you that is.~

~Crab. How do we get back up?~ I am not sure I want to go back up

there. Next time I will probably land directly on top of the nest of spiders.

~Rope ladder. It was how we got down so fast. Follow us.~

~Why didn't they offer this in the first place?~

~Only used in emergencies. Don't want someone you don't know making use of it. They keep it in the trees most of the time.~

~I saw someone down here before you arrived.~

~Lots of the their people about. Could be anyone.~

~You probably inked them dropping out of the sky like that.~ I was lucky I did not ink myself. Wonder why not? It is not like it has never happened.

~This time one of use on each side of you.~

~Where are we going?~

~Dinner!~

~It has to be better than snail stew again.~

~Yep. Red snail stew in mushrooms. Something green in it too it looks like.~

~Oooh, bet the red part makes all the difference.~

It wasn't bad actually. Maybe because it was fresh. I am suspicious of the mushrooms though. Not all of them are safe to eat. They can make you as mad a mag dipper before they kill you.

~Roo, there are no worms in the stew. Just eat it.~

Sarra comes up to me, swinging around the others. I almost ink watching him do it. ~Roo, why are you so afraid of everything? You are the most powerful person I have ever heard of and that includes those from our history lessons.~

~I don't see myself as powerful Sarra, just unlucky. All I wanted was a simple long life. All of this is far beyond my worst chased and eaten dreams. Think about it. First the bubbles and the mad Teacher. We escape by traveling through dark muddy caves for three days being pursued by Guardians trying to take us in to be darted. We are surrounded by your heavily armed troop and only by luck do we escape that. I didn't know I could make a bubble that big before I did it. We get chased up a ridge and down again. Spend a night in a strange world no one has been to before, surrounded by unknown creatures and plants. The crab molting just when we need it. The racers and the greedy people who tricked us into killing a species. Two days in the heat and sun and now this. What else Sarra? We have experienced more in little over an eight day than most have in a life time.~

~Funny. That's just the kind of adventure I have been dreaming for my entire life.~ He leaves me staring at the space where he was. Guardians are strange.

I find Gero without falling again and ask him, ~I heard they have only

been here an eight day. Why is that?~

~Two reasons Roo. They normally travel from place to place, that is their way. They believe in having as low of an impact on their surroundings as possible. Second, they are being pursued.~

~By whom? Who could be out here?~

~Well, they are. So why not others? As to who those others are, that is the interesting part. Let's just say you would have no problems understanding them Roo.~

~From our home?~

~I don't think so. Even I would have noticed if that many people disappeared all at once. No, I think they may be from another group of our people. Shore dwellers like us.~

~Am I from these people Gero?~ I am the same color as they are.

~Who can say Roo. We drift as hatchlings for many eight days. Some more than others. It doesn't matter now. You are one of us Roo, never doubt that.~

~Thank you Teacher. I don't always feel that truth.~

~It has been an adventure. Even more exciting than my last expedition here.~

~What happened then?~

~Half my people were eaten by these people, the Owachi, for the crime of trespassing. I was made to chose which ones and then help eat them.~ The eating part doesn't bother me. Who has participated after a darting? Meat is meat. But to have to chose. That would be the hard part.

~This is more exciting? What are they going to do to us?~ I turn white.

~Thanks to you Roo, they are not going to eat us if that is what you are worried about. Not right away anyway. That is if you are whom I think you are at least.~ He leaves me to think about that comment. Who am I?

Kerr comes up to me and says something. "I can't understand you." He grabs an arm and touches it to a moonstone on a belt of moonstones around his mantel. I look more closely. The one he pointed at has my mark on it! I pull out my moonstone and show it to him while pointing out the mark on mine. He then points to my tattoo which is the same. He then leaves. Now I know where all those moonstones went, but not how or why. Trade? What could these people have that we would want? Medicinals or minerals?

At dusk the Star Nauti come out in huge numbers. The insects are drawn to our waste and the smell of the cooking and the Nauti to them.

Suddenly there are more people on either side of me. I can barely make out that they are showing.

Sussi comes up to me and hands, ~I think I can understand some of what they are showing.~

~How? I only think I see a word or two, never anything understandable.~

~I am more experienced in languages Roo.~

~What is a language?~

~You know our modern way of showing is different from the way the Ancients did?~

~Sure we all know that. Part of the reason we all learn the old way as well. Our modern way is a variation and we would not want it to get too far from the pure form.~

~Rightly so. Only I think these people are even closer to the pure form than even our version of Ancient is. Our way of showing is so different now it is called a different language. Language is the defined set of rules and designs a people use to communicate with.~

~How can that be? I have seen nothing of their writing. Over time they should drift even further than we have. A snail text lasts a long time but even they need to be redone from time to time. Errors happen during the copying process and they don't even have paper, which won't last a year in the damp.~

~Paper can last hundreds of years in a sealed dry pot. You are right about their lack of writing. They are closer because they are still in contact with the source according to them. We turned our back on the them and will pay the price when the Saviors comes. Our people that is, not us. We three are of the Prophecy.~

~What does that mean?~

~That part I have not gotten yet.~ Crab.

I spent a horrible night strapped to a branch. I hope never to do that again. Even if the Star Nauti were incredibly beautiful, have you ever tried to rest when some over sized squid is blinking off and on near you all night?

Day 11

~Roo, wake up. We move.~ Mandhi nudges me and unties my straps before I am fully awake. I nearly fall again. Once lowered to the ground I am so happy I can't contain myself.

~Shhh Roo. We need to blend well. Danger ahead.~

~Where are the crabs?~

~They are ahead of us. They would have given us away if seen in day light.~

Paff comes up to me and offers me something to eat. I take it without thinking and start to eat it. Tastes familiar. I try with my best Ancient to ask her, ~What is this?~

She flashes back, ~Yaahi.~

~What is a yaahi, I have never heard of that creature?~ Then it hits me. I look around frantically. She is gone. I can't find her. I throw down the food and move among the others.

~They are feeding us Yaahi! Don't eat it. She was under our protection!~

Everyone stops. Gero comes up to me as fast as he can.

~You don't understand Roo.~

~I understand this. You are keeping us in the silence about what is going on. No one will show us who we are supposed to be except to say it is part of the Prophecy. Whatever that is. You allow them to kill our friends. Yes, I counted Yaahi as a friend. As of this point and time I am leaving. I will no longer be part of this expedition or group.~

~They can kill us all without a thought Roo. Don't do anything rash. You don't know what happened or why. You are making ink without knowledge.~

~And whose fault is that?~ I stare him down.

~Yours. You are not patient enough. I showed everything would be explained, but I can't just show you. Without direct experience it would not be believed. I promise that before this day is out you will know what we face. If you still feel you are being deceived then I will help you get to where ever you want to go even if it costs me my life.~

~You show them this. If ANYONE else dies of our group at their hands, they will all die. I have nothing more to lose.~ To demonstrate I take out the trunk of the largest tree that I can see without moving. The tree comes crashing through the bubble I made. I dissolve the bubble and the remaining trunk slowly tips over. I don't care which direction. To prevent any other moves against me I prepare hundreds of tiny bubbles and send them scattering in all directions. Soon almost every tree has at

least one hole all the way through it. The cut tree crashes. Fortunately I don't think any one is hurt, but it takes out several other trees on its way down.

The leader comes up to Gero and begs his attention. They exchange words.

~Kerr says he does not understand why you did this.~

I remain silent and Gero shows some more to him.

~Kerr says that Yaahi was abomination. Yaahi has killed Ancients.~

~She has killed Nauti, not Ancients. There are no more Ancients.~

~Kerr says that the Nauti are the Ancients. Now you know why I could not just show you.~

~You are right. I do not believe you. Let Kerr know what else I have shown. ANYONE else dies they all die. No exceptions. I did not ask to be here and I am done being used by all of you. From now on NOTHING happens unless our Triad approves. Got it?~

He signs the affirmative and shows with Kerr. Kerr shrugs and takes the lead.

~What did I just say? Where is he going and why?~

~He is leading us to the answers that you seek. Does that meet with your approval?~

~You can die just as easily as that tree Gero. Or would you rather spend the rest of your life on Pink?~

He is silent and waits. I go to Sussi and Mandhi who have kept quiet through all of this.

~What do you two think? Do we go with them and take a chance that this not just some new trick or trap or do we go home?~

~We can't go home Roo.~

~Can't we? Sarra made it clear that we three could take the Matriarchy if we wanted it.~

~She is guarded with more than dart guns and rock swords Roo. Even if we succeeded we would not last a day before someone else tried to get us and then someone else and so on and so on.~

~Then we go somewhere else. There are lots of shorelines on this world or for that matter on many other worlds. In fact, I think if we are so sure someone worse is watching us right now, I think we should travel on Pink till we got there.~

Mandhi gets it, ~And just our group and Kerr.~

~And Paff,~ Sussi adds. Thanks Sussi, not that Paff has much to favor her at least she is not a male.

~So we are agreed?~

~Yes~

~Yes~

We go back to the others and Sussi explains, ~Kerr and Paff will go with us to show us the proof of the Prophecy. No one else. We want no more death and right now we are a bit nervous. We can only watch so many.~

Gero shows with Kerr and then responds, ~Then Sarra must remain behind as a security hostage for the safety of Kerr.~

~Nope, Sarra goes with us. If you don't believe this proof enough to trust it then we leave here and now and Kerr and Paff can get on with their lives as if we never existed.~

Gero translates.

~Sussi, did he translate properly?~

She puffs up, ~Yes, more or less.~ We all three stare him down. He nearly inks. He didn't know Sussi could understand them that well.

Mandhi arms in to add salt, ~Let us know if he EVER strays.~ I form a bubble to place near him to heap the salt wider. No more tricks.

~We will need supplies.~

~Not for a one day trip.~

Paff comes up to us not totally understanding what is going on.

Sussi attempts to show her, not trusting Gero with another life. She agrees to come with us and takes up a position near her leader.

I take us all to Pink. As soon as we arrive I start to have problems breathing and itch like a crawly in a cook pot.

Gero shouts, ~We have become allergic to this world. I was afraid of that.~ He coughs several times, ~With repeated exposure the antigens here are affecting us, setting off an immune response. We can't stay. If we do it could kill us. We have to go back.~

~Not back, we go somewhere else. We have not been on any of the other worlds. It apparently takes time for this reaction to occur.~ I shift the bubble and we in the dark. I shift again till I find a world with the sun in the east to give us enough time. We fall an arm to the ground and are temporarily disoriented. Moving blind is not a good idea, but I am mad and not being patient. I don't really care.

Sussi comments, ~Kerr says this world is bad. The landmarks do not match. He will not be able to guide us.~

I look around. There are structures all about us. We are lucky we did not end up somewhere immediately dangerous. It tastes horrible here. The ground is not natural. Tastes of an oil seep or worse.

~There is something approaching us at a high rate of speed. We would not stand a chance against it.~

~And we can't fight everything in every world we meet Roo.~

~Fine. We shift again. There are thousands of worlds. Surely there is one as safe as Pink.~

It takes me at least eight more tries. I am not keeping track. We are in a field at least. No made structures. The sun is in the right position.

~Kerr says this one will work.~ We climb out of the hole our world has made in it and collapse the bubble.

~Lead on then.~ I hope we can find our own world again. The plants are all different yet again. These are green at least. The trees are like our twisted trees except the branches are brown and the leaves are all at the tips instead of along the branches as they should be. Strange.

~What are those?~ Mandhi points up.

~They are too small and fast to be floaters and too large to be insects.~

Behind me I think I see something. Then it is gone. I can't get over the idea that someone is watching me.

~Roo, come on. You were the one who gave them a one day limit. It will take most of that day to get there from here.~

~Too bad they took the crabs from us. They might even be able to eat this stuff. Lots of insects too.~

~They seem to like us, pesky things.~ We are all swatting them at random intervals. Glad we are wearing shaders or they would be all over us and I would never be able to concentrate. Bad enough they seem to particularly like our eyes. I finally give up and put on the dimmer covers. It will get hot but at least I won't be seeing them in close up. They remind me of carrion flies and I'm not dead yet!

The flap is closed on Sarra's shader so she cannot communicate. I gently open it. Kerr is motioning madly. I give him a dirty look and he stops and walks ahead.

~Thanks Roo.~

~I'm sorry I could not save Yaahi. I didn't know till this morning.~

~They tortured her most of the night. They hung her from a tree and cut tiny pieces off of her one at a time till she died. She staid white the entire time and did not say a thing. I think the entire village must have been there and participated. No quick dart like us. These people are savages Roo, be very careful.~

~I have noticed a lot of males.~

~I saw that too. At least half are males.~

Sussi comes up, ~I saw what you were saying. The don't have Triads. They form Diads with one male and one female. They both die after they mate.~

~So their males only mate with one female. How strange. Where do they have their young? In the bay? and why so many males?~

~I am not sure. Like us, mating only happens once a year normally. On a full moon like us also.~

~Except for their color, no offense Roo, and their language, they could be us.~

~I think I would prefer if you were armed in some way Sarra. I don't want to lose you too.~

~They are apparently not interested in me in anyway. I think I was there to act as a warning. They went mad when they saw Yaahi's Nauti marks.~

~But I have those marks too! Why haven't they come after me?~

~You are well armed and with strong friends. They will remember that tree fifty arms high falling at a thought.~

~And all those neat little holes. Won't kill the trees, but will also serve as a reminder. That is something I could easily do if provoked. I suspect that it would work equally well on people.~

~Fog is coming in.~ I look to where Sussi has pointed. Sure enough a large wall is approaching us.

Sarra comments, ~That is strange for this time of year.~

~For this world? For this place? Have you ever been here before? Be thankful and enjoy it.~

As soon as it hits us the temperature drops. I get out of my shader and enjoy the moisture on my skin. The flies disappear as well. This is bliss. Well, except for all the walking. I dare not suggest a rest stop. I would be unable to get up afterwards. Carrying the shader is a pain though. Gero has folded his into a packet placed on top of his mantle. I do the same and it gets easier to carry. You can get sunburned even in the fog.

Mandhi comes up to me and hands me a snail. Without thinking I pop it into my mouth and idly rasp at it. Tastes good. Then it comes to me, ~Mandhi, where did you get this snail?~

~Good huh? They are all over the place. They are coming up in the fog. They seem to especially like this plant thing here. Every time I pass one of these bushes I do a quick check and come up with a few. Not that big, but we have all day.~

~They may be poisonous Mandhi!~

~They taste good. Look very similar to the snails on our world. I don't think this world is that different from ours.~

~Have you seen the trees Mandhi? Do they look like anything from our world?~

~Closer than anything we saw on Pink. These snails would fit right in. No one would notice. So would a lot of the insects. Here comes a dragon fly. Does it look strange to you Roo?~

~A bit small and a brighter blue, but I agree very similar. We don't know this world Mandhi. I don't want to lose anyone else.~

~More for me then.~ She stops to search another bush. If the snails

are eating that bush, which looks very strange to me even if it is green, is the bush itself edible? Or will the poison from the bush transfer to the snails and then kill us?

~You know I am feeling a bit light headed and tired.~

Gero comments, ~I think the oxygen level is lower on this world. We are all breathing a little more than normal. We would adapt in time, but it is going to be as if we were at high elevation for our stay here.~

~And slow us down. I need to take a break or I will be too dizzy to continue.~ He looks concerned but doesn't say anything. We all stop for a fraction of an eighth. Kerr is the one I watch carefully. He is their apparent leader. He had to know and participate in what happened to Yaahi and I bear the same marks. Sussi and Mandhi take up positions between us. Good idea.

An eighth later we cross a small stream. I pause for a moment to soak up some water. Wish we had more salt. My salt bag is nearly empty. I had thought we could refill it from the supplies on the crabs. An eighth later the fog burns off and I am glad I paused in the stream.

I am almost ready to give in and give them another day when Kerr stops us. He shows with Gero and the two of them come up to me.

~We are as close as he dares get without missing the correct spot. There are slight differences in the two worlds and he cannot be totally certain.~

Crab, I knew this was coming.

~I am not sure I can get us home.~

Mandhi comes up to me, as does Sussi.

~We need to work on this one together Roo. Sussi and I showed about this possibility. I understand the math better and Sussi has a feeling for the resonance. You will be the power, I will steer and Sussi will seek out the proper resonance. She has noticed that each world has a different feeling to it sound wise. Probably has to do with air pressure and such.”

I add, ~Well we know it has a similar time base, so sometime near late sixth eighth. The sun should be roughly in the same position. All we can do is try.~

Gero, Kerr and Sarra get in the middle. A smaller bubble is easier to work with.

~Hope we don't bubble into a solid structure, it could crush us.~

~Roo, stop that. We have been alright so far. Let's begin.~

~Concentrate on home.~ I concentrate and open a bubble. Dark. I shift the bubble to light. Mandhi guides me and Sussi plays the flute with the correct sound.

~The flute should flutter if we get close.~

Suddenly a lot of leaves and sand fall on us. I shift without thinking

before we are buried. Safe in a new world we push as much as we can out of the bubble.

~That should cause someone to think. A ring of strange plant debris suddenly appears.~

~Concentrate.~ Sussi starts playing again. I start, with Mandhi's hand signals to get a feeling for it. All of the worlds at the same time sync are arrange in one dimensional line. If I stay on that line and follow it around the circles we should eventually arrive there. At least we can see.

As we pass through one of the worlds I briefly see someone waving to us.

~Stop Roo!~ Sussi yells. ~Go back.~

I go back one world and look at Sussi.

~Back one more.~ I go back one more. It is the world where I saw the person waving. They aren't there any longer. No person could move that fast. But the rock they were on is there and looks exactly right. The trees and ferns look right. We leave the circle and I collapse the bubble. The ground cover feels and looks right. No strange plants. Normal mosses and ferns and such.

~We are home. I think.~ Mandhi shrugs. Kerr motions us to hurry. I look to where he is moving and there is smoke in the distance. A settlement of some kind I suspect.

Sarra comments, ~If that represents more of his people we will be outnumbered again, be ready.~ He is holding a rather vicious looking piece of metal. Would make a good weapon.

~Where did you get that?~

~One of the worlds we paused on to get orientation.~

~You could have lost an arm reaching for it.~ He shrugs. Glad he has it though. I give his mantle a squeeze in affirmation. Kerr is getting way ahead of us. We all hurry to catch up. The air feels normal again. The oxygen or whatever feels good. My strength returns as my muscles are fed with good air. We head straight for the smoke. I don't see a path anyway. I am getting all scratched up again on the rocks and small branches of various plants. The climb up the hill hurts the most, but I try and keep up with the others.

Kerr stops at the top. Everyone else immediately stops as they reach the top. I finally scramble up last as usual. Out of breath I look to where they are all looking.

It is horrible. Our crabs are all up ended and burned. Most missing legs and cracked in pieces. Bubbling piles of char remains of what must have been people are scattered about. A few burned trunks of remaining trees poke up at random locations. It tastes heavily of burned flesh.

We slowly make our way down the slop to the edge of the burned

area. Kerr stops us and says one word that I think I get, ~Hot!~ He then leads us around the edge towards the opposite side. Very recent then. I don't taste death in the air yet.

Part way around he stops and points to a dead person not char. There are many many darts sticking out of it. It is dressed as a Guardian and a Guardian's sword is near by. Sarra goes to retrieve it and I motion to him not to. He looks at me and then at Kerr, then falls back.

~Guardians did this to your people.~ Gero says.

~They must have had a reason. They must have been attacked.~ Sarra comments. ~It is against our code to attack whole villages.~

Kerr continues. When we reach the opposite side he points to a large stone structure just inside the burn zone. He gestures that we need to get to the structure.

~How are we going to do that? The ground is still too hot.~ I wave an arm over the ground. I can feel the heat easily.

~We have only seen one Guardian body. The rest of them must be near by. We are not safe here, if it is not already too late.~

Paff gets an idea. She pushes sand and dirt over the burned section. It puts out any lingering fire underneath and provides a safety layer that is now cool enough. Mandhi starts to help and soon all of us are pushing earth in a line with Paff at the lead. When she reaches the structure, Kerr rushes past all of us to get to the front.

It is a building of sorts built out of carefully piled stones. He goes around to the other side. We follow.

~What is it?~

~No idea.~

On the other side is a flat surface that has been heavily damaged. Something was here.

~Look.~ Gero points to something on the ground. Flecks of gold.

~Gold, so what. A lot of streams have these.~

Kerr points to the gold and then to the face of the wall. He waves his arms over the entire surface.

~I think he is trying to say that the entire surface was covered in gold.~ Sussi adds. Gero is silent and laying very low to the ground.

Sarra whistles, ~We have company. We are being watched.~ He points to the far edge of the fire zone. A few Guardians have arrived and are pointing back at us. I recognize one of the people.

~Freng~ I whisper and lower myself into a defensive position.

~That's Freng? What the Matriarch is he doing here? The odds are enormous that . . .~

~I have had the feeling that we were being watched. I think he was thrown off when we entered the green world. So, instead he followed the

tracks of the other people and ended up here. A battle ensued and Paff's people lost.~

~War is illegal by every law known.~ Sarra angrily announces. Crab, more and more show up at the far side and begin to make their way along both edges towards us.

~We need to leave Roo.~ Everyone gets close to me.

~The other side of the wall, hurry. I don't want him to see this.~

~Good thinking Roo.~

We get the other side, close up ranks and I bubble us back to the green world in one jump.

~How did you do that?~ I collapse the bubble.

~Quick learner?~ I really have no idea. I wasn't even thinking about it. All I wanted to do was get away from Freng.

~Imagine his arms when he reaches the other side of the altar.~

~Altar?~

~There was a sculpture on the face of the stone. I am sure of it. Paff's people had covered it with gold. To gather that many grains of gold from the streams took a lot of time. You don't do that just for amusement.

Therefore the sculpture was important to them. An altar.~

~We don't have altars.~

~Sure we do. In the hall of learning and history. What do you call those rooms devoted to the first Matriarchs? People even leave bits of food there. The sculpture of the Matriarchs are not going to eat it. Face it, they are altars.~

~You could be right.~ Kerr grabs my arms and pulls. I glare at him and he lets go. He inks the ground when he realizes what he has done. He then motions for us to follow him.

~Here we go again.~ Sarra seems more excited than worried though. He really does like all of this. Males! Stupid as slugs. I expel air and reluctantly follow.

Within fractions of an eighth we reach a small pond. He is nearly jumping up and down. Gero translates this time, ~He says to take us back to home quickly before the others can find this place.~

I look to Sussi. She motions affirmative.

Sarra stops me, ~Be prepared to enter the water as soon as we get there. Better yet, lets all get underwater here. They won't see the bubble at all then.~

~Good idea if the pond exists on the other side.~ Gero asks Kerr, who with more arm waving, jumps into the water. I didn't know we could do that. We all follow.

~I have never tried this underwater before.~ Something nudges my back arm.

~Roo, just hurry!~ Ow! Something has bit me.

I make the bubble. It works the same as always. I motion the others to leave the bubble and I collapse it. I make for the surface when I am tugged down instead. Kerr again. He is going to end up full of holes if he keeps doing that. I see some strange shape moving above me, but as we are going down I ignore it.

We make our way down to the bottom of the pond. There is a pile of rocks there. Kerr starts to move some of them. We all assist and find that there is an opening to a tunnel here. We are motioned inside. Kerr goes last and attempt to pull some of the rock back over the opening. Hope there is another way out. We make our way down a tight tunnel. Breathing is difficult with this many people. We will use up all the oxygen in the water very quickly here.

But it opens up into a larger room almost immediately. Totally black of course. Someone grabs one of my arms and pulls me forward. I grab someone near me and they follow.

We break the surface of some kind of chamber. The air is stale but has oxygen in it at least. I receive a hand signal to make as little noise as possible. Like I was going to whistle? I carefully get out of the water onto some kind of ledge. A moment later I hear a flint stone being struck and a small fire is lit. At least we can see enough to show.

~What is this place?~

~I think it is the inside of the stone structure. A secret entrance. We won't be safe here for long. Sooner or later they will get tired of searching for us and try and tear the entire structure down.~

~That will take them awhile. It is many, many arms wide and this is not sandstone.~

~Look over here.~ Sarra goes around a corner. This place has more than one room?

When I enter the adjoining chamber I am confronted with the largest Nauti shell I have ever seen or heard of. It must be at least five arms wide. Beautiful in a very scary sort of way. The patterns on the shell are exquisite. Someone has inlaid the design with more gold. They are really into it. Too gaudy for my look. In place of the soft parts someone has fashioned a stone sculptured replacement out of the rock encasing the shell. The design on the front shield of the Nauti is the same design on the fabricated shields Paff's people were wearing when we first saw them.

Kerr pulls out an operculum set like the one I have and bows to the Nauti sculpture, ~Buzz, eh, eh, eh, eh.~ He repeats this several times before getting up again. I know I have never seen these people before, so how come I knew to do that of all things?

~I think they worship the Nauti Roo.~

~So it would appear. But why? Nauti eat us. They are the main subject of everyone's chase and eaten dreams. Not that crabs and such are not a close second.~

~I was always afraid of the pit crabs. They are the worst. Fall into a sand funnel and munch! Dinner is served.~

~Over here Roo. Look at what the figure is holding. A sphere of some kind. Does this represent a dimension bubble?~

Sussi and I get closer to see what Mandhi is looking at. It is a crude sphere carved from the same stone as the shell. There are patterns on the sphere.

~Don't those plants look like the ones on Pink?~

~Sort of. We have seen that Kerr can bring a bubble up. They could have seen Pink before. That means nothing.~

~Look more closely, there is something inside the sphere.~

A small chip is missing from the main kind of stone. Underneath there is something almost pearl like. I go to the water and empty the few remaining pieces of salt from my salt bag and quickly eat them. Then I fill the bag with water. I bring that over and pour it over the sphere where the chip is. My moonstone falls out and I replace it in the bag. Kerr notices but says nothing.

~It is pearl underneath. There is writing of some kind on its surface. Very fine writing. Best I have ever seen. How do we get it out of the stone casing to see more of it?~

~Are we even allowed to? This is their altar not ours.~ Kerr and Paff have been watching this entire process.

Gero ask, ~Do you see now? The Nauti are not to be feared, they are our masters. They are the ones who taught us every thing. We need to do whatever we can to save that sphere. They will enter this chamber soon. We must hurry. They can't be allowed to have it.~

~We could use Sarra's metal club and bust it out.~

~Can't risk damaging the sphere.~

Mandhi is the one who comes up with the idea to remove it of course.

~We can't hurt the area under the sphere. It is not important. We dig a hollow out larger than the sphere. We encase the sphere in one of Roo's bubbles while at the same time another bubble is underneath to receive it when it falls.~

~Two problems. Some has to be alone on another world where this structure does not exist. Granted that is likely on almost any of them, since it was made and brought here. And second how do we get it out without making any sound. Have you forgotten our hosts outside?"

~That's it. This was brought here. That means only the sculpture is hard. The ground underneath is still soft earth.~

~Doesn't look that soft. Maybe if we are careful.” Sarra does an experimental slow quiet dig of the area of the chamber floor directly underneath the sphere. It gives somewhat.

~It will take time, but I think it is possible.~

~We can take turns so we are always strong.~

We spend the next eighth making a hole barely half the size of the sphere.

Then we hear pounding on the sides of the chamber.

~They are breaking in. We are running out of time.~

~It must be dark outside by now. That means they are working through the night.~

~Which suggests that they really think we are in here. They were probably spending the rest of the time looking for some catch on the outside. Someone watch the surface of the pond just in case though.”

Gero shows Paff to do it. I would have told him to go, but let it drop.

~Sound it not going to matter now.~

~Except to encourage them in letting them know were are in fact in here. Maybe they will give up and go away if we are quiet.~

~Roo, we can always bubble out at the last fraction.~

~It would be better if we know where we are going ahead of time. Someplace like Pink without a lot of trees, but someplace we are not allergic to. I'll get on it. I am the smallest anyway. All of you will be better at digging.~

The pounding on our side starts. The pounding on the outside pauses and then gets louder. They know we are in here now.

I get to work on picking a world. I start with small bubbles and am soon developing a pile of stone, wood, and plant materials as they fall out of the bubble onto our floor. A few of the smaller things move away at random directions. Crab. We will need to burn this place afterwards. I am certainly guilty of pollution now. I would have just chosen the green world we were just one, except it is night there now and I don't want to go into a situation not being able to see anything. We don't even have a glowball with us now.

Mandhi hand signals me, ~Roo, the fire is going out. Find a light world and use it to illuminate what we are doing.~ Crab, now I have to do two bubbles at once.

~I feel wind, they are breaking through!~

I pick the best world I have found so far and make a big bubble and the room fills with light. The pounding stops for a second. That means they can see the light too, ~Get everyone else out. Sussi I want you to catch the sphere on the other side. Keep everyone else away Mandhi. Now go.~ I leave that bubble open and give them a moment to get into

position. I then make a bubble larger than the sphere in the sculpture and the entire sphere disappears with more light coming in from the hole I have produced.

I collapse that sphere. There is someone coming in through the hole they made and they are armed. I collapse the large bubble and the light goes out. I was counting on that. I then make a sphere to a dark world and step through. Once outside the bubble I collapse it and make one to the world the others are on and step into it and collapse it.

I thought I saw something in the dark world and am curious. I make a large bubble to get a good view, figuring that a larger bubble would make it easier to see into a dark space.

Suddenly a large object comes out of the bubble and barely misses me. It goes hurtling through the air onto the field below. It eventually comes to a stop. I collapse the bubble before anything else can come through.

The object opens and something comes out, a creature. How can it balance on just two arms? Then another smaller creature jumps out. It walks on five arms at least. One arm is in the air. Crab, it is ugly. The mantel is at one end opposite the arm in the air. The eyes are in the wrong place. The section the arms are attached to is too big in proportion to everything else. A very twisted view of reality. I think I am going to ink in sympathy for how horrible its life must be.

The larger creature bends in half. I can now see its resemblance to the smaller creature, though the colors are all wrong and it is missing its fifth arm.

We have all instantly hidden of course. Sussi arm shows me, ~We need to get them back to their world. They don't belong here. It is not their fault they are here.~

Mandhi adds, ~Make a bubble to their world. It was dark there. Maybe it will get the idea and go back there.~

~And if another of these things comes out then our problem is doubled.~

~Watch, it is getting back into the object.~ It does so and the object closes. Then it opens again, a whistle sound is heard. The smaller creature responds and enters the object. It closes and begins to move!

Make the bubble Roo. Do it now before it gets too far away. Look it is turning around.~

I make the bubble back to it's world. Crab I hope nothing else comes through. The object proceeds towards the bubble and stops right at the edge. It opens again. The larger creature moves towards the bubble and touches it.

~It needs to be sure it won't be harmed. Smart at least.~

It gets back into the object and proceeds into the bubble. I collapse the bubble instantly. No more surprises.

~That was scary.~

~That was amazing! There are sentients on some of these other worlds. The strange crab was not an evolved animal, but the long one was. Do you understand what that means?~ Sarra is very excited.

Mandhi and Kerr are working on the sphere. Mandhi has made a small bubble and is using it to carefully remove the outer sphere. If she goes too deep she will ruin the inner sphere beyond repair.

I grab a small stone. Nothing sharp, smooth all over.

~Move away please.~ I gently tap the outer sphere with the stone. It cracks easily being this thin now. I was not that far off in my estimate. It then peels off easily.

~How did you know that Roo?~

~Different densities. Something I learned in art instruction I guess. Your technique would have saved a lot of time however in removing the sphere from the wall, too bad we did not think of it earlier.~

It takes less than an eighth now to remove all the rest of the outer sphere. Gero suddenly becomes interested and pulls a hand microscope out of his mantel carrying pouch.

~Where did you get that?~

He pays no attention to me and is intent on carefully examining the sphere. He keeps at it not letting anyone else near the sphere, not even Kerr who is growing very impatient.

~We have visitors.~ What now? I turn around to see an entire troop of small creatures, less than a half arm tall with eyes on a pod above their bodies looking at us. A gap opens in the pod near the base and sharp white shapes are shown arrayed in two intersecting lines.

~Are they sentient?~

~No evidence other than their curiosity.~

~Shell crabs are curious but I would hardly call them sentient.~

Sarra goes up to the troop. They back away but don't leave. He finds a insect in the plant material and throws it up in the air near them. Three rush to get the bug. Two crash into each other and the third closes it's gap with sharp white objects around it. An enlargement moves down the stalk to the main part of the body. Their eyes are right next to their mouths. I guess that could work, though that could be a real problem if surrounded by enemies while taking in food. Besides once you have caught it, what's the point of looking at it any longer?

While Sarra is amused by his new friends I return my attention to the sphere. Gero is still at it. Mandhi and Kerr are about to burst. Sussi and Paff have gone off a few arms and Sussi is showing Paff how to play the

flute.

~Help! Help!~ Using whistle speech. I turn to see the creatures each chasing one of Sarra's arms. They occasionally manage to grab one at which point Sarra flings the poor creature into the air with another flash and whistle of help. I am not sure whether to cheer for the creatures or Sarra. When I see Sarra's blood however I see the game needs to be stopped.

I sphere off the enlarged pod on one of the creatures. Painful I am sure, but they should be able to grow it back with time. Everything stops, then the creatures turn on their own and shred the creature in a blood fest. Their blood is red! How strange can that be? Sarra gets over his pain and backs away from the group.

Before we can make sense of it all, they suddenly leave their partially consumed victim and scatter at high speed. We look up to see why they are running away to see huge versions of the creatures looking down at us. Their gaps are much much larger. I am guessing each of us would make one bite.

The main ganglia are usually near the eyes of intelligent creatures. It certainly seemed to stop the little one. This time I make an array of smaller bubbles and get ready to spray them. I was bound to hit something important. But instead of attacking us they seem to be curious about the bubbles.

One places its pod near a bubble and suddenly there is a huge intake of air. What was that all about? It then raises one of it's arms. At the end of the arm are five smaller hands? The arm and hands seems to be broken in several places but this does not seem to bother the creature. It brings the broken arm up to the bubble and tries touching one of the bubbles with the tip of one of the small hands. It passes into the bubble, but when it shifts sideways the tip disappears. This surprises the creature but does not seem to harm it. No blood is seen. What creature has no blood in it's hands? It was only the extreme tip, but still. Strange.

The other similar creature is watching all this. They both back up, lower their heads in our directions, turn and leave quietly for such large creatures. No fuss at all. They simply acknowledged our ability to defend ourselves and walked away. It was kind of beautiful in an alien ugly kind of way.

~Roo, that was amazing.~

~It was. I would have to say that they are the sentients here. Maybe the small ones are their crawlies. There is a large similarity.~

~That makes sense, but I am not sure. The length of the stalk to the eye pod is different, much shorter on the larger one.~

~Maybe they are dimorphic. I will take the next watch. Roo, see if

you can do something about Gero not letting anyone else look at the sphere.~

~Sure.~ I go to the three. The sphere is carefully sitting on soft ground. No one is actually touching it. All three are just sitting their now looking at it. No one is preventing anyone else from doing anything. 'Looks like the problem is solved' to me.

Paff and Sussi come up to me and see the three just sitting there.

~Interesting. How did you do it?~

~I didn't do a thing. They did it themselves.~

~Too bad, getting those three to keep quiet would be almost as useful as the other abilities.~

~I agree.~ Now we three are watching the first three.

~Wow, maybe the sphere has special powers. Anyone who stares at it is mesmerized. Don't look at it.~

I come out of it at that comment. ~There is nothing magical about the sphere.~ I turn away from the three and face Sarra. ~No more locals?~

~Nothing. Not even the little ones. It is as if we are off limits. What do we do now?~

~I don't know. It is most certainly dark on home world. They showed they would convince me by days end or I would leave. It is days end and I am not convinced.~

~Do we leave then? And where do we go?~

~Roo, the sphere is the complete genetic code of our species. It was buried in rock estimated at millions of years old. Gero has done the estimate based on the microfossils in the rock surrounding the sphere. Ask yourself Roo, what was a Nauti that size doing with our genetic code? Taking it in fact to the grave.~

~The sphere says she was a great scientist and we are the result of her work.~

~You can read it?~

~With Kerr's help yes. This is why you were brought here Roo. We have been waiting so long for this day. You have no idea how long that was.~

~And now my task is done, you have your precious sphere and I can go.~

~Oh no Roo. The adventure has just begun. We all need rest before we can continue though.~ Crab, I was afraid of that. My stomach growls. The others don't appear to have been harmed by the local produce. Maybe?

~Before it gets dark I want to understand the locals better. They are so strange they should not exist.~

~There are no more about.~

~There is the remains of the one that Roo got.~

~The eye pod is missing though.~

~Which world did you send it too. Go get it.~

I expel air, move back and make a bubble to the gray world. I move around the outside of the bubble to be sure it is safe. I want no object squishing me this time. Then I have an idea. I know approximately where the head would have fallen. I collapse the current bubble and make a new smaller one where it should be. It is getting dark and a dark green pod in a green field is not that easy to find.

The bubble is half below ground. It should be safe to reach in and feel around. I tentatively reach in with one arm and start my search. I am almost immediately bit by something and withdraw my arm. I am not hurt badly and reach in again. This time I find the pod and wrap a hand around it.

~Roo got the eye pod.~

~This is the strangest creature I have ever seen.~ That gets Gero's attention and he comes over to see what Mandhi is showing about. He pokes around for a bit.

~Strange. An insect has six legs, and even in some cases those are differentiated, but not to this extreme. It would also appear that they have a jointed internal shell. All the internal shells I have seen are a single piece.~

~Then you will want to see this. I retrieved the sixth leg. The one that has the eyes and feeding mouth.~

He takes it from me and turns it over. The eyes are clearly visible. He pries open the mouth gap and almost immediately cuts his hand on the white objects.

~Sharp. White, many and seem to serve the purpose of the beak. I guess it could work.~

~When we saw one eat the bug Sarra gave it, it seemed to swallow it whole. So why the micro beaks then?~

~There is a rasp inside, but it is smooth. How does it shred its food small enough.~ He flips it over and examines the attachment point to the body stalk.

~The shell extends into the pod.~ He tries to compress the pod and can't. ~Strange, the pod is hard.~ He then hits it again a rock on the ground. On the second try it cracks. There is soft tissue inside.

~A shell around the end of an arm that has eyes and a feeding mouth. This is getting stranger and stranger.~

~There is more. Look at this. The place where that arm was attached seems to be connected to its breathing ability and its stomach. What creature mixes food and breathing? That sounds really stupid. Too easy to

get food mixed with air. There is no mantle. The air exchange organ is inside this array of shell material.~

~Right, next you will show me the sex organs are on the outside instead of inside.~

~How did you know?~

~You're teasing me.~

~Nope. I am guessing male, but I can't be sure. I can't find a male tentacle anywhere.~

~These sperm packets are too large and not detachable either. Are you sure it is a male? Do they even have genders as we know them?~

~Too much. It is attracting a lot of flies. Too bad with iron in its blood it would be poisonous to us.~

~Wish we could take it with us, but we have no preservatives and I don't want to waste salt.~

~I am already out. I was expecting to get more from the supplies today or tomorrow.~

~We are not exactly close to an ocean at this point.~

~Yes. Over.~ Kerr breaks into our conversation. He is good if he is learning our language that quickly.

Gero shows with him a moment, but Sussi shows us, ~The bay is that way less than three eights walk. We have been going around the bay.~

~I wish I had paid more attention to geography.~

~We usually don't pay any attention to that which does not concern us.~

~You mean you don't know about Windy Bay Roo?~

~Did you realize it was this big?~

~No. One thing to see it on a map, quite another to walk it.~

~We still need rest. Hopefully we will all survive this and be able to come back to learn more."

Day 12

I am barely in a dream state when I am woken up. Technically a new day starts at sundown but this is ridiculous. We are all tired.

Sarra hand shows me. I know by his taste. ~We are not alone. I am not sure it is safe here any longer.~

~What's wrong?~ Mandhi joins the conversation.

~Get up as high as you can to get over the tops of the smaller plants and you will see what I mean.~

We do so. There is something bright in the distance. Several. In fact we are surrounded by these lights at regular intervals. The flicker. I get my bearings and realize these are camp fires. We are in the center of a circle of camp fires.

~Let's go. I am not ready to be a meal.~

We wake up everyone else.

~We have a problem. How do we move the sphere? We don't have a crab and this thing is heavy.~

~If we had cloth we could drag it.~

~We don't.~

~We can roll it.~

~That will damage it. It is very delicate. We can't take a chance of hurting the fine engraved writing.~

~How did it survive millions of years then?~

~Good question. The Nauti shell is no problem. Even we have found those.~

~Not decorated in gold.~

~No.~

~We still have the sphere to deal with.~

~What was that!~ We hear a horrendous sound. Not that far away.

~We can bury it and then bubble to another world.~

~We can bubble it to Pink. The plants are soft there and no sentients that we have seen to move it or take it.~

~Kerr showed we need to take it with us. Roo will do it.~

~Roo? She is the smallest one here. No way.~ Thanks Mandhi, though I agree with her.

Another roar and definitely closer. What does it mean other than something large is coming?

~Worry about moving it later. Get us out of here.~

I bubble us to Pink. Kerr, Mandhi and Gero carefully pick up the sphere and take it out of the bubble. Once we are all out I collapse the bubble. Only we have a visitor. One of those small creatures has followed

us.

~Great. What do we do with it?~

~It will not last long here, I would not worry about it. We~ Cough, cough, ~are going to have problems enough soon. Get us out of here Roo.~

~Let me try. I will make the bubble first and then we enter it.~ Sussi says. It is about time someone else tried. The first one is too small. She collapses it and tries again. Barely big enough, but it will do. My eyes are watering and very itchy. Time to go. Without thinking I pick up the sphere and run for the bubble.

Sussi and I are on the other side waiting for the others.

~Roo, what? How?~ The others come through and Sussi remembers to collapse the bubble. The little one runs past us chasing some bug.

I comment, ~I think we have a new team member. You never should have fed it Sarra. That means you get to take care of it.~

~Roo! What happened?~ They are all looking at me. I look around and notice that I am still carrying the sphere and suddenly feel the weight. It crushes two of my arms to the ground.

~Get it off!~ I scream, flashing frantically. Again Kerr, Mandhi and Gero lift the sphere off of me and gently set it down on some soft plant material. I rub my sore arms. The sun is coming up on the horizon. No night time for us.

~Where are we?~ I think we are back on Green. No sentients at least. I think.

~Roo! Pay attention. What did you do?~

I look at the sphere and rub my sore arms again. ~I don't know.~

~What were you doing before you picked up the sphere?~

~I was watching Sussi carefully. These bubbles are dangerous. If one had collapsed when one of us was half way through we would have yet another death. I knew the sphere was important. Kerr showed I should carry it. So, in a rush I picked it up and took it into the bubble. After that I was worried when the rest of you did not follow right away. Then I was distracted by the little ugly one."

~Roo!~

~What?~ I look up and see the sphere about a half an arm above the ground. Once I see it, it falls. Several people rush in to catch it before it hits the ground. Fortunately they were already nervous about it and were right there.

~That was new.~

~Roo. You are going to either kill us or save us. I am not sure which.~

~Roo carry.~ Kerr proclaims and walks away. Where now? I follow him. I can hear the others behind me.

Now that I know that I can lift the sphere it does not bother me as much. I glance back to see Gero and Mandhi still trying to be ready to catch it if I drop it again. It helps that I can't see it in front of me. Better for them too. I suspect that they would have more trouble walking backwards.

There is a bank of fog in front of us. It seems to recede as we progress towards it. I am hoping to see the bay soon and can't wait till I can bathe in the salty water. A quick dip should not bring on the mating sickness. Just enough to take in enough salt to feel better. Still, I wish there were no males present. Without the salt I have been feeling more and more like a slug instead of a healthy person. I will never be a normal person again.

Going down hill is harder than climbing up the hills to Paff's people. Both she and Kerr seem very comfortable here though. We are yet on another world. It looks more like our world in that the plants are more familiar, not that I am used to these inland varieties yet. There are no creatures in the air. No loud sounds from large ugly creatures. Just the usual assortment of crabs, insects, slugs and snails. Even an occasional crawly. A bit far from the shore.

Are we home? I look back and nearly drop the sphere. ~Sorry, everything is fine.~ I raise it back to a higher level. I smell no smoke from the fire that killed all those people and crabs. Granted it has been nearly a day now, but we should still be able to notice something this close by. Actually we should have come out right on top of the burned area so this is definitely not home. I am getting confused. Too many worlds too fast. It just looks so similar.

Kerr really seems to be in a hurry now. How could he know this place. Right, if it looks similar to me, it will to him as well. We are on a path at least. Easier to travel than over rocks and brush.

We do make good time. I taste smoke in the air. There is enough brush and trees, but they all look in good shape and with all this fog I would be surprised if they were the cause.

Oh! We have reached a settlement of some kind. I am beginning to see inhabited structures. Not the same design as ours, not as crowded. Each home looks like an individual shell with smoke rising out of the center of the spiral. Everything is the color of the surrounding soil, which explains why it took so long to see them.

I see people of all sizes coming towards us. They can't all be the old enough. I glance around. There are no unseen working at tasks. The smaller ones work alongside the larger ones. At least everyone seems to be ignoring the crawlies. I am tempted to snatch one up and eat it, but I see no color code nor do any of them appear to be dyed. Maybe their population is low and they need to raise more to person status.

When we get to the group we walk right through them and they close up behind us. No one says anything. Strange. If a group of strangers showed up at our settlement Guardians would be there almost instantly. I see no one about that looks like a Guardian. I see no weapons either. Granted a normal person does not carry a sword, just the Guardians.

We go to a modest home and Kerr walks right up to the operculum and enters. How rude! I wait outside. The others pile up behind me.

~You can set the sphere down now Roo.~ Huh? I look behind me and see that someone has brought a straw mat and they have scooped out a hollow or used an existing one. I carefully lower the sphere onto the mat. It wobbles a bit and then settles down. Gero and Mandhi sit next to it. The locals are arrayed in a half circle around our group. Everyone looks fit, neither thin or overweight for their size. Just curious. How many floating spheres do you see in a life time?

We wait. No one saying anything. I guess we are just as curious as they are.

Kerr comes out. Great now we are going to find out what's going on. Then Kerr comes out again!

~Mandhi, or great physicist, you want to explain this one.~ Took the words right off my face Sussi. The rest of our group comes up to see the answer, even Paff, who looks even more confused than we do. She keeps looking back and forth between the two.

Mandhi pauses and then carefully answers, ~We know all about the existence of the worlds we have been one. This one is no different, just another parallel world.~

~It is a lot different Mandhi. We did not see duplicates of ourselves on the other worlds.~

~That is because the split between the two worlds happened much earlier than it did here. Sussi was very lucky to have gotten us here. I thought that the closer we got to our own path the harder it would be to visit those worlds. The fact that there is another Kerr here means we are VERY close to our own world.~

~But the altar is not on this world. I was so shocked by how close it looked to our world that I looked back. The entire burned area is gone, or not here.~

Gero is translating everything we say for the others. Paff gets excited and leaves us, looking frantically at all the locals. Then I understand. She is looking for her counterpart. A few go with her.

Mandhi notices this too, ~I think she may be disappointed. The two worlds are not the same.~

Gero breaks in reading Kerr at the same time, ~She is correct. On our world Kerr was the leader. Here he is just a simple carpenter. You notice

the difference in weights. Here there has been no war with the light people, as we are called. In fact there is a good relationship between the two. Our Kerr was also a carpenter, but when so many of their people died or were made into slaves, he eventually became their leader.~

~So the split occurred during Kerr's lifetime.~

~No necessarily,~ Mandhi adds, ~There can be a certain amount of drift. Even after a split their will be more similarities than differences for quite some time.~

~You are saying that the split probably occurred many years ago?~

~Could have been hundreds in fact. A lot of random differences can happen in that amount of time. Chaos is one of the most enlightened math studies one can become interested in. A snail decided on one leaf instead of another and the entire world a thousand years later is different.~

~That subtle?~ She signs in the affirmative.

Paff comes running up to the Kerrs excited. Sussi is standing between her and Gero, so she translates.

~There was a Paff here as well, but remember when I thought I was going to mate five years ago and then backed out at the last eighth? She didn't. She is gone, but her spawn are now among the crawlies we see about us. I am so happy for her.~

~What do you mean she is gone? Why? No one dies at spawning anymore.~ Sarra looks shocked. I am not so surprised, having nearly died myself.

Sussi asks Paff about that and gets an answer. ~Paff asks why we don't die at spawning. Everyone does here. How are we different? It is an honor to contribute to the cycle of life, how can anyone ignore that responsibility.~

~How come she did not spawn then?~

An exchange, ~Because they were on the move so much and needed as many people as possibly to preserve their ways. It was thought that if too many people spawned there would be no one left to train the new ones when they came back.~

~Show her that we don't normally die at spawning because our Triad takes care of us during and after spawning. In that way we can do both. We can contribute to the cycle of life and help raise the new ones when they arrive.~

~That is not their way. She sees a potential problem. If you survive your spawning experience there would be a tendency to give preference to your own hatchlings.~

~We all spawn at the same time of year in the same section of the ocean. Therefore the crawlies all return at the same time. There are too many to know whose is whose and give preference.~

Gero comes into the conversation, ~That is not entirely true. We have been invited to a council meeting. I will explain then.~

~So we get to stay in one place for a day.~

~I suspect it will be several days. Feel free to enjoy your stay here. We are very welcome and to be guests of the Owachi-na, the people.~

~Wait, weren't they called the Owachi while in the forest?~

~They dropped the honorific 'na' when their spiritual leader was taken.~

~What are we going to do with the pearl?~

~We can leave it right here. No one will bother it. They have their own and would not even think of touching this one.~

~I guess it is too heavy for an unseen to carry it away.~

I comment, ~I don't think they have any unseen.~

~Good Roo, you are correct. This culture treats all as welcome as soon as they come ashore. In fact as soon as they are able to ask for it they are named.~

~Wow! To think of how much I had to go through to get my name. How come we did not see any of the smaller ones at the forest then?~

~They did not make it. Being smaller, slower and less experienced, they were the first ones captured.~ Great. I hate being the smallest.

A local comes up to each of us. Escorts I am guessing. Someone smaller than I am comes up to me. Female. Tattoo, at least they kept that convention, says Atal. I wish I had done better in Ancient now.

~Hide well Atal.~

~Why?~ Huh? Maybe she did not understand me. She tugs at an arm. I suspect I am supposed to follow her.

We leave the front of Kerr's house and the pearl. We visit homes, gathering areas, kitchens, craft areas. They are self sufficient. Most of their food comes from the bay, which I get glimpses of occasionally. Herbs and spices are grown in small plots at random locations. There are no streets, just paths. Nothing seems to follow any kind of order, yet there is beauty in their settlement. Lack of conversation does not seem to be a problem. The eyes see all.

We come to a crab pen. I am not at all crazy about wild crabs and these are only partly tame. I was nearly eaten as a crawly on more than one occasion. I can see them looking at me. I do not go anywhere near the fence. Atal does not seem to have the same aversion. I have nothing against crabs mind you. The controlled ones have been a big plus to our home. I can't imagine how we could do without them. But these. There is an intelligence behind their eyes. I look too much like dinner to them.

Atal sees me watching them and goes to a pot to remove some meat. She then offers it to the nearest one. It gently takes it from her. I still don't

believe they are safe. My chased and eaten dreams are full of crabs or Nauti. Crabs are the worst. I have never actually seen a Nauti that I know of. But I have certainly seen crabs. I back away. Atal does not understand but we go on.

We come to yet another craft area. There is a light covering of thatch that lets some light in, but not full sun. The sides are open, but by this time I am getting bored and don't really care. I really could use a salt bath and some food. I guess it is universal that one would like to show what one has accomplished. Wait, this area is different. I look more closely. There are un-fired pots carefully stored out of potential rain and fog. I find the kiln. It is different from our design, simpler and much smaller.

I follow the clay pipe in the back to a waste pit that smells active. They have gas then. I go back to the kiln and open the door. This kiln has not been used in some time. It is like they were all ready to do a firing, then just walked away. Strange.

When we are about to leave I notice a few moonstones on a table. No mark on them yet. Practice ones not worthy of being even fired. They look okay to me. I turn one over and look along its edge. Ah. Not quite even. There is a slight thickness difference from one side to the other and an ever so slight ridge along the circumference. I toss it back on the table.

Atal is watching all this. She reaches into her salt bag and pulls out her moonstone and hands it to me. Sufi's name faces me. My teacher lives here as well? Is this one of her stones that she made as an apprentice? I hand it back to Atal and show her mine. As a journey near master status I am allowed the right to carry a moonstone with my own name. She sees that it matches my tattoo and gets excited.

Each of the trades has some symbol recognizable to others of the trade, but everyone carries a moonstone in their salt bag. Right out in the open is the safest place to hide something. The fact that Atal recognizes the significance means she is a student at the very least.

~Sufi your teacher?~ I point to her moonstone and then make a circle above her mantel. She pauses and thinks then gives the sign for negative. I point to her stone and make a circle above my head. She looks around for a pot, turning over one and then another till she finds what she wants. She points to the pot and makes the circle over her head. I take the pot and examine the mark. That's strange. Gero is the name I see.

He is a life scientist in our world. Was he interested in ceramics at one point? Was this one of those random changes? And why were Gero and Sufi connected with these people so far away from our home?

~Where is Gero?~ I point at the mark and then wave my hand indicating distance.

She makes the hand symbol for unknown, I think. I wish I could show

with her.

Sussi and Mandhi come up with their escorts.

~Sussi, ask Atal where Gero is.~

~He is with the Kerrs Roo, why?~

~No, their Gero. He was or is a ceramics instructor here.~

Sussi pauses in disbelief.

~Really. I have seen his mark.~ I suspect that the musicians hide their mark somewhere on their instruments.

She asks Atal.

~She says that Gero went with two others several moons ago during the height of the rain. They have not returned. It is possible they had an accident.~ Possible, but just seems too unlikely.

~Why was Gero here? He should have been on the coast.~

More conversation. This time one of their escorts, a male named Tetta gives the answer.

~Apparently there is a small but consistent trade between the bay people and the coast people. Our own Gero knew of their existence, so why not theirs. Anyway, their Gero and his former apprentice, Sufi, came once or twice a year to help train their people. Atal was one of their students.~

~That much I knew.~

~We came to get you. Our presence is requested.~

~Where? Who?~

~My guess would be the Kerrs and Gero, but I was not told. Hey, our escorts are leaving.~

~What do we do now?~

~We are to proceed to the blue house, the largest one in town apparently.~

~From this level it would be hard to know which home was the largest. We need to get to higher ground.~

~When do we eat?~ My gut is reminding me of this need.

~Roo! We are on a great quest. We don't need to be fed constantly.~

~Constantly? I haven't eaten in days.~

~Not our fault you would not eat food from other worlds. So, why do you trust this one?~ Very funny.

~Rest would be good too.~

~Roo!~ Fine.

We make our way up the hill only to find out that the home we want is of course on the other side of the settlement. I may have more modern shoes, but they will not last forever with all this walking. Not that I am willing to ride one of their crabs.

~I want to know how they got that intense of a blue color.~ The only

blues that I know that intense all use forbidden cobalt powders.

~Not our problem Roo. This is their world, let them live it.~ Sussi is probably right. Then why we going to see their leaders? We should be getting on with this and get back to our own world. Come to think of it, we did not always know which minerals were dangerous and which were safe.

We make it up to the highest point in the settlement and clearly see that the largest structure was of course much closer to where we were than where we are. This exercise thing is becoming a pain.

~I did not see that many locals. Wonder where they all are? There are far more homes here than I can account for.~ I hadn't even noticed. Not that I paid any attention while at home either. I certainly will be more observant in the future.

The operculum for the blue building is open. There is plenty of light inside from the open roof, along with a lot of people. I look about as we enter. I finally find Sarra and Paff together to one side. Gero is up near the front, along with the Kerrs of course. At the center of attention is their apparent leader. He or she is dressed in one of those Nauti masks. Won't fool me twice. All the same I pull out my operculum noise maker.

There is a stone lined pool between us and those on a small platform. When we get near the front of the pool we are motioned to a stop by Gero.

~Roo, please enter the pool.~

Number four, don't trust a male. ~Why?~ And I have too many reasons to distrust this male in particular.

~It is part of the process of introduction of one spiritual leader to another. It is a great honor in this culture to be invited to use the sacred pool.~

~Then Sussi and Mandhi may join me.~

~Roo, sorry, just you.~

~We are Triad. We have our own customs to be aware of.~

~It is alright Roo. We will stay at the side in case anything happens.~ That sounds like a good idea. No point risking all three of us at once.

I make my way to the pool. I carefully remove my shoes, pouch belt and shader. The water is crystal clear and inviting. I taste the water. Just the right amount of salt. A strange aftertaste, but I so much want to be in this water that I slip in and spread out. I am afraid that the pool is not crystal clear any longer. I make my way underwater and breathe deep. My mind and muscles are feeling strange. Good, but strange. I feel like I am about to go into the rest state.

This never happens in normal salted water. There is something in the water! There is no time to signal for help. Barely able to concentrate I

bubble myself to the water world and swim out of the bubble. I am near the surface. I stop the bubble. I am lucky that on both worlds I was underwater. The water from the pool in my system is quickly diluted with the salt water of this world. This water tastes bad and will eventually send me into spawning sickness if I don't get sick from the toxics first. I don't intend to stay that long. As soon as my ganglia are fully receptive again, I bubble back with another rush of water.

What I had not accounted for was the fact that while in the water world I had not remained still. I find myself outside the hall with huge amounts of water from my bubble around me. I stop the bubble. A few people have come outside to see what is going on. Sussi and Mandhi push past them to get to me.

~Mag dipping idiots!~ I scream. ~The water in the pool was full of magnesium chloride and who knows what else. I was barely able to get out in time. I will not enter that hallway again.~

~You made your point Roo. Everyone inside was soaked with the most foul tasting water. Looks like all the garden plots from here to the sea are also ruined.~ Must have been the depth difference, though I was nearly on the surface there as well. I look where the water I brought back from me has gone. Not that much really and most of that is going down the path and not into anyone's garden.

~I am tired of being left out in the sun. If they want me to participate they need to explain what is going on and why. The next male that gets near me is likely to find himself on Pink.~ I make my way away from everyone. The rest seem preoccupied with dealing with the mess I made anyway. Good.

I find that I have unconsciously gone to the ceramics area. Without thinking much I finish loading the kiln and light the gas jets. This is a very simple crude kiln without all the automatic controls I have become used to. I only know because we all learned on one like this before being allowed to do a run on the newer one. It will take several eighths to reach temperature. Would not want to go too fast anyway. Everything would break. Not that I am thinking about being that nice.

An eighth later someone approaches. I see that it is Atal. She carries a bundle on her mantle. When she gets near me I see that it is my shoes and pouch belt. She has also brought some food of some kind. I thank her profusely. It was not her fault I know.

We sit and eat in silence. I would not have understand her anyway. I go back to the kiln several times to make adjustments to a few of the jets. This is good. Mussels of some kind. I will have to remember that these Windy Bay mussels are so good. I notice that I am eating most of it and she very little. I force myself to stop and pretend that I am full. Not half,

but it would not be good for me to eat so much after having so little for so long.

She waits to be sure I will not change my mind and then has several hands in the stew. She is as hungry as I was.

I glance at the kiln again to see that everything is going as expected. There seems to be a slight flickering. I look underneath to see that all the jets are fully active though one seems to be plugged partially. I find the cleaner wire and add it to a long ceramic pole and clean the jet. The pressure is low from the composter so this is not too hard to do. Takes a steady hand and patience is all. When I come out with soot on my mantle I see Atal has been watching the entire process. I would have done the same.

We sit together in silence. We are not alone for too long.

~There you are Roo. It is getting dark. At least come in and get some rest. You haven't really slept in several days.~

~Sussi translate for Atal so she knows what is going on. I would want the same in her position.~

~She says that is why they rest in the hot time of day. The fifth and sixth eighths.~

~That is where everyone was. I am staying here tonight. I started the kiln, I will finish it. It should reach final temperature before sunrise.~

~Can't someone else do that?~

~Nope. I am the only journey level ceramicist in the place.~

~It is never easy with you Roo.~

~It not so easy with the situations I keep getting into. I don't do any of this intentionally. I would much rather be home in a nice wet dark bed.~

~So would we all Roo.~ Mandhi has found me too. ~What's going on?

~

~I'll fill you in. Roo is staying here tonight.~ Sussi says.

~Then we are too. No more surprises.~ Mandhi is not giving up on me.

Atal is tugging at Sussi. It is starting to get dark, but we have some light from the gas jets.

~Atal wants to know what happened at the hall.~

~A big mistake.~ Not all of them were mine.

The four of us sit watching the jets flicker and heat the kiln.

Soon we have another visitor. An unwanted one this time. Gero.

~Roo, why did you do that? You nearly killed their shaman with the water jet.~

I remain silent hoping he will give up and go away. When he tries to get closer, Sussi and Mandhi block him.

~Gero, leave now or forever regret your ever having met us.~

~I did not know about the pool Roo.~ He leaves. Then how does he know now? It would have been far too dilute to taste. I barely did.

There is a full moon tonight. Beautiful, I hope someone is enjoying it. Crab, I forgot. They die at spawning. It may be a joyous event. There is a natural desire to mate. Otherwise how would we survive as a species? But, I nearly died myself. I have no idea why I survived. I certainly expected to die. A fate better than mating with Freng. Crab, I hope he has given up his search for us. A few days here might actually be a good idea. Will take that long to let the kiln cool properly at least.

I find my way to the slip pot. The clay has separated to leave water on the surface. It will need to be stirred up again. I find the paddle and begin. Sure enough Atal is right with me. She pushes me aside and takes over. She has done this before. Certainly strong for someone this small. Someone smaller than me actually.

~Show Atal that she can't do everything. I need to do some work to get rid of my anger.~

~I have a better idea. I have seen what you do with the gas jets and obviously Atal has as well. We will take turns tending the kiln and you get some rest. You can stay right here and if anything happens we will rouse you.~

~I am a little nervous, not having used this particular kiln before.~

~We will be right here Roo.~ Sussi steps in.

~Okay." I curl up next to Sussi and Atal. Last thing I notice was Mandhi watching the gas jets. Very pretty in their own way.

Day 12

When I become aware of my surroundings again, Mandhi is next to me and Atal is tending the kiln. She is careful and diligent. I really have nothing to worry about. I go up to the site glass and check. The lower melting point clay used to check the temperature is starting to lean over. We have reached the correct temperature. I go over to the valve and close it. The jets go out. I then lead Atal in the dark back to the other two.

I do not let her know that I am done resting. When everything is quiet and I no longer sense any movement from her, other than breathing, I quietly leave.

The rest of the settlement is silent. They are definitely not as curious as they would be back home. No stranger would every be allowed as I am to wonder about alone in the dark. Well, almost dark. The full moon actually gives lots of light. Now it is over the water. I walk towards the moon and the water. It is the easiest way. With the convoluted paths it is the only way.

Soon enough I am on the beach and away from the homes. I decide to follow the shore. Long and flat. The tide must really move in this place. Does it work the same way in a bay? It should right? In or out? Does not matter really.

There is something up ahead. I can see a glint of moon light off the edges. I nearly run into it. Hard to judge distance in the low light. Rock. I make my way around to the other side. Sand and silt all the way around. This is something on the side away from the moon. I can't see a thing and I am not willing to wait here till sunrise.

I feel with my arms and hands. It feels familiar. I reach out as far as I can trying to get an idea of the size. That is when I find the sphere and the face shield. This is one of those Nauti altars. What is it doing here? There was no altar on this world to match the one on our world. Is this it? That's a long way to move it if it is. Why move it? Without seeing it I can't be sure it is even the same one. Too big to be the one inside the structure. Could be the one on the outside, but that one was destroyed before we got there.

There is no point to staying here. The Nauti shield is set to the east. Must be a reason. No, not that Nauti itself. It is set north technically. The mantel of the altar is turned to the east. I think I am still tired. This whole adventure is too much. Like some large insane broken shell.

I continue north in the direction of the Nauti. Why did I know the right signal to give Paff's people? There is something missing that I am not getting. Gero, may he melt in a very large cook pot, knows more, but

is not saying. He is my first candidate to be Pinked.

False dawn. I can see a little more, which is good, since the moon is about to set. The sun lights up clouds high in the sky. Might be another half eighth before the actual sun arrives. Another structure. I taste smoke in the air. A home? So far away from the others? Curse my curiosity.

I make my way up to the operculum of the home. It is open and I can see a small flame heating a pot inside. A shadow moves against the wall. I whistle a greeting and the shadow stops for a moment. I politely wait outside.

A shape emerges. She is not wearing any shoes, but is wearing what look like leaves in a band about the top of her mantle.

~Hello! Please come in Roo. I have been expecting you.~

~You speak my, ah, language.~

~I speak many languages. Yes, many.~ I count Ancient, our own and possibly this local variant. How many more are there?

I make my way to the opening. Inside the walls are white. I taste the one closest to me. Shell dust. Crushed abalone and mussels are embedded in patterns. No idea of what.

~Please be well. I will have food in a moment.~ The air tastes good. She is good at her estimate and begins serving the seafood stew. She hands me one of the bowls. I will have to wait a bit for it to cool some. I know heating kills parasites, but I can't handle anything at this temperature.

~That's strange. This bowl is made from the new insulating foamed ceramic. Hard to work with, but much lighter. The shape looks familiar too. Where did you get this?~ I continue to turn it a round to see all the sides. I hold it over my head to see who the artist is. Me! ~What the?~

~You like it? Very interesting shape.~

~I made this bowl.~

~Ah, then you understand. Please eat. There is still time yet.~

~Time for what? Why is everyone playing catch and release with me?

~

~Hmm, maybe because it is so much fun. We have so little fun in our lives. Day after day hunt for food, hope the mating urge does not take you this moon. Try not to hurt anyone. Try to figure out what it all means. You are lucky one. Yes, very lucky.~

~What do you mean lucky? Do you know what I have been through?~

~Yes, but your path is clear. So few have that privilege.~

~What good is that if I don't know what path that is?~ She is worse than Gero, teasing me this way. I can almost feel her hands around me ready to impart the death bite.

~Ah, but others know your path. That is enough. Very lucky.~

~Why is that lucky?~ I realize I will get no where getting mad at her. I have to play the game to gain any information.

~Because everyone is helping you dear. Come, finish your food. We greet the morning.~ Greet the morning? Why? I hurry up and eat my now cooled food.

~Would you please show me what is going on?~

~First we greet the morning.~ She goes out the operculum. When I come out, she motions to me, ~You stay here and watch greeting. Someday you will do the same. Good place to watch.~

She goes a little ways towards the shore. I can see the water behind her as the light grows. She is very patient and waits till just before the first rays descend on her. I can see where they have already reached the water behind her.

Then she begins. She raises her front arms and dances. Slowly at first she sways back and forth and then an intricate pattern emerges. It reminds me of Sussi's group's percussion section, only there are no skins stretched over large shells. When the light hits her, all her arms are raised in the spread pattern that I had assumed myself to greet the pretend land Nauti. She holds that position till she is fully in the light. Slowly the arms curl up and she finishes.

I make to join her, but she motions me to stay where I am. ~Now I will answer any questions.~

~What is going on? Why am I here?~

~To answer that question I want you to do something for me. I want you to show me your version of how we came to be.~

~Version? I know of only one answer.~

~I will translate into proper Ancient so you may learn this language more properly. Begin.~ She then waits. Patiently.

~Ah, okay. Um, let me try and remember. We have been sentient for more than a million years. Written language for several hundred thousand years and our modern era began about fifty thousand years ago.

How far back do you want me to go?~

She remains blank.

~The Nauti and the People both lived in the sea. We were both descended from a common ancestor hundreds of millions of years ago. We lived more on the bottom of the sea and they lived in the water column itself. We lived in peace for a very long time. Trade flourished and knowledge was exchanged.

Then something happened, we don't know what or why, but we were suddenly forced under penalty of death to leave the sea. They outnumbered us by many times. We had no choice. We changed ourselves with the genomic tech we had, to adapt ourselves better, but the

process was not completed before our research was destroyed by the Nauti. A period of chaos followed and much knowledge was lost along with most of the people. Shells of knowledge written in the shallow hand did not prove stable enough to endure the time of chaos and we had to start over with the few deep hand shells remaining. Of course Nauti would also destroy or take any shells they found.

On land was the only place we could find that was safe from the Nauti, their heavy shells preventing them, but we paid a terrible price. We still had to return to the sea to reproduce. Having lost our genomic skills during the chaos we had no choice. Being in the sea however meant we needed to do something to insure that our eggs were not stolen and eaten by the Nauti. We had to stay with our eggs until hatching. This took a heavy toll on the spawners. Most died of the spawning sickness. We needed to form Triads because of the excess of females and to help ensure that our knowledge would last beyond our spawning time. Males for some reason were not as strong and most did not make it out of the sea. Could have been because the change to land was rushed.

We have been at war with the Nauti ever since. No one remembers the original reason. We do the best we can but it is not an easy life. Our knowledge expands slowly and we hope at some point to be able to return to the sea."

~Very good Roo. That is what I remember of your version.~ She says this in Ancient, but having just seen her translate everything I showed, I can read it fairly well. Not that different really. It will be some time before I can show it though.

~I will now show you what you want to know. I will start with the true version.~ The true version? Bad enough there is a second, but she claims it is the true version?

~We start at the beginning then. This was the time before written shells, so we can't be sure of how accurate it is. Knowledge was passed down by showing stories. Not a very reliable means across so long a time period.

At this time the Nauti and the People were the same. There was a ruler, Lakpu the Great. Since this was before the time of separation I will use the she pronoun even though she was both female and male.

Before Lakpu the Great was a vast expanse of time beyond remembering. Practitioners of the art of reading the layers have estimated this time to be in the hundreds of millions of years. At which time we branched off from the other cephalopods and molluscs.

Back to Lakpu. Lakpu the Great thought long and hard on how she could help the people. She called in specialists of all kinds. She sent observers throughout the world. They all came back with one thought,

something that had never been tried before. It would be a wondrous achievement. Besides the abundant plant life of the strangest descriptions, only the lowest of molluscs and crustaceans lived there according to optics experts. They had made experimental devices for seeing into this place. They could not see far and even getting to the observation points was sometimes extremely hazardous.

Life, movement and geo scientists were called upon. How would it be possible to breathe, to move, to see? What about protection from predators? There were many problems to be solved, but there was also time. Attempts were made to make special enclosures to carry people into this new environment, but all attempts proved unreliable.

Long past the time of Lakpu the Great the task was accomplished. A new life form would be produced. It would be based on the most intelligent life form known, themselves, but there would be changes. The mantle would be less open and the gills fastened to the inner walls. The new form would be able to breathe underwater and in the air. To make of themselves a creature capable of living in the new environment, at least part of the time.

A problem arose. Once in the new environment what would prevent this new person from abandoning them? All that effort and they might never know what the new ones experienced. To prevent this new creature from losing all contact with the people several changes were made. They were subtle, but important.

A few millennia later they were ready. Several hundred of the new people were formed. They lived in a buffer zone between the water of the people and the water of the new environment, the rainwater people they were called.

Being of a smaller number and not as mobile, it was necessary to invent a reliable means of preserving knowledge and making it transportable. In that way, one person could carry the knowledge of many. Thus shell writing was invented. These shells could be dropped at regular intervals back into the water of the People. Then everyone would benefit from the discoveries of their great adventurers.

The rainwater people left the brackish water of the between space and ventured onto land.~

It is hard work relating to this story. My ganglia hurt. She pauses to allow both of us to catch our minds. She knows a lot more than I have ever been told, but is it really true? She begins again.

~Living on land was difficult. Many new technologies needed to be developed. They persevered and gradually, very slowly, their numbers increased. It proved too difficult to go further inland than a narrow band along the shore. From there, small groups could venture inland and

explore further, but could not be further than the curse allowed.

The curse, as it came to be called was the need to be near the shore for mating and reproduction. The second part of the curse was the separate genders. Together the amount of energy needed to produce enough gametes to overcome the hazards and chances of the temporary life of abandonment in the sea meant that most people, as they called themselves, died after their young hatched. It was not until the wisdom of the Triad was found that this death sentence was overcome. That is getting ahead of ourselves though.

So many died young that it was hard to pass on necessary skills and wisdom. The very few that survived were unable to reproduce again as they lost their reproductive glands along with their spawning. These few became the first leaders of our culture. It was soon found that by spending limited amounts of time in the salt of the sea alternated with limited time in the rainwater the mating sickness was prevented. We still needed a certain amount of salt to stay healthy.

To allow us to travel further than the shore we found we could concentrate the necessary minerals from the sea into a powder and carry it with us in what became our salt pouches. The moonstones, which were at first pebbles of the right size and weight, were added later to prevent caking of the salt. As I showed earlier, it was not possible to carry enough salt to ensure mating, hatching and development up to the crawly stage, but we could carry enough to maintain an adult's health for short periods of time.

Which brings us to another problem. Because of the need to expel all of our spawn in one session, hundreds of thousands of hatchlings come forth. Though fewer made it to the crawly stage, more than enough did than could be ensured a livelihood, especially after all the available coastline that could be lived in was settled. A means was found. It was not ideal, but it is thought that before the age of the unseen, the crawly was not really conscious enough to be called sentient. Protein is protein. As I showed, not an ideal solution, but one we were forced into. By the way, males survive only slightly less in numbers than females. I will get to that in a moment.

That was when the resentment began. We asked to be returned to the sea and rejoin the others. They showed it was a one way trip and there was no way to return. They thanked us for giving them so much information on the land environment and hoped we would continue our investigations.

We did not realize that the sea was equally crowded and hard to live in. It always looks better on the other side of the water interface. They thought we lived in a paradise without predators and we thought they

lived in a watery paradise without the hazards of the sun, insects and food production.

But, we were angered. As a young species we felt we had been wronged. We stopped sending the shells of what we had learned.~

~How do you know all this? You a less advanced technical culture here.~

~We are less 'advanced' as you say because we choose to be. Technology is not the answer to every question. Every action has a cost. I will let you decide when this is over if technology is worth the cost.

But as to how we know, simple, we asked them."

~Who?~

~The Nauti of course.~ I ink, though I should have guessed. Why else would they dress in Nauti costumes and apparently used Nauti rituals.

~What now?~

~Your world is different from ours. You have chosen a different path. It is instructive for us to have met though. There may come a time when we will mistakenly attempt a similar path. Best to be warned don't you think?

Well, it is time to bring the others in before we continue. Please, Sussi and Mandhi come down and be with us.~

~What?~ I leave the entrance and go around to the side of the home. Not only are Sussi and Mandhi coming towards me, but it looks like the entire settlement was here to 'greet the morning' as she showed. That's the real reason she translated everything into Ancient. The others are leaving.

~Where are they going?~

~Back to their lives and work Roo. We were all told to come down and see a recital of the creation story. For the benefit of everyone she first told the story that we had learned on our world. I wondered how she knew that. It was you who told her?~

~Yes. I thought she was just translating everything I showed into Ancient so that I could learn the language.~

~I was translating for Roo, but even I am allowed to catch two crabs with one offal pot. Now that the others have left we have much to show about.~

She goes into her home and comes back out with four shaders. She hands one to each of us and beckons us to follow.

We make our way further north and then inland. Uphill to the top of a small hill overlooking the bay. We stop.

~This is far enough. Please be comfortable.~

~Why here?~

~This is where you will need to be to successfully re-enter your world to fulfill your purpose. Remember this spot. I have marked it with these

rocks in a Holy Circle pattern.~

~You have been there? How?~

~Roo, in this world, you mated and died. Another was chosen to take your place. The difference is that I went willingly and was not forced early by the polluters. I went consciously and knowingly. On your world, they intended you to die. It was only your decision to go deeper that saved you.~

~How come you both were needed to fulfill this prophesy? Your world is in no danger, so why did you go?~ Good question Sussi.

~You almost answered your own question. We were both needed because you needed me to be here to teach you what was missed. I don't know the particulars, but my guess is that while under the spawning sickness Roo did not remember all that was told to her. This may come back in time, especially now that you know more of what happened.~

~What exactly did happen?~

~I can only show you what happened to me. I was chosen as the alternate by our Sufi and Gero. This was known even before Roo mated. No one blamed Roo for her choice. To give up forever the chance to have offspring is not an easy choice.~

~I made the same choice you did! I remember as I swam deeper and deeper that I would rather die than mate.~

~They understood that Roo. That is why they took you in. Had you been there for selfish reasons you would have been left to die.

I made that same journey. The difference is that having been prepared I was given a dart from the Nauti that prevented the spawning sickness. In your case the sickness must have already been upon you. At least you never need fear it again.~

~What?~ All this time I have been fearful of the water and I was immune? Normally anyone who has been through the spawning sickness will avoid the water. You don't get a second chance.

~What about us?~

~I don't know. We don't have a counterpart for you two on this world. You could sit in a shallow tide pool to test it if you want.~ I am not even convinced myself. I will not sacrifice Sussi and Mandhi to a theory.

~What happens now?~ I ask. No more surprises.

~I want to know if Gero was right? Is there some kind of technological leak from one of these alternate worlds?~

The shaman looks startled, ~Gero did not show you that. You are very astute to have deduced it.~ Sussi is good.

~She is good at that kind of thing. Gero told us that our culture was adding tech faster than it should be. He showed nothing of the cause.~

~That gives an idea of what to look for though. Some one is making

bubbles for them. We are not the only ones capable of making them.~

~The universe is a big place. Best to keep an open mind. There is also the theory of synchronicity.~

~Did a shaman from a low tech culture just use that word?~

~I think she did.~

~Okay, what is sync whatever?~

~It means that a seemingly impossible set of conditions has happened made up of many many conditions that are in and of themselves not so strange.~

~Like flipping a sand dollar. Let's say you flip one seven times and get mouths. What are the odds of getting pattern on the next flip?~

~Very likely the test is weighted. What are the odds of getting eight mouths in a row. Very, very low.~

~Ah, you are right and you are wrong. You are right that the odds of getting eight mouths in a row are very low, two to the eighth in fact, or about one in two hundred and fifty six.~ More math than I can follow.

~Unless someone cheated.~

~We are assuming a perfect test for this argument. The point is, is that you are wrong. The odds of getting a mouth is one in two, not one in two hundred and fifty six.~

~How do you figure that?~

~Simple. I showed that they already flipped seven times as mouths. That part of the odds that are one chance in one hundred and twenty eight. The hard part is done. All I asked for was the odds on the last flip. The odds are in fact one in two, because it is the same as any flip that you do.~

~You are saying that the odds of all this tech happening are very, very low, but because it has happened, it is possible.~

~Yep. It does not really matter how it got to be. It is and we have to do something about it.~

~Four people against who knows what odds?~

~Three. I am staying here. I have brought you to an understanding, but I may be involved again later.~

~If we survive.~ No one needs to say anything.

~Do we have to go right away?~

~Why do you ask Mandhi? Is there something you want to bring with us?~

~I for one would like a real night's rest and some more food.~

~I hear they are serving us black limpet tonight.~ Sussi adds.

~With jelly fish sauce?~

~I am glad that recipe made it from the coast.~

~Only we use the little blue jelly fish. They get trapped in the bay by

the millions this time of year. If you look out on the water you can see them right now. We wait till they wash up on shore. Not as fresh, but easier than risking the sickness.~

~You don't have boats? Certainly that is not new tech.~

~We have flat boats that we can use when the surf is as low as it is now, but so many wash up that it really is not necessary. Too shallow near the shore for anything else. Regular traders come by of course, but they don't bring in food, mostly raw materials we don't have. We use the our flat boats to go out to meet them.~

~An easy life it sounds like.~

~Not really. The winter storms are still a problem. Not to mention the summer heat. Too few trees this close to the water. A good storm and high tide can wipe out many homes just when we need them most.~

~There is safety in the group.~ That is for sure.

~I need to check in with Atal. Not right to start something and not finish it.~ I signal goodbye to the others. We will meet up later. I don't want to miss the black limpets. On the coast it would just be an everyday meal, but after a week of dried snails I am enjoying normal food again.

Of course I get lost trying to find the ceramics area. My Ancient and ego don't let me ask directions. It is fun to see the homes and work areas more slowly though. Not that different from our own homes. I would be comfortable here.

Suddenly I see a green shape flash by me. It runs between several homes and then I see it on top of the one across the path. The strange creature from the other world. I hope they have separate genders. That thing is so fast there would be nothing here that could catch it. It is picking off insects apparently. Good at it too. That would be useful.

I hear a whistle and turn to see Sarra and Paff. Sarra is flashing, ~Get back here green menace.~ He waves a piece of fresh cow slug, ~Look I have a nice piece of meat.~ Wonder where he got that and if there is any more? The menace seems interested and watches Sarra waving it back and forth. Quicker than I can see it is off the top of the home and down in the street. Once it reaches Sarra it jumps into the air and latches onto the meat and hangs on by its mouth slit. Sarra raises the meat and menace higher into the air but it is clearly not going to let go. He finally lowers the two of them to the ground.

The piece of meat is half the size of the creature, but it works at it, biting off small pieces until it gets it all in. The middle of the large segment is noticeably distended. Not moving so fast now, Paff picks it up.

~Works as long as the cow holds out.~ She says in Ancient, ~But what happens when it grows?~ Crab, I hope it does not get as big as the

large ones we met. We really need to return it to its own home. Ugly little thing.

~Paff, which way to the ceramics area?~ She does not understand our language that well. I make the shape of a pot with my hands.

She gets it, ~That way.~

I take off in the direction indicated. She used to live in this community on our world. That is assuming they have not moved it for some reason. Might actually be easier to move that small kiln than the compost field. Fortunately I soon recognize where I am and find the kiln.

~Atal, thank you for watching the kiln.~ She looks at me not understanding. I look at the kiln and everything is fine. I then try to shoo her away, but she refuses.

~We have an entire day to ourselves. What shall we do?~ I look around. I see some curved molds and go over to them. Atal is watching every move. ~I wonder what these are for?~

Atal tugs at me. I turn to look at her and she says, ~Top of home.~ Top of home? I look towards the nearest home. Looks the same color as the surrounding earth. I walk across the path and examine it more closely. The color is from the dust, as I brush it off I see the plates underneath. It must take a lot of these to do an entire home. How many kiln runs for each home times how many homes? I guess the real question is how long do they last. I walk down the path. I find one of the older homes and brush off the dust. There are small cracks in this tile. It is starting to break down. So, if nothing else they can certainly use more of them. I don't like to not be working. I think I have found my task.

I go back to the ceramics area. I uncover the kneading table and start to clean it off. Atal starts to help. I point to the slip pots. She understands this time and starts to bring them over. Heavy. She has to roll them on their edges to do it. She does not give up easy. Good. Now the fun part, I use a broken shard to scoop gobs of very soft clay and water mix onto the kneading table.

It was not long ago I was doing this because I had to. Now I am kneading clay again because I want to. It would be so easy to stay here.

As we finish a batch I show Atal how to fill the molds and she takes over that part. They will have to rest there for a few days. Then they can be removed to dry completely. That part could take several eight days. Once dried they go into the kiln. I remember a few were in the lower part of the kiln run we finished loading. They probably only do them now when they need to, to replace broken ones. I always preferred to have backup ready before the crisis happens. Does it rain here in the summer? Rare at home. All we get is lots of fog.

Rain. We just came off the rainy season and the homes should be

washed clean. So how come they are covered in dust so thick we can't see the tiles? Atal nudges me she is ready for more clay. I need to concentrate if I am going to keep up with her. Why is everything not as it seems?

Thinking back on our conversation of earlier. That would mean that the pool contained seawater, maybe a little more concentrated to speed up the effect. It was just a test to see if I had been cured of spawning sickness, that I really had been to the Nauti and not somehow stumbled on the gift by accident. When you think about it, it was a good test. But since I could not have deceived them by pretending not to be sick, why keep it a secret? Maybe because the shaman did not know that I did not know why the pool was there. Well, since I bubbled seawater for seawater and suffered no ill effects I guess I pass.

How would Sussi and Mandhi do? Is our ability related to whatever the Nauti gave me or is it our understanding of the bubble process? I certainly don't want to test it on the other hand knowing would be useful in case we need to use the sea as an escape route. It is very peaceful here but I know that soon we will have to go back to our own home. We really do not belong here.

~We are done! All the molds are full.~ Atal then does a strange thing. She goes over to the nearest redwood tree and removes a few new branches. She then uses the leaves to press a design into the surface of the clay. I get the idea and find a few cones. I press these into the pattern she has made at occasional locations, not every one. Just like a real tree. When done we carefully move them to the drying shed and stack them with blocks between so they don't touch. I feel like I have actually done something positive.

I flashed too soon. There is a crab coming down the path a bit erratic with Mandhi on top. I hide against the wall. I really don't like crabs. She is barely able to keep it on the path. About seven arms out she goes off the path and nearly runs it up the side of the home. She hangs on tight and backs it off the home. No one home fortunately. Everyone works this time of day. Again I am wrong. An arm and then a person comes out the operculum. Their skin has seen a lot of sun. Old? Not that big, so size is not a clue.

Mandhi comes to a stop near us, slips off the crab then ropes and stakes the crab to the ground. Twice. Seems like over doing it. The crab shows some resistance and nearly pulls free. I guess not. It finally quiets down when Mandhi gives it a treat to work on.

~Not the same as ours. They really have almost no tech. This crab has only manual controls and has not been genetically subdued. If I had not had years of experience I would not have gotten here. Yet they ride them like they are the tamest creatures on the planet.~

~We have been here all morning. Atal and I worked to get some roof tiles ready. In a few weeks she will be able to fire them and they will be ahead of their need for the next rain season.~

~I have spent all morning trying to find the motion studies lab. It does not exist. Or rather, it is not seen as anything special. I found craft centers that make simple machines from wood and stone, but they each only make one device and show no interest in how or why it works.~

~No research.~

~None. There is a life studies area, but they are more interested in crops and medicines than in evolution or genetics. The same with the reaction studies. What ever they need to do a task and no more.~

~They have any curiosity at all?~

~Their craft area concerning location studies is actually more advanced than ours. The entire bay is plotted out in a map with this settlement at the center. There are two large rivers that feed the bay and only a narrow opening to the ocean itself. What is even more impressive is the detail in the bay itself.~

~You mean islands?~

~No, under water.~

~The shaman is the only one immune to the salt. There is no way she could have mapped the entire bay.~

~I don't think she did. I think she was given the information.~

~The Nauti.~ It is not a question.

~They did the land and the Nauti gave them the bay. They probably trade a lot of other information as well.

Problem is I don't know how that is done. They have no far seerers. No terminals. No communication means at all. Not even signal flags on hill tops.~

Whoa, we all learned that old method as unseen. Similar to far hand show. Hiding the body and only using one hand visible made for a smaller target. You really had to know where the other person was to see the signals.

Atal tugs at me, ~Time for afternoon rest.~

~Where is Sussi?~

~I left her with the art and music group. They do have that at least.~ I would imagine that the flute has not changed that much at least.

~You two go ahead. I want to stay here a bit longer. This is the one place in the settlement that I feel most comfortable.~ I want to enjoy this feeling a little longer. Atal was reluctant to go, but Mandhi thankfully tugged at her till she did.

Alone. Normally that would be a scary feeling, but this time it feels good. I really should rest as the rest of them are, but I am drawn back to

the clay.

I find a lump about the right size. For what I don't know, but it is as if I already see a shape there waiting to become. I look away and work with just my hands. I don't want to prejudice the outcome. I really don't have to do anything of course. I have done my work for the day and earned my evening meal. This is for me.

There is a sort of trance you get into when doing something creative and I want that trance so badly. I soon lose all track of time, place and being. There is just the clay and my hands. There is no separation. There is only the form coming to life. All is the form. There is nothing but the form. Only the form.

I have no idea how long I am under the influence. Only the form.

I feel someone showing to my hands. ~Roo time to go. They expect all of us at the gathering hall.~

I look around. I am not next to the table I was working at any longer. I am at the opening to the drying shed. Blocking the opening in fact. Strange. I move out of the way and Atal rushes in. She comes out a moment later waving her hands and arms frantically. Mandhi goes past me to see what Atal wants.

She comes out a moment later, ~Roo, what did you do? It is incredible! I have never seen anything like it. I thought you only did strange pots and abstract sculptures. Ah, not really abstract now that I understand, but definitely abstract as far as anyone else is concerned.~

I barely read what she is saying and look past her to the disc holding what I must have done, only I don't remember doing it. Before me is a sculpture of an adult Nauti. I have seen them before. Sailors carve them out of wood and shells.

The shaman shows up, ~I know this Nauti. Who did this?~ Atal and Mandhi both indicate me.

~It is perfect. All of the ridges and patterns are perfect. I have never seen a work of clay so close to reality. It is as if at any moment the figure will come alive and speak to me again. The conversations we used to have. I miss s/he very much.~ She then turns and leaves the ceramics area. Mandhi and Atal tug me to go with them. I glance back at the sculpture now resting with the rest of the materials drying. How could I have done that? I wish I could remember what happened when I was under the sickness. I suspect it would go a long way to explaining what is happening.

~You must not have gotten any rest at all. I have seen people work on sculptures for weeks and get less detail than what you have done.~

~Actually I feel very rested. It is like I have been resting for an eight day in fact. Very strange. Everything looks like I am seeing color for the

first time. When did you get that bite Mandhi? Looks fresh.~

~All kinds of things are drawn to crab 'offerings' unfortunately.~

~Where is the evil beast now?~ Just making conversation.

~I hope in the cook pot, though I did not put him there, as much as I would have liked to.~ Nice to see Mandhi is not good at all things crab.

~We are having black limpet still or is it crab now.~

~Black limpet. The crab is fine.~ We walk the rest of the way in silence, though I can barely contain myself. I feel bad for Mandhi but am relieved that not all the bad things seem to be happening to just me.

Finally I ask, ~Where is Sussi?~

~There is she is up ahead of us.~ Mandhi whistles our Triad call sign and Sussi turns to look for us. We both raise arms and she sees us. She waits as the others to go past till we catch up.

~What have you been doing Roo?~

~I could ask you the same.~

~She did the most incredible sculpture Sussi. You would not believe it. The shaman showed it is almost alive. The strangest part is that she did it in only an eighth.~

~I would like to see it. I already love the other sculptures you have done Roo.~

~This is not a nine dimensional representation. Only a three dimensional one.~

When we get inside the shaman waves us over to her circle. Gero and the two Kerrs are with her. It started out to be a good afternoon. Too bad. I purposely choose to sit next to the shaman, Mandhi sits next to me. I will not sit next to Gero.

There is a shallow bowl with a small fire underneath. The limpet stew looks good. I look around. Others are scooping sand on their fires to put them out. I look at ours and suddenly with a whoosh, it is gone. A bubble! I turn to my right. The shaman of course. How did she do that? Fire can't leave the bubble on its own. When the bubble collapsed it, it should return. What kills fire? Lack of air, or water. I feel the sand where it was. Not water. The coals are still there, still warm in fact. No flames though. I wave my hand over the coals a few times and a flame returns.

She hand signals me, ~There is one world with no air. Use a very small brief bubble if you don't want to end up sucked into it.~

~Thanks.~ I signal back. I remember that world from my searching out of curiosity. The flames have returned so I try myself. The flame whooshes out as expected. I hold it open too long though. It makes too much sound. It will take practice. I add some water from the water world. The flame will not return.

Everyone else has already scooped some into small bowls. The is

plenty though. I scoop some into the remaining bowl. I pass a hand over the top. Too hot still, but tastes good. I bring it to my mantle and blow on it to cool it faster.

~Roo can't eat anything hot.~

~She does it correctly. Hot is not good for digestion. Best not to cook oneself.~

~Kills parasites.~

~Kaga root kills parasites.~

~Please, I am trying to eat here.~ Kaga makes you throw up and eliminate waste rapidly at the same time. A most unpleasant experience. A favorite punishment for any unseen who misbehaves.

~It is time for me to go. I will return afterwards.~ Sussi gets up and leaves.

~Where is she going?~

~I don't know. I was occupied myself all day.~

~It is time for us to go as well.~ Gero and the two Kerrs get up. I start to rise, but the shaman holds Mandhi and I back. I look around. No one else is getting up, but I see a few spaces are empty that were once full of people. This hall could hold at least twice as many. Where is everyone else? I wish I could remember from yesterday. How many people were here then?

I absentmindedly finish the rest of the larger bowl. Better than dried slugs. Someone goes to the center area. The pool is covered with a platform now. They light several gas lamps. The lamps get really bright. Must have a mantel. That would seem to be fairly high tech? I wish I could remember my history better. Not that I trust it any more. How much was changed to hide our sudden increase in tech?

I turn to the shaman. I wish I knew her name, but she has no tattoo. Clearly too large to be an unseen. I have seen them scurrying about cleaning up. One is coming here to remove our bowl.

I turn to the Shaman, ~Excuse me. What should I call you?~

~Anything you want.~

~Shaman then. You seem to be the only one here.~

~That is not true, but I will answer to shaman for now.~

~You were going to show me about the males. What happened to them on our world?~

~Ah. They are still alive.~ She thinks for a moment. ~They were alive at least to the unseen age. From there they were moved to another location. You will see for yourself soon. The people who did this did a lot of work to hide their absence. This took more than a handful of people. The entire culture was involved.~

~Then how come I did not know?~

~You were not hatched on the coast Roo. You did not arrive there until you were already named. You missed a lot.~

I hand signal her, as Mandhi is on my other side, ~Then how come Sussi and Mandhi don't know?~ She remains silent. I don't believe they know. It is possible that not everyone knew what was going on. Most people would just go along with whatever the Matriarch told them to do.

Mandhi hands me, ~They are starting.~ I turn to the center. Several people have arranged themselves on the platform. One has raised several arms to gain attention. It is one of the Kerrs. He is larger than I remember our Kerr being.

~I am Kerr of this world. This is a showing.~ I am right. A shutter is thrown over the lights and the hall plunges into darkness. I look up. There is still some light in the sky I can see between the sparse roof. It must be because of the contrast from the sudden change in brightness. I look back to the platform and can see one person. The lights come back up.

~I am Roo. This is my story as it is known to this time and place on this world of many worlds.~ Another Roo? I look to the shaman confused.

~Participants in the real story are not allowed to play themselves. They know the story. A showing is so others will remember. What better way than to play the part of another?~ That makes sense.

~I was hatched in this very same bay, but on another world of the froth with a short DS coordinate from here.~ I did not understand half of that. What is the froth? ~My growing was unremarkable. As an unseen I worked in a ceramics research lab with a special emphasis on room temperature super conductors.~ I doubt the locals have any clue what that means.

~I advanced to apprentice on my naming day. My analysis of the self replicating bio ceramics assured my place on a tenure track.~ Now I doubt anyone in this room knows what that means. I certainly don't remember doing that work. Are they sure they have the right Roo? The part of my life before the spawning sickness is kind of vague. I just remembered I liked ceramics.

~There was a male by the name of Freng.~ The lights dim. I make a nasty sound. Mandhi pokes me.

When they come up again, a male is standing on the platform. Does not look like him fortunately. I relax to watch.

~I am not a bad person. I am loyal to the Patriarch. I work hard. I was part of a stable pairing.~ He was? Then why did he try for me? ~Politics being what they are I was caught up in the foibles of my mate. She was critical of some of the Patriarch's decisions. I warned her to be blank. Others could report us. She showed that we lived in a more relaxed

society and it was unlikely the Patriarch would even care about her. We are not in the ancient times any longer.~ Patriarch?

~She was wrong. The Patriarch did care. I was called before Him. My mate Leyh was bagged next to Him with several Guardians. It has been a long time since I had seen actual Guardians. I am told that unless I perform a task for Him, Leyh will become fertilizer for the fields and I would soon follow. I asked what was going on. He showed that our way of life was under attack from an outside group. If something was not done all would be lost. It was important to sacrifice one so that many could survive. I was to be the agent of that need. I was never told what this female had done. I was to drive her into the sea and wait to be sure she did not emerge again. She would die un-mated from the spawning sickness with no one to watch over her.~ The lights dim. That was not what I remembered. I am suspicious of this showing.

~I am Gero. I am a master of life studies. My home is on the coast. While an apprentice I used to come to the bay each year to study the people here and their ways. It was because of this study that I noticed the disparity between their level of technical understanding and ours. I showed to the sea traders who visited many communities. We were the only settlement at our level of tech and the main reason they came to us, as we really did not have anything else to trade.

These questions continued to intrigue me. I listened to the shamans of the bay community. There was something special here. They claimed to be able to communicate with the bay Nauti. Unfortunately their leaders were afraid of this connection as I rightfully thought they should be. But I was loyal to the Matriarch and reported my findings to Her and Her people each year.

I was called in before the Matriarch. Only it was not the Matriarch that I knew. A power struggle had disposed one and replaced her with another. Not an uncommon occurrence in our history. Surrounded by more Guardians than I had ever seen She informed me that I was not to go back to the bay community. We were at war with this community and it was no longer safe. That seemed strange to me, but I obeyed. I had only seen a few Guardians and fewer weapons or other preparations for war before this meeting.

Our males started to disappear. We had always been low in number. I assumed they were being recruited for the military. Being of the elite and bigger I was in no danger, as long as I behaved myself. All the same I made sure that my escape routes were intact and undiscovered. I stocked supplies when I could. Something did not feel true.

I was friends with one of the members of the Triad that I had serviced during their spawning. I barely survived. One of them did not. I sort of

became the missing member by default. She is a ceramics instructor by the name of Sufi. We spent time together when we were not teaching or doing research. She mentioned this one student she had by the name of Roo. Very promising work. Far ahead of any student she had ever had. Very creative.

The problem was that the entire ceramics section may either have to close soon or be converted to more practical pursuits if this war was real. I had not heard anyone else mention it, so I kept quiet. But I worried. Sufi and her remaining mate Fari knew about the escape path. I told them to be prepared.

A short time later Sufi came to me and described Roo's experience in the motion studies section. We both knew what it meant. They had solved the equations and created a froth bubble. Others had done this, but it was a clue to their identities. I told her what I had learned from the Bay people about the one who would come accompanied by two others who would save the Bay people. It was not until I saw Roo for the first time that I realized she was of the Bay people. That was the second clue.

It was two days later while I was visiting Sufi that it happened. Roo had achieved a froth bubble without any external means. Then her partners both came in claiming the same thing. There was no question in my mind that they were the ones. I needed to get them away quickly. They were still new to their abilities and would need more experience before they would be ready. Fortunately they were also wise enough to see the danger.~ Scared enough to ink you mean.

I knew the story at this point so decided to look around instead of pay too close attention. Mandhi and the shaman were still slimed to the story. It is dark outside with a full moon rising. I look for the others. The two Kerrs and Gero are sitting together. That leaves Sarra and Paff. Ah, there they are. They are at the entrance looking at the moon. Not a good idea. Better to ignore or hide from the moon when it is full.

I decide to give myself an examination. Crab, I have torn another sucker. Tear too many before they heal and you can't hold onto anything. Or I have to use my back arms for simple tasks. I am not as coordinated with them. I know, I should practice more with them, but there never seems to be enough time. I have bug bites all over me. Never got this many on the coast.

~Roo, watch please. It could be important.~ Mandhi pokes me.

~ . . . noticed Roo found the dark world. In that world the sea level is higher than it is here. We would be underwater right now if we were there. She got splashed on the mantel. She also called on this world when she thought the pool was magged.

I am only a life study researcher, so I don't understand the bubbles

myself. One aspect I find perplexing is how a bubble can show light from the other world. If the bubbled portion of that world is now in ours, it should be lit from our world not it's own world.~ Silly thought. He is still thinking in three dimensions instead of nine. Light behaves differently when porting the dimensional bubble. But how did I know that?

I am distracted again. This time I see a crawly of several years post landing. It is going between the groups of people searching for anything missed. Seems to be finding something to eat. I don't remember my life that far back, but I imagine it was similar. I really don't remember much from before coming to the coast.

There is someone strange next to us. I can't help but stare. Their skin has got lots of small folds in it. Another person is rubbing lotion on them. It is as if they have been in the sun a very long time. I have seen prisoners staked out in the sun. They die a horrible death, but they don't look this bad. That has to hurt. Whoa, they are too weak to apply the lotion themselves.

I quietly leave my group and go to them. Without a word I start to apply lotion as well. As I am doing this I notice more. A person over there is missing part of an arm. There is a horrible scar on the mantel of another. Almost everyone here has suffered in some way. They are all watching the story of my life to this point. What do they see? I am guessing now they see a very lucky person who has suffered very little. A person who is horribly ungrateful for what she is.

Everyone starts whistling. What's going on? I get back to Mandhi.

~Where have you been? You missed the best part.~ I lived it, how could it be better in the showing? ~Look Atal is bringing your sculpture to the platform.~ When she takes the cloth cover off there is a sudden silence. Then everyone lowers themselves to the ground and does that fan thing with their arms. This is not right. It is simply clay. They get up and turn towards us. Now what?

The shaman comments, ~You have seen the High Priestess. Only one other has seen her and lived.~

~If I have, I don't remember, so does it matter?~

~Clearly part of you remembers exceedingly well.~ Though I am getting used to it, she does show a little differently than we do, even in Ancient.

~Time to rest?~

~Not all of us worked during the afternoon Roo. Much more to come. Sussi has been up to something and I want to know what.~ Yes, that could be important.

There is a commotion at the entrance. I recognize the shell mantel adornments of sailors as the group comes in and makes their way to the

center. From an operculum that I was not aware of on the opposite side comes locals adorned in the local style. Their ornaments are made from carved wood and colored stones.

~There!~ I see where Mandhi is pointing and see Sussi. She is dressed in a way I have never seen before. There is brown cloth covering most of her mantle. To it leaves have been attached. She looking like a bush that is moving. Sort of like those moving hills we saw on pink. Color is wrong, but where would you get that color here? She has her flute at least. The rest look more normal. Not coast performer normal. Not important.

They start to play. I finally notice Paff, then Sarra. He is adorned as a local. Paff is not a local either technically, though she grew up in a similar community. They are both in the shell drum section. Just smaller drums. Locals are playing the Nauti drums. Huge things taller than a Matriarch. I like the low sounds it produces. Soon the ground is vibrating in a syncopated beat. The sailors are playing off the locals, who then respond.

I listen for awhile, but I am tired and soon lose my awareness. The last I hear is the shaman saying, ~Let her rest. If she can do so here with this much vibration she must really need it.~

Someone wakes me as the music ends, ~Roo, time to go to your rest area.~ This place works for me. I get up anyway. Outside the hall I see most people going to their respective homes. Two however are going towards the ocean. Sarra and Paff. What are they doing?

I rush to catch up. They are intertwined. I look up. The full moon will set soon and we are headed straight for it.

~Are you two doing something unwise?~

They are startled. Since I spoken coastal, Sarra answers, ~We have approval from the elders.~

~But, neither of you is from this world. How can they give approval?~

~We are the same species. Our spawning may even lend some needed genetic diversity.~

~There is no support system. On this world you will both die.~

~What exactly do you think our chances are back home Roo? I am no number expert but I think they are near zero of surviving. At least here we will leave offspring.~ I can't argue with that.

~We could have used your help.~

~We are not special like you. We are not educated like Gero. We are not leaders like Kerr. We are meat for the stew pot. Here our spawn have a chance. Here there is no war. Here is a loving supportive community to crawl out of the sea to.~

~I will miss you both. I am sorry you were both brought into this. I

wish I wasn't. I wish I could stay here as well.~

~No one is stopping you Roo. Stay. Be a clay instructor. Do some good. Don't die for this so called prophesy. Don't die for Gero. Don't trust him Roo. He is not worth it.~

~I don't Sarra.~ They leave me and wade into the bay waters. At least they will be happy for a short time. It will take hours before the spawning sickness will affect them. Several more days before she lays her egg cases. Then many eight days before hatching and their own deaths. May they be successful. May many of their hatchlings reach the shore. May many of their crawlies reach naming day.

Day 13

I manage to get back to the ceramics area and rest for an eighth before the sun is up high enough to make resting difficult. By then Atal is beside me.

In Ancient I try to ask her, ~What wrong?~

~You will leave today Teacher Rooi.~ She is formal and it is not a question.

~I fear, not leave now, never leave.~ We lost two more of our group last night.

~I come with you.~ I hand signal no. Then I gently take her over to some fresh clay and get her to start working it. As she takes out lumps of soft clay to work on the table I leave to find the others.

I am halfway to the Hall when I see Mandhi and Sussi coming towards me.

~We need to go.~

~Yes Roo. We know. You know about Sarra and Paff?~

~I was at the water's edge with them. At least they are happy about it. Wish I could show the same about our choice.~ They sign agreement.

~That leaves the last two. Think they will appear?~

~I hope not. Did anyone show them?~ We all sign negative. Good. Maybe they won't come.

Mandhi hands me a sack. I already have my tool belt and shoes on. ~Shader and some food. We don't know when our next meal will be or if we will even want to eat the local material. I believe this will be difficult.~

~No crab?~

~Even if I could feel comfortable with a local one, it would not be right to bring one from this world back to ours. Sarra and Paff may have a right in their decision, I just don't agree with it. I does not seem right to mix our life forms up.~

~You are wise to feel that way Mandhi.~ The shaman has joined us as we walk towards the spot she showed us. ~You see this new plant above the tide mark?~ She grabs some of the plant and pulls it out of the ground. There is too much of it to matter. ~I brought this back from a world you will see one day. It is called grass. Not a native to our worlds. I didn't even bring a plant with me. It somehow came in my possessions. A spore or something. It produces an edible portion at the top and we are learning how to use it, but the rate of spread means it will eventually change our world even if we kill every plant in sight.~

~We have also exchanged microbes.~ Gero and Kerr have joined us.

Too bad. ~Granted our worlds are only a little different, but what of the worlds we will see? How do we remove all contamination?~

~One way trip.~ Sussi suggests.

~So, it is right to contaminate their world with our microbes, but not ours with theirs.~ No, not really.

~Don't go at all?~ I suggest. No one takes the line of reasoning. We have to go. I know it, they know it.

We are high enough above the bay to see much of it. Out there are Sarra and Paff waiting for the sickness to overtake them. I look towards the near shore but it is empty.

~I forgot! Who will greet the morning today?~

~That was over an eighth ago one who rests in daylight.~ I sign amusement. Was not long enough for me, even if I seem to need less rest that I did before this all started less than two eight days ago.

~Speaking of which, why are we here so early? Surely we are not going to do this in daylight? Even I can't hide that well.~

~Check it out ahead of time with a bubble?~

~Those things are pretty visible not to mention what happened to the Guardian. I get the idea that a lot of people might be around on this one.~

~I have the same feeling. We wait till dark then. Most people rest then.~

~Which means we should rest now.~ I could use some more.

~Have you forgotten it is light out and getting lighter?~

~Look in your bags. Each of us carries part of a large shader. I thought it might come in handy.~

I immediately look in my bag to see what else is there. I pull out most of the cover cloth itself. The latest carbon fiber stuff. ~Where did this come from? I don't remember it from earlier.~

~I lent it to him.~ The shaman. She has many secrets.

~I have never heard of a piece this large being made. Where did you get it from?~

~It was not made on either of our worlds. The rest you will need to figure out yourselves.~

I look further. There are some strange containers. I pull one out.

~What is this?~

~Pry the ridged portion up.~ Easy to grasp the slick surface even if it tastes strange. I have no idea what the substance it is made of is, but inside is something even stranger. There are many different colors and strange odors I am tasting.

~What is it?~

~Food of course. I thought you might want to experience what they eat on the world you are going to.~

~I thought we were going back to our own home world. We don't have anything like this.~

Mandhi is already eating hers, ~Very strange. I have never had anything like this. What is it?~

~Animal protein, but I have no idea what animal.~

~Maybe one of those ones we saw that walk on two arms.~

The shaman remains quiet.

~It won't hurt us?~

~Likely to give you an upset stomach. We are not used to that much iron. I would recommend tasting but not consuming.~ I look at the dark substance under the fluffy stuff. Ghastly. What is the bright red goo? Mandhi looks like she is going to be sick. She was eating it.

~Screech!~ What is that?! I look up towards the sound. ~Screech!~ Then I localize it. Menace is running down the beach. Sussi lets out a whistle and it stops, orients on the sound, ~Screech!~ and comes rapidly towards us. That thing is FAST! Why didn't they do something with it before spawning? Rude to have not cleaned up your messes. Not that anything here would eat it. Maybe flies would. They eat anything dead.

As soon as Menace is within a few arms of us, it breathes rapidly while pointing its mouth slit into the air. It orients on my open container and practically climbs over me to get to it. In a few bites it manages to get most of it down. Mandhi gives the rest of hers to the thing too. Soon everyone has pulled their containers out. But two seems to be its limit. I can see from this close that it is able to cover its eyes with skin. Interesting. That would be very useful. It walks around in a circle until a spot of earth has made a hollow, which it then settles into. Its breathing slow. It is resting. The light apparently does not bother it at all.

~Let's set up the shader. Put Menace in the center.~ We have done this kind of thing many times and it is even easier with this light weight material. As there is a slight breeze and the sun is likely to get stronger in the afternoon, we set up a two layer cover cover. The space between will keep most of the heat away from us.

We take positions around Menace. I should take it back to its world before we go to our own. Later. Rest now.

I become aware a few eighths later when I hear that shriek sound again. Is that how it communicates? Using sounds instead of sight? Strange. Can't possibly have much of a vocabulary, or maybe we can't hear the nuisances. A few days ago I was not really aware of languages. I guess anything is possible.

Kerr sees what the commotion is about this time, ~Sarra and Paff come.~

I get up on my arms, ~How can that be? They should be fully into the

sickness by now. It has been at least five or six eighths.~

~They are coming this way.~ Mandhi waves her arms to let them know where we are.

~Do we wait for them to entice us to remain, or do we leave?~ Gero is getting anxious and more than a little annoyed at further delay. If it was anyone but him and Kerr I would probably have taken their advice and made the bubble, but because it was Gero I decide to wait. I am curious anyway.

~It is Sarra and Paff! How long ago did they enter the water?~

~At least six eighths. They should be well into the spawning sickness by now.~ Yes, I just thought that.

~Don't look spawny to me at all.~ Spawnny?

The two come up to us exhausted from the climb uphill. Menace did not seem to be slowed down at all. Another advantage.

Paff does the showing, ~We decided to follow the shore north to help ensure that the crawlies would not be immediately eaten by the settlement.~ Good idea.

Sarra adds, ~And swimming would help us get salted up by passing more water over our gills.~ Again, good logic. Probably why I was affected so fast. I was swimming as fast as I could. Fear and anger probably helped too.

~So why are you still rational and why are you showing to us?~

~Nothing happened. Neither of us feels anything at all. Like we were in a rainwater pond.~

The shaman looks amused. Gero is watching her then shares his theory. Does he always have an answer?

~Roo, you are contagious. It is the only answer.~

~What? Is anyone here sick?~

~Think, what the Nauti did to you? They used a viral genetic injections method. You still carry the virus.~

~Then why isn't everyone in the settlement affected? The shaman would have infected them long ago.~

~Probably takes close physical contact, like resting together. Maybe even for an extended period of time. The shaman rests alone.~ And we could not be infected again by her, so we don't count.

~So anyone who shares a rest period with me is 'infected' with this virus. Now what?~

~We see if they can make a bubble?~

Sarra has been following the conversation, ~I have been watching every time a bubble is formed. I have tried to see them, to understand them. I concentrate and concentrate and nothing happens.~

~It was moons after I was with the Nauti before we did our first

bubble.~

~How long were you with Sussi and Mandhi before it happened?~

~At least two moons.~

~Wait, Roo, you are infected by the Nauti long before we were. I showed with the locals. You were with them for several years and yet we were able to bubble only a short time after meeting you.~

~Years! When did you see that?~

~While you were sleeping. I told you to stay aware. It was part of the presentation last night.~ Crab. Do I do everything wrong?

~Okay, it takes less than two moons then. Sarra had been with us about an eight day. Paff even less. It might be awhile before it manifests."

~So are you coming with us?~ I really want our team together again.

~Don't be rude Roo. Just because they can no longer spawn does not mean they want to die today.~ Now, who is being negative?

~Is one aware once the spawning sickness takes hold? We thought we were already dead, at least to awareness.~ Does Paff show her thoughts any more? Males can be so annoying once they think they have one of us. Gero certainly tried to do the same to us.

~It will be dark in about two eighths. Stay with us till then and decide.~ Gero opens one of his containers and Menace quickly eats it. I think it is growing before my eyes. I am sure it is bigger after each meal. Menace, full again, goes back to resting. Paff stokes the back of its eye and mouth arm. Menace makes a funny sound that slowly fades. At least it likes affection. Wonder if that is universal? Arthropods excepted. Eat or be eaten seems to be the only thing they understand, even during mating I have heard. The male, being expendable, is often sacrificed early for the good of the spawning. Maybe they are not so wrong.

No dreams this time, but I did not rest well. I am concerned about what we will find. The shaman has been blank. That concerns me. Clearly she has knowledge. Why doesn't she share? That food came from the world, so why didn't she just finish the task? Why are we needed? What I am really asking myself, is why can't I stay here? That means it is time to go. Soon it will be dark enough for our purpose. We are going home.

~Pack up. The sun sets. Soon it will be too dark to see well.~ Gero has taken control again. I let it go this time, but I am watching.

I can't believe it. I see Gero hand Sarra a ceramic knife of the latest design. I trust Sarra, that is not the problem. But does he expect we will need to kill others?

He sees me watching, ~We will be the aggressors this time. Most people do not take kindly to that. Best to be prepared, even if we don't have to use it. Sarra and Paff do not have your abilities yet and Sarra

knows how to fight.~ There is logic in that statement, but I don't like it.

I had forgotten about my lucky moonstone. I rub it nervously now.

Shaman backs away from our group.

~Shaman, come with us. We could use your expertise."

~Your world is not my world. It would not be wise to exchange too much information. Have you not wondered why I have not tested you beyond what was necessary to authenticate your identity.~

~Then why show us about the food, this location and everything else you have hinted at?~

~I want you to win, but I have to be careful for others may be watching.~ Oh. I was not imagining the character. Or was I? I have not seen anything since arriving here. Was it the shaman? Am I being tricked and misled again?

~We are ready Roo.~

~Where is Menace? Last thing we need is that shriek at the wrong time.~

Paff points to the bulge in her pack. There is a stack of empty containers next to the shaman. No doubt sleeping off the last of the alien food. That gives us at least an eighth. Does not appear to be hurting him any. He may be more related to them than to us. The fact that we get along, more or less, is hope. Maybe this is just ignorance on our part.

~Roo.~

~I think we should make an observation bubble first.~ Gero signs affirmation. Like I need his permission. I make the bubble. It is dark there as well. It should be the same time of day as here, being so close, what was the word? Froth? Like crab froth? That tastes good. I am hungry. We have not had anything for ourselves. No one has offered anything either. I move around the bubble until I see something!

~There are lights in the distance! Bright artificial ones. Much brighter than one of our glow balls. I see shadows. Might be people.~

~It is our home, there should be people there. Best we just go if you don't see anything close by.~

I see the shaman going back towards the settlement. The moon is starting to break the horizon in the east. We will have the same advantage when we get there.

~We wear shaders, dark side out.~ Mandhi orders. Good idea actually. I pull mine out of my pack and fit it over my mantle. The packs themselves are already pretty dark. Sarra helps Paff with hers. She is not used to wearing one. I guess they just hid in the shade during sunny times. I really should pay more attention.

~Gather together. I want to make as small of one as possible to avoid being seen.~ Not that I expect to.

~As soon as the bubble forms, step outside of it so I can collapse it.~

~We have done this before Roo, just do it.~

Crab. I really just want to forget all this. Instead I make the bubble.

We leave the bubble and I collapse it. No problems so far. The lights are all below us landward. The moon is in the same place.

~What about the Nauti pearl?~ I ask Gero with hand communication.

~It will stay with the shaman. It will be safer there.~ In case we do not make it. I make an eight of small ones. It seems to be the maximum number that I can handle with any precision. I used the shaman's world as the base for them so they would be dark bubbles. I suppose a light world would be easier to follow in the dark, but they might also give us away. I can always use them later.

Sussi hands me, ~We need to get closer to the lights to see what is going on. I wish the shaman has shown more.~

I answer, ~She showed it was more or less against some rules. I don't know any more than that.~ I can see why she chose this spot though. It is far enough to let us get oriented, but close enough it will not take all night to get there.

The lights are more or less where the settlement was in the last world, but the path is different. Changes have been made. Changes by people, not nature. The air tastes strange and not in a good way. Even the soil we walk on has a bitter metallic taste. What have they done? I suspect pollution on a massive scale. Whoever is responsible will be darted for sure.

Kerr from our world showed that his people used to live here, but the bay people were chased out by others. I am guessing from Gero's story, it was somehow related to the coast people.

~Mandhi, you showed the lead glass was made in a place that the pollution from it's making would not cause harm.~

~I am thinking the same Roo. It would appear it was not far enough. We are given the gifts of knowledge at the expense of the bay people.~

~It is more than that. Gero's story mentioned that the bay people had something that the coast people wanted. Knowledge from the Nauti. Are Nauti polluters?~

~Most of our tech does not work underwater, so I doubt it came from them. But who knows how far they have gotten in the time since our separation.~ At least hundreds of thousands of years. The oldest Matriarch on record was some two hundred and thirty nine years. Most much shorter. It is hard to imagine that many generations.

We suddenly stop. I wait for the communication to get to me. Disadvantage of not having enough light to show by.

~Kerr says that it is not safe to get closer. We are to observe from

here. Gero has a far seer.~ Next expedition I get one too. The microscope I don't really need, but I definitely want a far seer.

I do my best to observe without it. There are people about going from structure to structure. The structures are strange with straight sides instead of gently curving ones that used to exist here. The paths between structures are also straight. Very ugly. It is like our world has been turned upside down. A crab left on it's back to die in the sun.

~Roo, over there! Look, it is like that creature we saw with the strange crab.~ I look where indicated and there are now two of them. The kind that walk on two arms. The upper arms are waving on one of them, but I can't make out what they are saying from this angle. The conversation is slower than we would show. They may have limited intelligence.

Then I see another of the four arms pushing one of the people. The person is carrying a heavy load. Why not use a crab? We are not designed to be beasts of burden. There is an entire line of people being used in this way. This is what has happened to Kerr's people. They are now slaves to the four arms. Who are they? How could something of lower intelligence rule us?

I follow the line of people back to their source. That's strange. They seem to appear from behind that tall tree stump or whatever it is. There is light one side but not the other. I need to see this from another angle.

~I am going to the right for a bit. I see something strange I need to check out.~

~Be careful. I am sure they have posted Guardians about. I would.~ Sarra is kind to remind me. He could just turn us all in now that he back to the people who hired him in the first place.

I make my way slowly. There is a lot of brush and I don't want to draw attention to myself. Still I hear small branches snap. I hold still and listen each time. The moon is higher in the sky, but I can't see that well. The glare from the lights below does not help.

That is the last thing I remember. I suddenly find my body and mind on fire with the most terrific pain I have ever felt in my life. Then I lose awareness.

Prison

When I become aware I find myself in a dark place. I have no idea how long I was unaware. The ground feels and tastes of stone roughly cut. I make a bubble from a light world but it does nothing. It is still dark. Then I realize that even a light world is dark at times. I make one from the shaman's world. A small one at first. Light can bring danger as well as help. Still nothing.

I make another. Nothing, though this time I hear something roll on the ground when I make the bubble. I make several at once and hear something falling each time and bouncing away.

I think. Something falling.

That means that in the other worlds, this area is underground. That means that this hollow space is made and not found. Someone put me here. I did not somehow bubble here before losing awareness.

How large is the hollow and are there any others here? Should have done that first, though a light would have told me more easily. I must be still fuzzy from whatever they did to me. I check out my body but do not feel more than the normal bruises I have gotten all along from this journey.

I remember the pain though. It takes me awhile to remember what I was doing before the pain. I saw a line of people coming out from behind the tree with no one entering the other side of the tree. The tree is too narrow for them to be making a right angle at the tree. Well, I am below ground here. Could they be coming from below? Maybe this hollow is one that is no longer needed. Mining? Highly illegal near a settlement, but I don't think they care about that. Solid rock would not have been easy either. That means time or more illegal tech.

I stretch out in all directions, but feel nothing more than the floor. It doesn't really matter what direction I try. I go forward with my arms in front of me till I reach the wall. Tastes of more rock. I make a pile of stones from bubbles near the wall. If I go all the way around and hit this pile again I will know I have made it full circle.

I don't make it that far before I walk into something that reacts to my presence. It shrieks! I back off and wait. Lots of sounds come forth, but I have no idea what it is. When it is silent again I decide that maybe the other direction is in order. I make my way back to the pile I made and then go past.

This time it is quite some time before I run into anything, fortunately not the same creature I did the first time. A person at least. They taste bad and are not reacting to me. I feel their mantle. There is still breath. I try

hand signing them.

~Who are you?~

~No pain, no pain.~ They push away from me weakly. I reach out and touch them again.

~No pain, I am a prisoner too.~ Great they have to torture us as well? Isn't it bad enough we are in the dark with no food or water? ~Who are you?~

~No one of importance.~

~I am Roo.~

~No! Please don't say that name! Please, you can't be Roo.~ They know me?

~Who are you?~

There is a pause, then carefully, softly, slowly they answer, ~I am sorry I failed you Roo.~ Another pause, ~I am Sufi.~

Now it is my turn to be upset and quiet. I just hold her for some time. I can't see, but I can taste the dirt and bruises on her skin. I carefully begin to clean her as best I can without seeing what I am doing. I don't stop until I have finished.

~Thank you Roo.~

We rest until she is ready.

~Sufi there is something else here with us.~

~At first I thought they were feeding me more than the usual ration, but it is too hard to catch and eat.~

~It made a lot of noise when I touched it. You have taught it well to avoid us.~

~I have not had much to eat for sometime. I don't know how long I have been here. There is never any light.~

~Without water no one can survive long.~

~At random times they throw unclean water into the room. Sometimes there are scraps of nearly rotten food in it. I can no longer beat the creature to the food.~

~From which direction?~

~I think from above. I think we are underground.~

~I know we are. But what you say means there is an opening above us.~

~Then it is above the reach of the creature as well. It can reach much further than we can.~

~How do you know that?~

~I saw them before I was put in here and from the one time I was able to feel it while it was resting the creature matches what I saw.~

~The ones that walk on two arms while showing with the two free arms?~

~You have seen them?~

~Twice, once by accident. It was inside a strange crab along with another creature that had five or six arms. It seems to be related to the creature we befriended from another world. We called Menace because it was always getting into trouble. Menace has six arms, one of which contains a mouth slit and two eyes.~

~Strange indeed. I should hand you my story.~

~Are you feeling well enough?~

~It is better I show you before I get worse. I may no longer be able to then. We will not leave here alive Roo. These are our last eighths. I am sorry that you are sharing them with me here.~

~We will get out. I came with others. They will rescue us.~

~Do not count on that. They can see in the dark. They probably knew you were there the moment you appeared. I assume you have advanced enough to have come through a bubble.~ She only saw the small one that I made. Gero showed they knew of the prophesy. This confirms it. I need to show her about Fari.

~We did, but we were some way away from the settlement.~

~Maybe they did not notice until you got close to the settlement then. No matter, as soon as you got close, they knew.

I moved into your home as soon as you left. At first nothing happened. I went to the studio each day and helped students. Guardians came around a few days later asking if I knew where you were, but they left without anger when I told them I did not know. I was just told to look after your home for a few days. I played dumb and since I am a Teacher they had to be careful.

When a few days had passed they came around again. This time they showed more anger. I pretended to be very concerned and worried about you and the others. I paced around the main room going over your last few days, leaving out the bubbles. I suggested that whoever ruined the storage room might be behind your disappearance. I still believe that, so it really was not a lie.

The problem is of course, is that I believe they know who was behind the destruction.~

~I think you are right. From what I have learned the local population here was in communication with the Windy Bay Nauti.~

~The bay? I did not know we were near the bay. The Nauti would explain much though. Our culture has been taught to hate the Nauti. It was not always that way. When I was an unseen we heard almost nothing about them. By the time you arrived we were told the Nauti were responsible for all that was wrong or at least holding us back from our true destiny.~

~The fact that you are here means the Guardians came back again.~

~Less than an eight day later. In the middle of the night I was darted. When I became aware I found myself bagged on a crab. I rode for days without being able to communicate with anyone. They wet the bag once in a while. I absorbed as much as I could. They did not feed me then either. Fortunately I had gained some weight over the last couple of years, and not from physical activity.

When we reached the settlement, they removed the bag and I saw the four arms for the first time. I was brought before three of them. They appear to communicate with sound and hands. They appear to be unable to flash as we do. As they wore excessive cloth, it may be that their normal means of communication was covered to be less vulnerable.~

~That is a severe handicap. They appeared to be in a leadership position when I saw them.~

~That I don't know. I was only in the light for a short time. I was darted again and became aware again in here.~

~They have taken great effort to hide from us where here is. A test, or fear on their part?~

~Fear is my guess. I was questioned by someone who appeared here at random intervals. There may be a hidden door along the wall we cannot find.~

~What did you show them?~

~At first nothing. Then the pain began. Not darts. Only a club. I never knew from what direction. When they liked my answers I was fed a small amount. When they did not I was beaten. I handed them everything that I knew and then more. I made up material to try and stop the beating.~

~That may be a good thing. They will not be sure what is real and what is not.~

~The fact that you are still here means that they will know not everything was real. Do not get in the way of the beatings. They will beat you as well.~

~What of the creature?~

~It arrived only a short time ago. I cannot know time, maybe three or four days ago.~

~We were gone thirteen days before I was darted.~

~Then maybe it was only a few days ago. I don't really know.~

~The creatures appear to be sentient. At least the ones on the surface did. Are they in control or are people?~

~I don't know. I did not see enough of their interactions.~

~Later then. I wish we could communicate with the creature. It would appear they have. If it is down here, it must mean this is how they treat their own whose behavior they do not approve of. Have they questioned

it? Have they beaten it?~

~I don't think so. I think its punishment is being here with us. Sooner or later it is sure it will become food for us. We are the monsters.~

~And now there are two of us. No wonder it shrieked when I touched it.~ I hear something from above us, but the sound echo makes locating it difficult. ~What is that sound?~

~They are about to water us. They have to drag a large pot of water to the opening. Get ready the creature will hear it also.~

~What do I do?~

~Go the center after the water starts to hit and sweep as much of the food as possible in this direction. It will not follow. Hurry or he will take it all.~

I let go of her and go part way to the what I think is the center. The water starts to fall. It feels good splashing against the stone floor and them up against me. I can hear larger objects hitting and rush in to feel what I can find. I am about to start sweeping when I contact the creature, who immediately shrieks again. I really want this thing to be a help not a problem. For every two sweeps to Sufi I sweep one in it's direction. I can't be sure of my aim of course.

Sufi is already eating when I get there. I make sure she gets most of it by eating as slowly as I can. After that we rest. It is hard not knowing how long we rest.

When I feel the floor most of the water is already gone. That means there is an outlet somewhere. There is a slight slope upwards to the center. That means the outlet must be near the edge. I follow the edge in the same direction I was first going when I found Sufi.

I run into the creature again. Without thinking I hand com it, ~Sorry,~ and back off and wait. In a moment I feel it touching me. I try not to be afraid.

It hands me, ~No eat?~ It knows how to sign! Amazing! It is possible to communicate!

~What is your name? How long have you been here? Is there a way out?~

~Slowly. No good this way.~ Ah, right. That makes sense. They come from another world. This is not their normal means of communicating. Not ours really either, just one of the options. Flashing is much faster.

~Your name?~ I hope they have names.

It signs back, ~Healer.~ Strange name. More a work type. We have so few healers. We usually either heal ourselves or die. Not much need for the few cases in between.

~My name is Rooi.~

~Female?~ Whoa, I am surprised that he knows that. The females in

the settlement do not use the convention. He knows something of the coast people then.

~Yes. You?~

~Male. Other?~ Never trust a male. Does it apply to their kind?

~Sufi. She will not eat you either.~ Might as well show him we are not interested.

~I not eat either.~ Nice to know. Not that I was worried.

~The water leaves the room where?~ He just might know having been here longer.

~Water leaves here.~ He grabs one of my arms and pulls. I go along with him though this is very undignified. He stops and guides my hand down to the grate, then lets go.

The grate tastes of iron metal. Horrible taste. Oxidized severely. The size is large enough that if removed a person could easily fit. I am not sure the creature could. From what we saw of Menace's type, the internal shell structure could prevent him from navigating the entrance and pipe. A definite handicap.

On the other hand, we could not rise vertically as well. Different ecological niche. I bet they are good at harvesting cones from trees. Could be useful. Bet they can't climb one as well though.

It would be easy to remove the grate. Bubbles should take care of it nicely. Never mind the stones I make. They will go down the pipe just fine. Takes less than an eighth even without sight. Just have to be careful not to bubble my own hands. I can hear the stones transverse the pipe with quite a bit of sound. Might not be a good thing. I am not sure I want to be darted again. Don't like not knowing what is going on. Definitely not.

Sufi comes up to me from her side, ~What is that horrible sound?~

~I bubbled some stones into the pipe to remove the iron grate. There must be a pump or something at the other end.~

~A metal one I am guessing. A ceramic one would have broken from the stones.~

~A wooden one probably would not last long enough to handle all the water they pour in here. If they are smart they have more than one grate and all we heard was stones hitting it.~

I feel from the other side, ~Sound stop.~

~I almost forgot. Sufi I would like you to meet Healer, Healer this is Sufi.~ I let them hand each other. I am glad that Sufi is open enough to accept him after what they have been through. I have the feeling that we will accomplish more if we stay together. He does taste horrible though.

~What happen when water come?~

~What water?~

Then I hear it. The rushing sound of water coming down a pipe.

~Air taste bad!~ It does. Quick, think. All our waste goes down this pipe. We are below ground. The pump must pump the waste water back to the surface for processing. No pump and the waste will back up into our chamber!

~Back up now!~ As soon as I am sure they are safe I measure the grate with my arms and bubble a sphere larger than the grate opening I had cleared out earlier. It comes down with a huge crash. I move the bubble out of the way and remove it. Not a perfect seal, but it will have to do. The water hits a moment later and I am hit in the face with a jet. Definitely sewage. Crab. I feel around the edges and sure enough more is coming in slowly. All I have done is gain us some time.

I hand both of them, ~This chamber will fill eventually. I am not sure how to prevent it.~

~Maybe something that you have learned will help. Show us of your journey so far.~

~There may not be enough time.~

~Make other shape?~

I think, ~I have never tried.~

~Make cylinder, one arm high. Move up to. Higher than water.~

~Of course! Crab, why didn't I think of that?~ The water has made it around the edge of the room. I go closer to the center. I need to concentrate. I make the cylinder I want in my mind and then transpose it into the ninth dimensional matrix needed. Then push! A cylinder of stone falls and crashes to the floor of the chamber with an even larger crashing sound and splits in two. I had forgotten that the floor is not level. The weight of the stone and the fall were enough. I feel it. It is high enough and stable enough though.

I gather the others and we climb to the top of the cylinder. Having smooth sides it was easy for Sufi and I. Not so easy for Healer. I hear him make several attempts before success. He finally manages by making use of the cracked section. It only buys us an arm and a half. Maybe an eighth time wise at best.

It is difficult showing the story so rapidly at two people at once by hand. I am thinking of Healer as a person. Interesting! The worst part is that his vocabulary is not as great as Sufi's and I have to go over some sections with easier words. The hardest part though was showing Sufi about Fari. Hard to lose a Triad member. I may have lost two. The water is within a hand of the top of the cylinder when I finish.

~I could make another cylinder smaller than the first.~

~It would be too crowded and we would have to get into the sewage so you could drop the stone properly.~

~You move Nauti pearl. Do same with us.~
~Even if I could, to where would I move you?~
~The opening at the top of the chamber Roo. Where they pour the water and food in.~
~When next water?~
~Has it been that long already? Certainly not?~
The water is now at the edge. Unless we want to risk disease we need to move.

~Okay, I raise one of you at a time, but how will I know what is going on? I could miss the hole and ram you into the ceiling of the chamber or the outer chamber's ceiling. Then what? I can't let you go, you would just fall down here again.~

~Work fast. Water here. Use sound.~

~How?~

~My people use sound.~ He makes a noise, ~Means up.~ Another sound, ~Means down.~ Another, ~Right.~ one last one, ~Left. Enough direction?~

~I can't make those sounds Roo.~

~Me first. Help on top. Feel new first.~ I think I understand.

I concentrate. I can feel Healer rise till he lets go of my third arm. He then signals up, up, up, until he reaches ceiling. ~Right.~ I move him to the right. I can feel him moving himself against the ceiling trying to find the opening. It is strange that I can have this kind of feed back. He finds the hole and I push him up through the hole.

Once into the hole I raise him more slowly. I don't know how thick the hole is before he ends up on the level with the upper floor.

~Stop! Left, left!~ He then makes sounds that we have not been told the meaning of. I wait for a moment, but do not feel any resistance to my holding him. I slowly release my hold with no objections.

The water is now a hand above the stone. Not holding anyone I use the ability to 'feel' the chamber. Suddenly the chamber comes alive to me! It is as if I can 'see' the room!

~Sufi, you are next. I will not need help or directions. I know where everything is now. Just relax and let me do the work.~

~I don't know Roo. I am very weak. If something goes wrong I will not likely survive the fall.~

I start to raise her, ~Relax Sufi. Don't fight it. I need to concentrate.~ It takes me far less time to put her right next to Healer.

~My turn.~ I show to no one who can see me. I rise slowly. This time I have to move myself and feel ahead. I do this more slowly than I did Sufi. I need to be able to understand how this method of moving feels to do it well. It feels great!

I almost bump into the ceiling myself, but have at least an arm length as a buffer, feeling the ability touch the wall first, then the opening. Once through the hole I can feel the expansion into the chamber above and I can feel the two of them waiting on the new floor! I land next to them.

~This is wonderful. Let me concentrate and I will be able to hand show you what the entire chamber is like.~

~How can you do that Roo?~

~The ability has feed back. I just need to touch the walls and other object with the touch to know where they are. It is like I am forming clay.~

~Or painting a picture.~

~Yes, good analogy. I am painting the surroundings in my mind.~

I spend some time exploring the new space. There are six more holes going down. In the chamber itself there is a mechanical device I don't understand. Then I see the large bowl. I search inside and see that it is already full of water. Strange how water feels to the touch. I can see through things at the same time as feeling them.

~It's moving!~

I watch it and realize it is coming towards us.

~We may have to move out of the way.~

~It stopped!~ Healer is being blank. Sufi is the one most excited and handing.

I then show them what is happening, ~It is over the chamber next to us and is tipping over. The water and food pieces are pouring into the chamber. Now it is tilting back up and returning to the resting spot it was in.~ Nothing happens for moment and then, ~Oh, it is refilling from a pipe in the ceiling. Probably to move to the next chamber.~

~Roo, if there are people in those other chambers are they in sewage now as we were?~

~Crab, I am not sure.~ I feel out and go down into the chamber in front of us. The bowl is moving again, but goes to a chamber further away. We must be last this time. The chamber in front of us has a pipe coming out of the center. Ah, the center chamber is deeper than ours. Must be the central chamber. Yes, I have the overall shape.

~I have found the center sewage chamber. It is about one third full of water now. Proceeding to the chamber next to us.~

I reach out and down into the hole.

~Crab! There are three people inside. They are all swimming in the sewage. I have made everyone in here sick!~

~Bring out Rooi!~ Healer presses my hand hard. I quickly feel for the other chambers. He cares about us. That is reassuring.

I reach into the last chamber, the one to our left, ~Oh crab! The last

chamber has several corpses.~

~Leave them. Save others.~ Make that seventeen total then.

~There is not enough room without risking people falling back into chambers.~

~Seal corpse hole with stone. Not full ball. Part ball.~ Huh? Oh, of course. I don't need a sphere. Just enough to seal the hole. I make a slice off of a sphere as it does not fall more than a finger thickness. The rest goes back to it's own world. Enough to support someone's weight and enough to cover the hole. At least the taste of death is less. Not that anything here tastes good.

I then start raising people from their respective chambers and sealing the holes after I am finished. Everyone has been soaked in sewage as I suspected. We need to get to clean water as soon as possible if we are to survive. Though the three of us are not as affected, infections will not care.

~Here comes the bowl to our hole.~ And the only uncovered one.

~Cover hole now!~ Healer thumps on me hard. Rather than ask why I just do it. The bowl comes over and dumps it's load on top of my stone dish. Most of the water finds it's way through cracks to the chambers below. Ah, but the food remains. Good thinking. We should have done that with the other chambers. At least one load is better than none.

~Split up and show the others what is happening. I can see who you are and find you later to bring us back together. Take food to those who need it most. Sufi, eat some yourself first. You can't help anyone sick.~

They leave as I finish pulling the others out. In the mean time the bowl returns to the resting spot. This time it is not refilled. We have until the next feeding to leave or risk being covered in water and a rising tide of sewage. Crab, skitters! Looks like they have decided to leave the chambers as well. I have seen those things climb upside down on almost any surface. They were probably hiding on the ceilings of the chambers and came down to feed on whatever we missed when we rested.

I reach the nearest person and show them, ~Skitters, catch as many as you can and show others.~ I feel them move away from me. Soon everyone is making a game out of catching the skitters in the room. Not much protein, but does give people hope of being in control again.

There is a metal pipe, how I know that I am not sure, but the pipe that brings water and bad tasting food goes up a rough hole in the ceiling. I follow it with my mind as far as I can, but there seems to be an abrupt limit to my ability to see this way. Strange. Normal sight does not behave this way.

I look up to try and figure out how the bowl moves. There are two rods. One running what I will call North-South and the other East-West. I

have no idea of the real directions, but know no other way of describing it. When the bowl moves, these two rods intersect the bowl control unit with the bowl below it. Wouldn't be easier to use a radial system? We certainly did not design this. Healer's people? They have four main arms with different duties. Again inefficient. The sensory organs all appear to be on a bump above the mantle. That seems dangerous, but then it is encased in an internal shell. Why cover it with skin though?

Menace had six arms. Two for locomotion, two for grabbing things. One apparently for stability when running and it can run that's for sure. The last one with the shell encasing the sense organs. That would mean that Healer's bump is really just a short arm. I look more closely at him. Ah, there is the sixth arm, very tiny and buried under the skin. Must not be needed any longer. What strange creatures. Hexapods. But not insects or crustaceans. No, those all have their shells on the outside as one would expect of their kind.

So, how do hexapods grow? Can't exactly shed their shells like the insects. I wish I could see some of the younger ones up close. There might be growth rings on their shell as with clams or snails.

A skitter tries to crawl past me and I quickly grab it with my thoughts and bite it with my beak to stop it from moving. I then hand it to the nearest person to try and get something out of it. I'm not that hungry yet even if it has been over one day since I last ate anything of substance. The tastes in this room have put me out of the mood.

I try seeing through the rock around us, but find nothing but different layers of rock. Everything had to have come through the one hole the pipe now goes up through. I move over the bowl and pipe. The surface is smooth enough for me to climb easily. I could use the ability, but I need to know if others can climb this.

I make my way over the bowl to the pipe. Then up the pipe a ways to see what condition the shaft is in and how much clearance there is. There's enough. No one here is a Matriarch in size. Hmm, the hardest one is going to be the Healer. I may have to carry him with my thoughts. How does one get through life without suckers to hold things? At least it appears he is the only one of his kind here. What did he do to deserve being put here? Have I made friends with a killer or worse, a polluter?

When I get down I notice that there is now a great deal of air coming through the pipe instead of water. I was wondering how they did the ventilation. That means that there is an opening at the top for the air to our as well.

I find it amazing that I can find Sufi with this new method. Everyone seems to have settled down from the skitters. She is wondering about slowly, asking people something.

I finally reach her and ask, ~Sufi, what are you doing?~

~Trying to find Gero, but no one has seen him. He is not here I am sure. Most of these people are locals who did not go along with the forced labor required of them.~

~What were they being asked to do? We all have to work to serve the whole.~ If I can ever figure out what is going on.

~They were forced to dig these chambers. We are over a hundred arms below the surface of a hill near the bay.~

~What were they looking for? There are usually enough minerals for our uses near the surface. We don't need to dig deep into the earth. We don't need to pollute our surroundings to fill our needs.~

~They were looking for something called Nauti spheres. Three were found buried in solid rock. No one knows how they got here. Do you know what those are?~

~Yes. Sacred objects to the locals. We can't see into solid rock. How did they know to look here?~

~The people I showed to did not know about such things. Some remembered a lot of foreign devices being used. Strange things of metal, electricity and something that made them feel ill.~

~It sounds like these devices were used to help them find the spheres. The fact that there are seven chambers but only three spheres were found shows they are not all knowing. That could be useful.~

~How are you feeling?~ I have looked at her with my sight. She is in trouble if I don't get her to a healer. We can heal most injuries ourselves. I am not sure she will be able to do that much before she dies. Food will buy us time, an infection will make it much shorter. She has all the classic symptoms of salt deprivation as well.

~Let's get out of here Roo. Do whatever you have to do.~

~There were others with me as well, Kerr, a local chieftain, Sarra a Guardian and Paff, also a local.~

~And Menace. No one has seen any of them. These people were all captured in the first raid. These fourteen survivors are all that is left of hundreds.~ Crab. I am not a leader. How am I supposed to take a band of starving refugees and turn this around. It is the moral thing to do, but how?

~Pipe space leads up out.~ Yes Healer I already know that.

~Get all the people to the bowl and pipe.~ Might as well try.

Sufi and Healer start everyone moving. I float over everyone else and get there first. As quickly as I can I bubble some stones into a pile to make it easier to climb up to the bowl. I then fill the bowl with stones. We will not be needing it any more. From there it is easy to reach the pipe.

When Sufi gets here I direct her, ~Sufi, I want you to go first.~

~I go first. Faster.~ How do I show Healer that he is likely to be the slowest and will need a lot of help. Before I can show him though, he has already crawled past me and gone up the tunnel the pipe is in. He never even touches the pipe! How is he doing it? I watch more carefully. There is some sort of structure at the side of the tunnel. A sequence of metal bars at regular intervals. He is using his upper arms to grab the bars and the lower arms to push himself up the bars. Amazing! He is really good at using these. I wonder if we can?

~Sufi follow Healer. Try using the bars on the side. Switch to the pipe if you have trouble.~ She is one of the weaker ones. If she can make it I should be able to help the others myself. Sufi goes up and I start slowly feeding more people to the tunnel.

I think it must have been two eighths before I get everyone up. Just as I start up myself a message comes back that there is a metal grate at the top and we are all stuck. I need to get to the top. There are sixteen people before me. Crab. Using my lifting ability I push my way slowly past everyone else to get to the top. I have to do this slowly so as not to knock anyone off and occasionally explain why I am doing this. Half way up I notice a large gap. I go back down to the top of the gap.

~Do you need assistance? There is plenty of space above you.~

~I am frightened because I am too weak to continue.~

~Let me help. I will help lift you till you get to the next person in line. You can't fall while I am helping.~ Can I lift two at once? Guess I will find out. Turns out to not be a problem, though I don't know how much I can lift. I am sure I could not do everyone at once. I could not budge some of the larger rocks that I made to prop things up with. Once I get him up to the next person I continue my way to the top.

~Sufi, what is the problem? Something about a grate?~

~Just above us is a metal grate. I suppose they were worried that someone could somehow get this far.~

~Stop from falling in.~ Healer adds. His explanation makes more sense. But then it could be a test if they believed what Sufi told them.

There is just enough light for me to see the grate with my normal vision. Kind of confusing to be using both methods at once. I try to ignore the new method while there is light. As soon as I touch the grate I receive a small electric shock. Nothing I have not felt before and not enough to do any harm. Maybe it stops the smaller creatures like the skitters. Still it is something that I have to deal with.

I switch to the special sight and expand out from the grate to see what else there is. About an arm above the grate is a metal multi-blade system. I can feel air rushing past me. I am guessing this is some way of providing minimal ventilation. Air pushed down through the water pipe when it is

not being used to deliver food and water. Otherwise we all would have died in less than one day. It is interesting that they did not intend anyone to die quickly. Underfed so we would attack each other. I wonder how many each chamber once held? I will not ask that. People do what they have to do. They are survivors, that is all that matters.

Back to the grate. Since there is more equipment above the grate I decide that making a tunnel to the first open space by going diagonally would be easier. Since I am sure I cannot handle a large stone I decide to make smaller ones. Where do I put them though?

~Sufi hand show the person below you to stay as close to the wall bars as possible. I need to drop stones down the far wall and I don't want to hit anyone.~ I already have one weak person. Soon there will be more. I really should have done the tunnel first, but then someone above us might have found it before we got out. I hate puzzles. It would also take too long to drop each stone by using the ability.

Since it will take time for everyone to get out of the way I decide to start by lowering some of the first balls with the ability. I will let gravity decide where, I will just control the speed. In this way I will know if and when it will be safe to really go for it. The spheres will gather speed as they drop. The people at the bottom will be in the most danger. I could make this tunnel pretty narrow, which would help everyone navigate it, except for Healer. Those internal shells are a real disadvantage right now.

The end of the tunnel is below my ability to see, but now everyone is above that level at least. I begin. The first stones go easily. I get into a regular pattern.

Then I get lazy or distracted and one hits the opposite wall and bounces to the people on the other side. I try and stop it, but it still hits one person pretty good. I hope they make it. I stop making stones till I am sure the person is okay. In spite of my worrying about the time I decide it would be better in these tight quarters not to let go of any stone.

One benefit of making smaller stones is that I am ending up with some texture on the surface. I hope this is enough for Healer to get through. He is definitely heavier than any of us. Soon I am near the surface. There is a layer of stone like material with steel bars in a cross pattern embedded in it left to get through. The bubbles don't care, but it is interesting to me. Why would they do this? Metal is so fragile in that it corrodes away so easily. Maybe encasing it in stone protects it. How did they do that? The stone has a strange taste I can't place.

~I am almost ready. The room is empty, but I don't know if we will be detected or what would happen if we are.~ My ganglia are swimming in a torrent. The space above is too large for a dwelling. The walls are straight. Everything looks wrong. Maybe it is just this strange way of

seeing.

~We die if we go back down or stay here. We have no choice.~

Escape

When I break through even more light suddenly enters the shaft. I carefully lower the last stones below the others before dropping them. I hear the crash as they hit the floor at the bottom. I wait a moment to be sure no one above reacts. I guess there are sounds all the time. I lift myself up into the room.

It is strange inside. The walls are straight instead of curved. I am disoriented by the weird shapes. There are enclosed areas much taller than I am. I look further inside with my ability and see even stranger shapes. There is enough room in here to hold everyone and that is what I should be concentrating on. My ganglia calm down.

Sufi comes through next and looks as surprised as I must have been. She immediately tries to match the pattern of the floor without much success. Healer comes through next with some difficulty, but he is persistent and makes it on his own by pushing and pulling. He is very strange this close up and in color. Did I mention that the new sight is only in shades of gray?

I have no idea if he is startled or not. He is not wearing any of the cloth material that I saw on the other hexapods like him. No evidence of a flashing area. Between the two lower arms is a smaller arm. That must be his male arm. I try and look away. No normal person would allow this to be seen by others. He does not seem ashamed though. Strange creatures.

He goes to the enclosures and opens them to look inside. He finds some cloth that he encases his body in. At least he is covered. Then he goes into an adjoining area and I hear water running! Sufi hears it too and makes her way as fast as she can into the same room.

Others start to come through. I immediately direct them to the sound of the water.

Sufi comes back into the main room clean and refreshed. She takes over directing people as I go to the water. It is amazing. There is a room with very smooth ceramic tiles. The water is too warm for me, but it feels wonderful. I feel like I am washing the entire experience away with the water. I see others are reacting the same.

Soon we are all back in the main room looking about trying to figure things out. Many are still looking at Healer with fear. From what I saw before being darted I am not surprised. The other hexapods were abusing people. I rise above everyone and suddenly everyone goes blank and turns white. Not a person is moving. In the dark they had not known what I was doing. Must have seemed dream like. I rest next to Healer and put a pair of arms around him. I had touched him before, but now that I can

really see him it is all I can do not to pull away in revulsion. I just want to make it clear that he is one of us and not to be feared or mistreated.

Sufi comes up to us and tries to do the same. She touches and backs off several times before she succeeds.

~He tastes funny. Not unpleasant, just strange. He has a texture that I have never felt before.~ She drops her arm to the cloth covered area at the end of the lower arms. We have all seen and felt cloth before, though when I look at it closely I see it is strange as well. The fibers are all going north south and east west just like the bowl system and the walls around us. It must be how they see the world. Definitely not the same world as ours. Blessed is the Holy Circle.

~Healer, how long have you been on our world?~ I wait for a response.

Seeing that I am waiting, he responds using sign language, which is not easy with only two arms. I can barely understand him, ~Not know skin showing.~ That's strange. How could he know hand and sign, but not flashing?

I sign back to him, ~How long have you been on our world?~

This time he does understand and responds, ~Four years and two years with visitor on my world.~

Crab, there are people on his world from here. This is not just an invasion, but a cultural exchange.

Sufi asks, ~How long have my people been on your world.~ He showed two years Sufi, pay attention.

He responds, ~Over fifty years.~ Fifty years! That is about the same time that Gero showed the new tech has been happening! This is the source of the tech then. They are polluting our world! But, what was his role?

~Why were you in the pit with us?~ I should have asked that. The one who did was a small female. She could not be over twenty. She may have even grown up in slavery. Here naming tattoo has been made into a circle to erase her identity. I look around, they have all had this done. I look at Sufi, she is still Sufi. I can't see myself, but I suspect that I am still Rooi. Maybe they did not expect us to live.

He lowers himself to our height by resting the main part of his form on the floor and extending the lower arms out in front of him. Does not help much to make him look better, but maybe less intimidating?

~The person who taught me to understand your language had escaped from the pits into my world.~ That means he only knows ancient. No wonder he could not understand what I showed. ~I hid her from the Guardians of my world. Eventually I was caught. She was killed by the Guardians by resisting capture. I was brought here to this world. At first

they tried to convince me what they were doing was good. I asked too many questions and tried to confirm what was told by asking your people.

On this world your Matriarch is in control. I was brought before her. She saw no alternative but to place me in the pit until I awakened to the truth or died. I was in the pit for about two moon cycles. I am not sure though.~ Any more than Sufi was.

~There was one other before Sufi, about five eights ago.~ He has to think about how to say numbers. ~The person tried to eat me constantly. They never put food in the daily water.~ Ah, the water was once a day. That means I was only there for two days in the conscious state anyway. ~This person went insane, is that the right word?~ We sign affirmative and he continues, ~He or she eventually killed themselves by eating their own arms I believe. After the attempts to eat me ended I waited a few days before eating what was left of the body. There were no arms on the body.~ I would not have waited so long. ~Normally I do not eat meat, but this was the only food present and offered no resistance.~

~You do not eat meat normally? How do you survive?~ He has everyone's attention.

~Our forms are different than yours. We can eat most foods and obtain nutrition.~ He is actually better at signing than he is with arms. ~Some of us have chosen not to eat meat out of respect for the intelligence of animals.~ Could not be that intelligent if they could be caught. I think all he did was frighten the people here again. A few back away.

~We need to get out of here before someone comes and finds us. Roo, can you see a way?~

~I will try, but with all this light it is hard to concentrate.~

~Oh, no problem.~ He gets up and moves to one wall. Suddenly it is dark in the room. Everyone remains motionless. It takes me a moment to get over my own fears. We have glow balls of course, but they are not instant off. When they run out of food they slowly get dimmer and dimmer.

I reach out with the ability and feel the spaces near us. It takes some time. The complexity and the shapes are very scary to me. I get lost many times trying to curve when the shapes always say straight. I finally see enough to put together a map.

~Sufi, show Healer to turn the light back on.~ I hope he can! I just assumed that he could. Crab, what if. It goes back on. I nearly ink. Several people have gone blank to try and match the floor. There is not enough surface texture here to hide well. I never thought that our homes and other structures are all designed to be easy to hide in. Clearly this is

not a concern for them. Healer is very easy to see and except for the changing of outer cloth, does not change as we do.

I make a small amount of ink on purpose and use one arm to draw a rough map of the areas around us.

~This is the path I think you should take.~ I move my arm over the path that I have outlined.

~You? What about you Roo? I can't leave you now.~

~I will catch up. I want to see if I can find the others. I have two members of a Triad I am obligated to.~

~I need to find Gero then. Not strictly Triad, but he is all that is left of the one I was in.~

~I will try and find Gero as well Sufi. I need you to lead the others out of here. You show better Ancient than I do. They will follow you now that you have suffered the same as they have.~

~Show me then.~

~Once outside this room go down this path and turn here and here. There is a Guardian at the end of the path before a square operculum. There are so many of you I hope he will let you go rather than risk being hurt. I know this is strange, but apparently all the operculums are square here. This path leads to the outside and the forest beyond. Once out of here find a safe place and wait for me.~

~For us. I am going with Rooi. I was placed here for not understanding. I still don't. I will help in any way I am able.~ Not exactly my first choice in a companion, but he might be useful as this area looks more like his world than ours.

~How do we open this operculum?~ Sufi has made her way to the operculum and is pushing against it with no visible change.

~I could bubble it, but I am worried that if I keep making so much noise they will come and stop us.~

~Let me help. Rooi and I need to use the same ah operculum from this room.~ What do they call them? He goes to the operculum and using one of his upper arms with many fingers at the end, he grabs the metal sphere and turns it. Crab he is ugly! The operculum opens! Smart though.

How come this complex is done by the others? We are on my world. They even appear to have made the locals help if not do the entire construction. An oasis of comfort? I am assuming they find our way as disturbing as I find theirs.

~They hid the complex. Probably a condition of their having it.~ Sufi comments. Yes, it would disturb anyone outside just seeing it. Easy to subdue a few locals with low tech, but as more and more of the Coast people arrive to 'help' it would get much more dangerous. I scan using our method of moving out from the center in a radial pattern. Snail shell

like. Much more comfortable. Wish I could say that about what I am scanning.

~Inside or outside? Which side is the guard on?~

~Inside.~

~That means they are worried about people leaving, not entering.~

~Good point. I assume that means there are others here they want to keep inside. Since we were never expected to come up from the pits, that means others here on this level.~

~We also need to find salt. Everyone here is suffering from lack of salt.~

~They rationed salt when we were working. They keep it hidden and locked up.~

~But it must be here. I will find it. Be still for a moment.~ It takes much more than a moment and what I find is not what I was expecting. My scanning ability does not show me easily what something is made of. I can only show from the context of the surroundings it is in or the shape it holds. I scan beyond finding a way out. There is no mistaking the baths full of crawlies though.

~They are raising hatchlings to naming!~ I fall to the floor.

~What! That is not possible. You must be wrong. It is against everything we were ever taught.~

~If they are have hatchlings, then the water they are in will have the salt we need. Take us there and we will be saved.~

~People are attending them.~

~Then we can save them as well.~

~Where Rooi?~

~Please call me Roo. The room is three by eight arms second arm from my current orientation. We will not be able to get there in a straight line.~

~Roo, point where. I get us there. Not suspect me.~ He points to the cloth he is wearing. I don't get it, but I point in the direction I had shown the others.

~What about all of us?~ Fifteen sets of eyes look at me. How do we move this many people at once.

~I will stay here with the others. The worst they can do is imprison us again. None of us is a threat. You two are. We can always blame it all on you.~ The worst they can do is permanently dart all of you. Sufi is not a local I know she has seen what happens. I don't intend to be caught even if I have to get nasty, very nasty.

Healer opens the operculum further. Here we go. I let Healer lead. Is this what it looks like to be one of the mentally damaged? Everything looks wrong. We go straight, then left, then right. Everything is a sharp

angle.

~Someone is coming.~ He does not see me! His eyes are too far forward and he can't see what I am showing behind him. Another handicap. I would rather have three arms missing. I catch up and tap him just as someone comes around a sharp angle. They see us together. Another of his kind.

The two of them exchange information. Strange sounds come from their food slits. Their beaks are split into many pieces. Are they all diseased in this way? Maybe this was is malnourished as well. The shape of the second one is strange. I am not sure why yet. My eyes go back and forth between the two. Finally I try my special sight to see beyond the cloth they wear. Ah, this must be a female. She lacks the male tentacle and in the place where it would be is a receiving structure. Strange place for it. Doesn't that get into the way of locomotion for both of them?

She goes down one of the paths. Healer looks my way and then proceeds. I follow. He was right that no one would bother him. I still taste bad from the pits. Why are they not noticing that something is wrong? I scan while following Healer.

~We are here.~ Healer turns to face me as he signs. I sign back affirmative. He turns and pushes the operculum. It splits in two and he walks through. It closes immediately behind him. I am trapped out here alone. The operculum starts to open again. I hide. Healer walks through. I relax. He holds it open and I follow.

~Sorry. New for you.~ Yes it is. Please don't do that again. My hearts are racing. I can feel the extra pressure in my arms. Then I see what is inside.

There is only one person present, ~Gero!~ He is attached to the wall with a long chain. The end attached to him goes through his mantle. I do not remember having seen this. I need to be more aware.

He notices me looking at it, ~Does not hurt as bad as it looks.~ I notice that the site of the hole is infected and looking very green. He is slowly being poisoned by the metal in the chain. Copper! Don't they know what they are doing? His veins are starting to show the poison as well. I thought we had it bad in the pits. This is much worse.

A bell rings and he immediately starts to do something. He gets something from a ceramic pot and brings it over to a pool. He casts scoop fulls of material from the pot into the pool. I go over to the pool being careful to not be within reach of him. I look in. There are thousands of hatchlings in the pool. This is the first pool. I look further down the long hall. In the next area there is soft sand with a low wall. On the sand are newly shored crawlies. They have a near continuous production system for spawn. Just like I saw. I had hoped that I wrong.

The question is, is whose are these? Who would raise their spawn in defiance of all that is sacred? Who would risk everything for short term gain? We have genetic tests. Too many of one spawn show up and they know. Only a Matriarch could afford this. The people, the resources, the time. Only a Matriarch.

~Roo, please!~ Gero is as close to me as he can get. I may not like him, but I don't want to see anyone like this. I bubble the chain and a small stone breaks up when it hits the floor. Not solid. That means we are closer to the surface finally.

~Roo, please!~ I can hardly understand him he is so weak.

~I have freed you. What more do you want?~

~I will not survive. The poison is too much. Kill me. Stop the suffering.~

~Where are the others? Where are Sarra and Paff? Where is Kerr? Where is my Triad?~

He has to struggle to show, ~Kerr is in the new mines after he refused to help them. They search for Nauti pearls and he would not translate them. He will not survive long even with his ability. Paff is likely with him. Sarra would be dealt with by the Guardians. They don't take kindly to traitors. Of Mandhi and Sussi I know nothing. Now please, take me. I beg you.~

Healer comes up to me, ~Mercy.~ Gero knows nothing of mercy. Do I?

~You are a healer, heal him?~

~Mind healer, not body.~ Not again.

~His mind is what ails him, not his body.~

~Not enough time.~

The bell rings again and immediately he jumps up to feed them. What could they do to him now that would be so much worse than this? He is so weak he can barely show, yet he jumps like a young unseen when the bell rings.

I look over at the pool. I have to do something. This is so very wrong. The pool has a nice round bowl. I do not need a large stone, just enough to displace the water. I make a large bubble on a hand above the pool. It comes down crashing and spraying most of the contents of the pool on us and everything near us. A lot of the crawlies are washed out as well. I dissolve the bubble and most of the rock goes back to its world. Now a pile of wet earth and stones. The hatchlings are struggling on the floor.

~Make dimension sphere near ceiling.~ Dimension sphere? I guess that is technically more accurate. I do so and a hand sized stone falls to the now mud pile and sinks in. Most loose dirt falls and it suddenly gets lighter. I have reached the surface on the other world.

I empty Gero's bottle and the dip into the remains of the pool and fill it with sea water. A few remaining hatchlings and crawlies scramble out of the way. Looking down the rest of the hall I see far too many to deal with right now.

A crack appears in the floor near the extra stone and earth of the former pool. That initial crunch must have done it. There is not much time. I raise Gero and move him to the pool.

~At least here the salt will take you away from yourself.~

~You don't remember Roo! The salt will not work on anyone who has been with you.~ I don't like it, but I finally grant him his request and bubble his ganglia to replace them with stones. The corpse immediately collapses. At least I did the chain first. He was free when he died.

~Not easy to do.~ Healer signs. Not even for a suspected enemy. I hope I never have to do that again to anyone I don't intend to eat.

I look down the hall. I wonder who feeds the rest of them and where they get all the crabs, snails and such to feed them with. Different life stages would require different food. Not an easy process if you want healthy spawn. Main reason most do not even attempt it. This hall is too large to look like a mere attempt though. They know how to make it work.

~Others need.~ Healer is beside me waiting for me to recover. I turn to go and Gero's jar follows me. We meet no one on the way back fortunately. I might hurt someone if we did. Where is everyone? There should be many people here to take care of this many spawn and to watch the feeders. You don't chain someone like that unless you see them as a threat. Gero and I are not the only ones who would be repulsed by what we have seen. He was right that I am dangerous. The tech I could go either way on, but the controlled spawning is making me much more dangerous.

~People ahead.~ I scan around the corner and there are several eights worth. Mixed people and other world sentients. I need to find a better name. I scan for Sufi and don't find her.

~How did you know?~

~I can hear better than you can.~ Ah, so they do have one small advantage. They do communicate among themselves with sound. Could be they are simply better trained.

~Our fellow prisoners are gone. Only the captors are present. The kind like you are all wearing cloth and the ones like me all have proper shoes and belts.~ I do miss mine. If it weren't for the ability to float I would be in serious trouble if we had to walk far. Why take our shoes? We can't eat them.

~We can only hope they made it out themselves. We need to go

another way.~

~We need to find my Triad.~

~Honor obligation. I understand. I would feel the same way about my special friends.~

~If we go to your world would we be safe?~

~Maybe. It would be good to go there for other reasons. You need to understand from the other side.~

~Only when you understand the whole do you have resonance.~

~Resonance? We use the word harmony or enlightenment.~

~Understanding or wisdom.~

~Wisdom, yes, but don't forget compassion.~

~That will be hard for me. I have run out of compassion.~

~Maybe. They come this way. Find us a way out.~ His hearing is good.

I find an empty room near by first. I need time to scan and think. Healer tries the door but it is locked.

~Don't make noise this time. Some can hear as well as I can.~ Wish he could understand me when I flash. This way takes too much time. I look at the metal sphere. I need to make one large enough to enclose it and part of the door, judging from the workings I see inside. I also need it to fall in this direction.

~Be prepared to catch the stone.~ He moves his oral arm up and down. I hope that means he understands. I wait. He watches me. I motion towards the operculum. He finally moves and places his two upper arms below the metal sphere. Too close. I motion him to lower them. He moves lower a hand. I make the bubble, the stone falls. He catches it with those ugly fingers spread wide. Another advantage. Unfortunately he nearly lets it hit the floor. He is not very strong. I help him lift it out of the way and set it down.

~Heavy.~ Not really. I have to allow for the fact that he was in the pit far longer than I was. He may also be a juvenile for all I know. He seems to be only as strong as a typical unseen. Juvenile then.

We enter the room and he closes the operculum as well as he can. He then turns the light off. That will help in many ways.

I scan.

It takes time. I am at the limits of my ability. I am not getting enough information to make a decision in this confusing environment.

Healer becomes impatient and hands me, ~They will start searching rooms next. Try looking up.~

Up? Of course. The top of this hill should be close by. Did they make it by mining out the rooms like in the pit or did they cover this section after the building as we would have done? I scan up. Within several arms

of the ceiling I reach open air, small ferns and equally small trees.

~How do we get there?~

~Dimensional sphere of course.~

~Then float out the opening.~

I make a small test bubble and light fills the room! I move it about and there is light everywhere I move it.

~Be careful, the light can be see in the hallway.~

~Crab, I'm sorry.~ I make a bubble around both of us and we enter the light of another world.

Rescue

We are at the top of the hill, but everything is different than I know. Even the trees are strange with twisted shapes and leaves that look monstrously huge. Instead of cones there are strange colored shapes and large colored spheres on others. The bushes are even stranger. No ferns that I can see. The ground is covered with the plant the shaman showed us only smaller. There are walls of wood all around us. Behind me a ways off is what might be one of their buildings. If the outside is anything like the insides, all straight edges.

Healer has immediately taken off. He goes up to one of the wood walls and places his upper arms on top. Amazing that he can reach that far and not fall over. Whoa! He just pulled himself up and over the wall!

I make my way over but see no easy way for me to do the same. Then, duh, I remember that I can float. Is it safe to use the ability here? The structure is clearly made not grown. I could bubble it of course, but who every but this here might not like my destroying it. I decide that the only way is for me to float. I rise slowly to the top of the wood wall and look over cautiously.

Healer is moving quickly down hill towards the east. That is assuming I have not gotten myself turned around. I decide if he thinks it is safe I should as well until proven otherwise. Even with my ability he is staying ahead of me. I am doing all that I can. I have the jar of seawater held tightly trying not to spill any. He turns his eye arm towards me and I wave a few arms to slow down. Finally I catch up with him.

~Not much further Roo. Then we can dimensional sphere back to your world.~

~Won't there be Guardians?~

~Depends on how anxious they are to catch the escaped ones. I am guessing that considering how bad of health they are all in they will take their time, hoping many will die in the attempt.~

~But if they catch them before they are exhausted they will taste much better.~

Healer stops and looks at me, ~What did you just say? I may have misunderstood.~

~We usually fatten up a prisoner before consuming them. All of them look very close to death. Not good for anything other than fertilizer in my opinion.~

~I thought Sufi was your teacher and friend.~

~Dead everyone is just protein. Why waste it?~

~What about disease?~

~Anyone who was sick is of course fertilizer. Only protein from healthy people is used directly.~

~How often does this happen?~

~Depends. When it is determined we have too many people to support, it tends to go up. Everyone is on their best behavior during a lean season.~

~That is logical.~ Of course it is.

~We are almost far enough. It would be best to see what your world has to show before going back.~

~Right.~ I make a small one and a sphere of wood falls to the ground. I remember what happened to the Guardian I killed by accident. I float higher than any person can reach and make another bubble. Healer stays firmly on the ground watching. I slowly make my way around the bubble before realizing that it would be easier to move the bubble around me.

It is not until the second time around that I see them a short ways off. They are hiding well. From what I wonder? They are at the edge of a redwood grove looking back towards the complex. I slowly turn. The area between is charred and barren. There has been activity here before. I did not think of this possibility when I recommended this path. And why did they have to leave before we got back? What caused the complex people to come back to the rear of the complex and find us all missing? Not that all my stone dropping was exactly quiet. Could also have been the pump failure. Could have been a Guardian at an art exhibit, only causing destruction.

When I get back to the point of seeing the complex itself I see what they are worried about. Guardians are pouring out of the complex in large numbers. I need to give the pit people time to get further into the forest.

~I am coming down. There is going to be trouble. Guardians are coming this way. Sufi and the others have just entered the forest. We need to give them enough time to escape.~

~Make a bubble and we go.~ He does not seem to get upset about anything. I wonder why?

I am just about to make the bubble when I have second thoughts and make a small bubble first to be sure nothing has changed. Sufi is coming straight for the bubble I made. Crab! I make the larger bubble, which she could not miss and we quickly leave the bubble on either side. I collapse it to find that Sufi has caught up with us.

~About time you two showed up. What took you so long?~

~How did you get free? I know the exit was barred by a Guardian and was also locked.~

~It seems that your infection has affected me as well. Since I have known you nearly as long as Mandhi and Sussi it makes sense actually.”

She makes one about a hand in width at eye level.

~Mandhi and Sussi manifested two eight days ago.~

~Until you told us your story I did not know it was a possibility and until now I have not had the time to try.~

Healer pulls on our arms, ~We have more to worry about. They have weapons from my world. This is not good.~ A high tech world and apparently a violent one if he is worried. He is not making any attempt to hide though. Could not be that bad then.

The Guardians get closer and then stop. One comes forward to within easy showing range. I wish I had my shoes. I feel strange without it.

~Roo and Sufi I expected. Why is the Ambassador here and covered in strange cloth?~

~Ambassador?~ I turn to Healer.

~I did not lie. My name is Healer in your language.~

I turn to the Guardian who is removing the protective mantle shell.

~How could you imprison an Ambassador?~ I find I am facing Sarra!

~What? How did you get here?~

~It would seem there are many mysteries.~ Indeed.

~Where are the others?~

~Paff is with me at the lower complex. I have not seen Gero or Kerr.~

~Gero is dead and likely Kerr is as well. Gero was punished for being a traitor to the Matriarch.~ Sarra signs understanding.

~We both knew that Kerr was the local leader. That would be enough. The Matriarch is not forgiving.

I suppose you want to know about us.

We were all captured together as far as I know. I woke up in the Guardian complex chained to the floor. I did what any Guardian finding themselves in this situation would do.~

~You lied and told them you were my prisoner the entire time.~

~Yep. By the way, neither Paff nor I have been able to bubble yet.~

~I just did a few minutes ago. It may just take more time.~

~Where are Mandhi and Sussi?~

~You would not believe me if I told you. It would be better if you saw for yourself.~

~What about the rest of your group?~

~We were sent to bring you all back in. Impossible for those who have reached the forest. Someone set off alarms inside that distracted us long enough to allow their escape. Don't worry. They will be fine. We have an underground group that will meet them and take them someplace safe.~ I forgot to deliver the salt water! Crab!

~So, you are not exactly with Her.~ Sufi comments.

~Not exactly. You taught me a lot Roo. I can never look at something

without trying to figure out the other possibilities as well.~ I did that? He will make a good patriarch if he keeps going.

~Do you know about what goes on inside?~ Healer this time.

~Not personally. Because of how the Guardian code works. Most sponsors are careful not to let us know about what is really going on for fear we would switch sides, but no secret is forever. I have heard that she has a spawning pond. That is the main reason why no one has killed you yet. We heard of the destruction only you could have caused.~

~Worse. It is not just one spawning room. The entire complex except for the pits we were in is devoted to raising spawn.~

~Abomination! I did right then to dissuade the others. I told them the casualties would be too high. I knew that you have done nothing wrong and could lead us to the actual truth.~

~It goes much further than the spawning beds. The weapons you use are tech pollution far worse than anything chemical or biological. She plans no less than to bring down our entire civilization.~ I could not resist.

~I need to take the three of you to Her. It is the only way to stop the madness.~

~You showed you would show us about the rest of my Triad.~

~You will meet them there.~

~Why are they with Her?~

~You will see. You would not believe me otherwise. We need to start moving or those with me are going to get nervous.~ I can see the metal weapons, though I don't understand how they work. I am guessing that if these came from Healer's world and the Guardians favor them over their own weapons, they must be formidable.

I want to know how Sarra rose from a grunt to a leader in so short a period of time. There are no Nauti about to fight and gain prestige.

Sufi hands me, ~Don't trust him. I have a bad feeling.~

I hand her back, ~So do I.~ I am thinking that the scanning and moving ability might work to form a sort of shell also. I concentrate and imagine a transparent shell around the three of us.

~Good, it is about time you tried that Roo. Don't count on it being enough. Those weapons can still hurt us though.~ What? How does he know what I just did? Sufi does not seem to have. Why would an Ambassador be put into a pit with us? Too many questions. I look again with my sight at the weapons. No idea how they work, but being all metal means the result is likely to be able to penetrate our flesh easily. The fact that Healer does not think the shell will protect us means the metal has to be moving with more force than I can hold. I could bubble a weapon of course, but there are far too many of them to get them all before they are

turned on us.

As I am thinking about all of this, Sarra is looking at something on the mantel of a grunt. It looks like a monitor, but is too thin and not made of skin. The shapes are changing too rapidly as well. It is showing! And Sarra is showing back at it! A means of communicating from a distance. How far? When Sarra is done he rolls up the monitor and hands it to the grunt who places it in a belt pouch. Portable, fast, good for at least distances out of sight. How will that change our world?

~Transport will be here soon. The Matriarch is at the bay coast home. Too far to walk in time.~ What's the rush? It will be dark soon though.

~Captain, activity in the woods coming this way.~ Captain? I am wondering if Yaahi and Sarra traded ranks. For all I know those scars on Yaahi were just from drunken mag fights.

I am watching the woods when Healer gets my attention and points further north. I can see movement but can't see clearly enough. I try using the sight, but it is out of range. Not for long. Racers! Strange, these are striped, green and brown and very fast. Larger too. They look just as nasty and hungry though. I push harder on the shell I have made.

~What are they?~ Sufi asks.

~Eating machines. It is near dusk when they come out to hunt. The pit people will be easy prey if found.~

~Locals have already lead them away. That was why I felt alright about coming back to get you. They gave us all salt too.~

~Would they have done this? Set the racer on us?~

~They hate the Matriarch.~ She hands this to me, but I pass it onto Healer.

He answers back, ~They have reason. You showed us what they did to these people by Kerr's account. I am sure they did not stop when they came up here.~

~The Matriarch is from the coast. This is a long way from home. Well outside the normal range of a community leader.~ Yes it is. Very far. With this new technology she will be able to take over the entire coast of this continent.

~Ambassador, why were you in the pit?~

~Ah, I wondered when your curiosity would get you to ask. I was in the pit because the Matriarch put me there. She thought it might convince me to come to her way of thinking.~

~So you are with us against her.~

~I represent my own people. Never forget that. At the moment though they would not approve of what is happening here.~

~But this tech came from your world.~

~No, it didn't, at least not with my approval. That is the problem.

Your world should not have this technology, at least not your people. Not yet anyway.~

~Gero showed that there is a lot of information on the Nauti spheres and we know they dug the pits to rescue three of them.~

~That took tech in advance of what you have elsewhere on your world. I am guessing they found or rather took another spheres before those.~

~How much tech did they take off of you when they imprisoned you?

~

~None actually. We are forbidden to bring any technology into a world that does not already have it. At least not until they reach a level safe enough to have it.~

~How did you get here?~ He certainly does not bubble as I do.

~The operculum you observed is but one of two. I came through that one. It was quite a sensation. I nearly did not survive. Your Guardians don't like surprises.~

~Where is the other?~

~I have not seen it yet. I suspect that it might be in the Matriarch's home. A private operculum. There is the servant one you observed and there is her's. I suspect it is used by diplomats and spies.~

~She is stealing the tech from whatever world she finds useful.~

~Which explains why everyone was so upset when you and Mandhi solved the equations. They were already using them themselves.~

~But through tech means. Roo, Sussi and Mandhi and now Sufi can manifest the bubbles without tech. That makes you very dangerous to them.~

~Dangerous enough to kill us if they can. The pit was the first attempt. An easy one to explain if necessary. Next time they will be more direct. What they don't know about is the infection. If it spreads or even if just Roo can infect there will soon be many with the ability.~

~There is one other way. She can attempt to control you. With the three of you on her side, she does not know about Sufi and the infection, she believes she can control the world.~

~Showing about infections, most of the pit occupants will not survive. There is a massive fungus infection among them. For some reason I do not appear to be affected, just hungry.~

~If the Matriarch follows the usual pattern we are about to be fed well.~

~Poison?~

~Not yet, but be careful. If something tastes strange don't eat it.~

~Not all poisons can be detected by taste.~

~I don't feel so hungry any more.~ When I scanned her earlier she

seemed in real danger, but now only a little thin. How did that happen? Maybe this ability is not reliable.

~Here they come. Do not interfere no matter what you see Roo.~

~Why not?~

~I will explain later, but for now just observe. You need to learn as much as possible.~ What does he know?

The racers are much larger than the ones we faced. Clearly a different species. Glad we only faced the small ones, though I still feel bad about destroying them. We are closer to them than the Guardians and they reach us first. The shell holds and the first couple bounce off of it. The rest learn and avoid us completely. I turn to see how the Guardians will react.

They all have their weapons ready. Not everyone has the same type. The grunts react first. I see flame and noise come forth from the ends of the weapons. Their bodies react by moving backwards slightly at each eruption of sound.

~Roo, look at the racers!~ I turn to face them again and see they explode one by one. What kind of weapon is this that causes creatures to explode from afar?

~Get down flat on the ground. They are not being careful.~

Something very fast goes by me and I feel the shell give for a moment. I react rather than think and make myself nearly one with the ground. Instinctively I hide as well. A flame races overhead. The same weapon we devised but much more powerful. The shell seems to protect us from it at least. Healer is beside me, not as flat, but better than I thought possible for his kind.

From the side I see a strange beast. A few of the racers attempt to attack it but are as effective at it as they were with my shell. Then one of the racers spits venom at it and a long streak remains. It does not appear to have done more than mark the surface however. Once the racers give up on the beast and get far enough away, the others destroy them with their weapons. I get the idea now that they are projectile weapons. I cannot see the object thrown, but there is an immediate response from activation of the weapon to the effect on the racers in an apparent straight line.

The air around us has a strange taste. A chemical reaction is responsible I suspect. Equations of remembered reactions speed through my mind. I was told that I used to be very good at chemistry, but until now I had thought I had forgotten all but the glaze and clay aspects. Nitrogen and sulfur oxides are the major chemical components. That combination would be within our own ability. Did they make it or steal it?

The others are getting on top of the low flat portion on the back of the beast. I go up to it. Tastes of metal and some strange hard organic.

~It is safe I assure you.~ Sarra gets up and hangs a few arms over one edge. Healer seems to know what it is and looks into the front end of the creature, or rather a device. No creature has a metal shell and circular arms.

~They have adapted it to your physiology. Not perfect, but time and experience will change that. Takes two to drive it. We use only one person to do the same.~

Sufi and I look at each other and then attempt to climb on. Sufi is still weak. Several of us grasp her arms and bring her up. They make a space more in the center of the device. Once we are all on Sarra pounds the metal surface over the control section and the device begins to move. I look over the edge and see the circular arms turning. How can they do that without breaking off? No creature can do that!

~The wheels always entrance new comers.~ Sarra adds. The others signal amusement. I pull myself back up to a sitting position. The device moves much more rapidly than a crab and obviously carries much more. There are the two in control, the five Guardians, Sarra and the three of us. A standard crab carries two and supplies.

I hand Sufi, ~What if Sarra can bubble. That might explain his sudden advancement to captain.~

~He could easily defeat any opponent with a single bubble.~

~Or a series of smaller ones to disable first. He would have to appear to win fairly.~

~He could the same to any of us. Can someone bubble through the shell I am beginning to use?~

~A dangerous game indeed.~

We ride the rest of the way in silence. Wish my thoughts were. I see so many scenarios playing out in my ganglia. There are just too many ways for this to end bad for us. When outnumbered hide. When you can't hide join. When you can't join escape. Menace's world seems safe enough. At least we understand how they attack.

I can taste the sea in the air. We are getting close.

Suddenly the trees clear and we are confronted with a large sand dune. We turn right and follow the coast of the bay. That would mean we are heading north if I am not totally lost. Could they have transported me to the other side of the bay when I was darted? It is dark enough now that glow balls on the front of the transport are started. They are much much brighter than I have ever seen. I have to stop being surprised.

~We are here. It is too late for an audience with the Matriarch, so I will have you taken to your rooms.~ Sarra hands me. I want to remove

my arm when I feel him touch me.

I hand both Healer and Sufi, ~No matter what stay together. Explain it as being too soon after the pit and we need each other right now.~

~Thank you Roo. I would like that very much.~ Strange for a teacher to be thankful to a student.

~Captain Sarra, I do know my way around. As they will be staying with me I would be happy to take over.~

~They have their own quarters more appropriate to our kind. They would be more comfortable there I'm sure.~

~After weeks in the pit they will be fine with me. We will adjust.~

Sarra thinks for a moment, ~I will advise my commander. You are free to go.~ And we will be watched. Carefully.

Without further comment, Sarra leaves with his group and Healer motions us to follow him. I have to use my ability to see without light to even know where we are. Sufi follows me by holding a hand.

If this was a bay settlement, it is clearly not so any longer. Most of the structures are of the Healer's people's design of which I have only an arms experience. So far I have been far too dependent on destructive methods. I need to follow Healer's example. Easy for him. He does not have the ability. This is a curse as much as a blessing. I reach for my moonstone and of course it is gone. I am not even wearing shoes, much less a tool belt.

~This is my home on your world.~ We walk into light. There is cloth everywhere. Almost ever surface is covered. There is a raised structure in the middle of the room that would be nearly up to the ceiling in our home, but here is only about one fifth the way. I am slowly getting used to the high ceilings. No evidence that it will fall on us. Yet.

He goes over to a cabinet and opens the operculum to pull something out. Those hands with many fingers do seem to work alright. I never thought that not having suckers would work.

~Food. I think you will be able to eat it. Better than we got in the pit anyway.~ Whatever he is holding has to go up and down as he shows to us.

~How are you able to store food for so long? You were in the pit for eights.~ He hands me the container and it is cold, very cold. He then takes it back and places it in another cabinet. A moment later he brings it out and hands it back to me. It is now room temperature. Amazing!

~Remove the top.~ He tries to act out what he wants me to do. I place a line of suckers on it and pull. Nothing happens. He motions to turn. I hold the bottom with another line of suckers and turn the top portion. It comes up easily. The container itself tastes strange. Hopefully the contents will not. Sufi comes over to see what we have.

I place a tentacle inside. ~Tastes good. What is it?~ Is it safe to eat?
~Meat from a species you do not have on this world. But species related to yours on my world enjoy it very much.~

~Our kind are on your world?~

~Sort of. Not quite as intelligent and only live in the sea, not on land or fresh water.~

~Of course the water has to be fresh. No one wants to live in soiled water.~

~Sorry, wrong word. I meant rainwater.~ Ah, only in salt water.

~They don't suffer from spawning sickness?~

~Like the Nauti, they are adapted for the sea.~

~Roo, it's good.~ Sufi has nearly finished the container when she hands it to me.

I look into the container and then look up as Healer hands me another one.

~Different flavor.~ I taste it. Good too. Strange, but good. Soon we are in a group on the floor with Healer finding even stranger food.

~Aren't you going to eat?~

~You would not like how we eat. I believe it is considered obscene here.~

~What to do you do? Put food into your mouth in full view?~

Something we would NEVER do. Hey, it was the only thing I could think of.

He makes a strange motion with his mouth and eye hand.

~Sorry. We do not hide our mouth when we eat.~ It is not easy for me to regurgitate, but I feel like it at the moment. Sufi has left my side and is looking around. She comes back with a small piece of cloth. She rips a strip off one side, then another. She then ties on strip to one corner of the square piece of cloth and the other to the opposite diagonal.

~This should work.~ He looks at what Sufi has made, holding it up. Then folds the large portion in half along the diagonal. He then holds the structure to his mouth hand and ties the strips behind the upper arm. It stays in place.

~Should work. Thank you Sufi. I can have the guild make something more elegant later. Not fashionable enough to wear before the Matriarch.~ He takes a handful of food and tries it. Not perfect but at least I am no longer getting sick.

Kitchen

After we finish the food Sufi asks, ~Is there another water device here?~

~I have a different idea and this idea will require that we all get dirty again. After we come back we can all get clean. There is even a soaking pool here.~ That would feel good.

~Where are we going?~

~We are going to join the garbage detail.~

~What? Why?~

~You can't solve all problems by bubbling your way out. Sooner or later you will regret what you have done.~

~I already do. So what do we do?~

~Anyone who volunteers for garbage is not asked questions. That will get us close to the food preparation areas.~

~It is night. Why would they be preparing food now?~ Good question Sufi. We are going to rest aren't we?

~That box I took the food out of for us? They have a larger version. The Matriarch's group eats a lot of food. It is not possible to catch enough each morning and prepare it all in time. This way they can rotate crews throughout the night and only heat the food just before it is served. She has taken to cooked food. Makes her more modern she thinks.~

~Why are we going there?~

~I thought you would figure it out. To gather information.~

~From food preparers?~ He does not answer but goes into another cabinet to pull out some rags with holes in them. He removes his current cloth and replaces it with these rags. He then goes to another cabinet and pulls out two shoes! Well, sort of shoes. They must have seen two eights of users and then left to rot for eights. I am reluctant to touch them much less wear them, but I can't use my ability around everyone without attracting a lot of attention.

~They can read our names.~

~And why would a tall one be collecting garbage?~

~You think they don't have garbage on our world? We make lots of garbage. Not all the workers here are ambassadors. Some were brought here to work. We can do some things your kind cannot do easily.~

~Young ones not named yet?~

~We name our young when they are hatched.~

I nearly ink, ~What? There would be too many. You would destroy your world!~

~We nearly did. More later. We need to go.~

He turns the light off and Sufi grabs an arm.

I hand Sufi, ~Are you well enough? This is likely to involve physical labor.~

~We both have served enough time in the clay room to know what that is. I will be fine. It is strange. I thought after eights in the pit I would be like the others, but I am not. After a few arns in the light and a good meal and I feel like it has never happened.~

~Come to think of it I have not been sick since arriving on the coast. Does this have something to do with the ability? A correlative path?~

~Possibly. It is obvious we can still suffer pain and I suspect death.~

~Don't be a dumb slug.~

~What about our names? Won't we be recognized? And what about the watchers?~

~Roo, you know how to leave this room without anyone seeing. I am surprised.~ He waits.

Crab. ~I don't like bubbling blind.~ I make a small bubble. Nothing falls out of it this time at least. No one died. No holes in trees. Menace's world looks quite at the moment. I collapse the bubble and then make one large enough for all of us.

It is much hotter on this world. The ground is slightly lower than the room floor, but not enough to cause problems. We exit the bubble and I collapse it.

~Now where?~

~You tell me Roo.~

Crab! I think. I try to remember where we are in relation to the room and the surrounding buildings. We need to get far enough away that the watchers will not think to look for us there.

~Where are the preparation areas in relation to your room?~

~Due east, close to the docks. They still don't have enough of those boxes built yet to hold all that is necessary. Most prey is captured live and kept in cages in the bay or just on the shore as appropriate.~ No luck tricking him into pointing. He opens his food pore in a peculiar way. A crescent shape.

~We go this way.~ I lead and the others follow. At least everyone can see in the light. I just hope we are going in the correct direction. I can see the bay from here. We are close. I can't go too wrong.

A moment later we are at the edge of the bay. So far we have only seen a few locals and they have stayed away. I really don't need more trouble right now. But what is before us is strange. There are three three sided shapes poking above the surface of the water. I scan then. They appear to be constructed of ceramics of a low grade. The structure will not last long in the wet condition. I look about. The tide here is near high

judging from the rack on the sand.

~If we bubble in the water we are less likely to be noticed nor bubble into a building accidentally.~

~What about the structures?~

~They are harmless in themselves. The only question is what the natives will do if we approach them. I recommend we do not enter the water too close to them.~

~Well reasoned Roo.~ But? ~One problem. Our kind cannot survive underwater for longer than a fraction of an arm. A small fraction.~

~We stay on the surface then. Less safe, but it is right on our world. We may still succeed.~ I hope.

We enter the water south of the pyramids. Healer keeps his food opening above the water. I understand now. He cannot breath in water. A handicap for sure. He is very slow in the water too. Better adapted for land. There he is the clearly better.

~I am going to bubble us back. Be prepared.~ I still make a small one first. We are close to the docks, but not close enough to worry about bubbling one or anyone close by.

~Wait, cover our eyes for a moment to let us dark adapt some.~ Good idea. We do so. I bubble just as something brushes one of my arms. What have I let loose on my world?

We come ashore. The Healer's rooms are surprisingly close to the food preparation area. I am not sure if this is an honor or an insult. The air tastes of a mix of rot and flavors. We are on a small path outside the main residence. I feel the walls surrounding us. They are moist from the night air and customary fog. Stone. The same kind of stone as from the pit. Not the same as the bay settlement, nor the coast, that was soft stone, easily ground into material that can be made into clay. This is harder stone, more primitive. From the fires of below. Not as easy to work. To cut and shape this stone requires power beyond what we normally use. Or a great deal of time and labor. How long has the Matriarch been working on this project?

~We are here. I must assume the role of your servant. It is not allowed for my kind to be in a position of leadership over people.~

~But I saw your kind ordering slaves about.~

~Ah, those individuals were no longer classified as people.~ A not so subtle reminder of what can still happen in a moment.

~What do we do?~

~You were once without names. I believe you call them unseen? There are no unseen here. People must do the same work they once did. The Matriarch does not trust the unseen this close to her. They have not demonstrated loyalty and have nothing to lose.~ To lose one's name is the

ultimate. Maybe dying is worse. I don't know. Those who lose their name rarely live long so it is essentially the same.

~Sufi, you are the elder and should assume leadership.~

~You are the stronger Roo.~

~They will not know that, nor should they. We both need to be careful not to use the abilities overtly, even if threatened. One slip and the Matriarch will know we are here and assume we are spying, which would be the truth.~ I turn to Healer, ~You are an Ambassador of another world. Can you also accept this understanding? We must not give ourselves away. We are in extreme danger here. The ability will only go so far. Even together we are not strong enough to take her on.~

~Agreed. We are here to gather information not start a war.~ That strange crescent shape again.

~What do we do?~

Sufi takes over, ~We act like we belong. Most people pay no attention to the help, even the help itself. Create a mess by hassling people and you are likely to face discipline from someone bigger than you.~ She turns to Healer, ~We go into the kitchen, find work to do and do it. At the same time, keep our eyes aware for what others are showing. Help show, and what they like to show the most is about those who are likely to make their lives difficult, those bigger than they are.~ I am feeling like a crawly again. Of course, Sufi probably saw this every day in the studio. It still makes me nervous. I have to remember my time as an unseen in a ceramics and chemistry study area. Do not draw attention to oneself. In fact do not even think of self. Self does not exist.

I look at Healer and see a glazed look come over his eyes. Amazing that it can be seen in another species. He lowers himself folding slightly and looking down instead of ahead. Never look another in the eyes. A threat in all people apparently. The body relaxes itself and moves forward.

An operculum is passed and the kitchen entered. There is much work to be done. Waste needs to be removed. Another comes over to assist. A large container is lifted and taken outside. The contents are emptied into a larger container. Inoculated soil is added and the contents are stirred. Then the container is moved over to the waiting crab. It is hoisted on top and the driver urges the crab forward.

More work needs to be done. It is easy to get into a rhythm and easy to forget self. A distant image not connected to existence. Collected refuge, move to inoculate stage, stir and push up on a waiting crab. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

When I become aware there are people all around me. It is harder to do the work aware, but the repetition helps. I don't have to think about

what I am doing any longer. I noticed Sufi, who is larger than I am bringing fresh rock crabs in from a float at the dock. Should she be doing that this soon? I bump into a table. Repetition only works so far. Where is Healer?

I see him over the open oven. His skin glows from the heat of the coals. Amazing that a creature can take that much without drying out. Then I remember, his skin is totally different from ours. Does not dry out as easily because it is normally dry. I notice another of his kind getting materials off a high shelf. This space was designed, as were the rest of the structure, by his kind. Why? This is our world, why make it like his?

So far I am only seeing the negative. People enslaved to a ruthless ruler. Pollution, selfish reproduction, stealing from other cultures, destroying existing cultures. No one does something without a reason. The Matriarch must have thought the rewards were worth it.

The showing in the food preparation area is mostly about the work itself. New orders are handed down to the head preparer who then passes on orders to others to carry out what needs to be done. I am seeing no showing about the Matriarch or others outside this area. Either she has trained or threatened them well or no information has come this way. That seems really hard to believe. Who could control information that well?

Each person does one job only and their range is limited. No one goes more than a few arms from their station. Always someone ready to receive the task to operate in their limited range. No one knows the whole. Looks like someone very paranoid or very careful.

A pair of Guardians enters the preparation area. I can feel everyone tense up or maybe it is just me. No one stops what they are doing so I don't either. I try to ignore them, but I don't trust them. Sarra does not speak for all the Guardians. If he is really with us.

Without warning I suddenly feel intense pain. I lose awareness for a moment. What happened? Being very careful I scan around me so I don't have to turn. The two Guardians are standing in my blind spot with a metal device. They move it towards me. I suspect this is the device, but I can't respond the way I would like.

The pain is more intense and lasts longer this time. I collapse to the floor. Crab, I have inked. I show nothing and try to rise to go back to my task. This time they have moved enough that I can see them.

~I told you they are too dumb to avoid pain.~

~Let's try the tall one. Is it a male or female?~

~Doesn't matter to me. I certainly am not going to spawn with one.~

They move towards Healer. I stop what I am doing and watch. I can't act without putting everyone in danger, but I can be witness to their

cruelty. Sure enough they go up to him from behind. Healer has a much larger blind spot than we do. He is cooking something over a hot fire. I can see the glow of the flames reflected in his upper most mouth arm.

The two Guardians slowly move close and one touches the device to a lower exposed arm. Nothing happens. He checks something on the device and tries again. Still nothing.

~Must be broken.~ He turns to find another person to try it on, but when he turns around he sees everyone looking at him. Not even a Guardian will try anything with this many against him. He goes back to fumbling with the device, but he does not try it on Healer again or anyone else.

I hear an operculum open behind us. I hear movement of those around us. I look around to see everyone assuming the Nauti position. I hand a person next to me, ~What's going on?~

~The Chosen One.~ I was called that once. I wonder who it is? I assume the position. I have no idea where Sufi is. This position does not allow much visibility, but I have the advantage of the sight. I female enters with a male on a tether. A prisoner? Here? I recognize the male. It is Kerr! I thought he was dead.

When they get close enough I see Kerr is blank. It is as if he can't show. I scan inside. He has been damaged severely. Parts of his main ganglia are scarred heavily. He may not be able to show any more.

The other I can see now is Paff. She stops right next to me, but I don't move. She does not appear to recognize me. She is watching Healer and the two Guardians. Menace is with her! It seems to be excited about being in the food area and immediately starts to search the corners for scraps. It won't find much I cleaned up well.

~Did you use the shocker on him?~

~He was not working hard enough.~ One says.

~It appears he is the only one who is working. How do you explain that?~

They are silent. What does she have over them that they don't just attack her? Menace does find something and quickly consumes it. Starts to look for more. No one else seems to be upset by this strange life form. It has apparently been here before.

She goes to Healer and gets his attention. He lowers himself down to a more equal level. He still has the glazed over look.

~What is your name?~

He looks at her, pauses, then finally answers awkwardly, ~I work.~

~Please tell me your name?~ She repeats gently and clearly.

He wrinkles his face, then shows, ~I work.~ At this he rises and goes back to work cooking the food over the fire.

~Guardians I don't believe your account of what happened. Leave the device and leave this area at once.~ They show acknowledgment, slowly and carefully place the device on the floor, turn slowly and leave.

The person I recognize as the food preparation area supervisor moves slightly. She has let herself be seen by Paff.

~Good Quir, what happened here?~

~They came in with the device and without any reason or warning used it on the one next to you. She was working hard and had been all evening. I have no complaints as to her performance.~ Thank you. I was not sure if I was doing enough. Paff looks at me, or rather at the ground near me. Ink. There is still ink I left on the ground. ~They then used the device several times on the tall one, again for no reason. I have never seen a more devoted worker.~

~Is he well?~

~He is not very smart, but does not mind the heat. He just arrived tonight, but I would be happy to have him on my shift permanently.~ That must be rare as they had no reaction to our arrival. I also note she did not say the same thing about me. I will have to use more effort.

She turns to the device, picks it up and examines it. Suddenly without any apparent movement it splits into two with a loud snap. She bubbled! That means that Sarra likely can as well. I nearly ink again.

~They will not hurt you again. I will speak to their captain. Turn off the fire or he will start cooking one of us. This shift is over. The cleanup crew will be here in a fraction of an arm.~ She then leaves out the back, the same way we came in. No one moves until she is out the door. Both she and Sarra went from nothing to leadership positions in less than an eighth. I don't believe it.

Healer does stop once the flames are extinguished. Sufi goes up to him and grabs an upper arm. He follows her out. I follow them as others start to disperse as well. Most turn to the right as they leave. No one follows us as we make our way back to the docks. The few ships tied up are quiet. The lights are nearly dimmed. The world has changed again. We slip into the water and I make the bubble.

The sun is just about to set when we get back to where I think we left the room.

~Look for the circle Roo. A bubble always leaves a circle.~ It takes us a moment to find it. There are not a lot of recognizable objects in this world. It is strange enough that everything looks similar. Ends up I was only three arms off. The depression in the low plant life was what finally assured us we had the spot.

~Ready?~

~You are not going to look first? What if they are waiting for us?~

~Then I am hoping that a large bubble cuts them in half. I am way too tired to do much more.~

~Won't that make it difficult with the Matriarch?~

~Who do you think all that food was for?~ Good point Healer. I make the bubble. The light is dim, just like Healer set it. I sense no one else in the room. We exit the bubble and I collapse it. There is a depression in the floor, circularly shaped a fraction of a hand.

~One reason not to use this method of getting around. How do I explain this?~

~No one comes into the room. They really don't like us tall ones.~

~How come you did not react to the pain stick? I inched when they did it to me the second time. I thought I was going to dissolve.~

~I saw what happened to you and covered my lower, ah, arms, with fat from the cooking. It insulated me from the electric charge.~

~That was what that was? I have never been hurt that way before. I think I would prefer the dart.~

~Time for the soak?~

~Spiders, that sounds wonderful.~ Sufi looks at me and then adds, ~Will all of us fit?~ Very brave of her. We have seen him without his cloth. Incredibly ugly. Actually his is ugly even with the cloth, but somehow it helps. I understand why they wear it now.

~I believe so. I will need some help adjusting the temperature. My kind are used to much warmer water than I think you would like. Maybe something in between?~

~You can adjust the temperature? How is this?~

~I'll show you.~ We follow him into the separate room. That is strange. Anyone who can afford to have a soak in their home would place it in the center of the largest room. At least this room has a decent smooth floor surface. Easy to get a grip on. The rough stuff in the other room that tastes horrible and looks stranger. Maybe no one came into the room because they did not want to walk across it.

He motions towards two raised circles on the wall. Why do they use the Holy Circle everywhere? We would be darts if we blasphemed in this way. Is this what got him into trouble with the Matriarch?

~If I turn this one on cold water comes out. If I turn the other one, hot water comes out.~ I can see the steam when he does the second one. Is he going to cook us?! I back away before I become aware of my action.

~Do both together and you can adjust it to whatever temperature you desire.~ I am so tired I start to enter before the soak is even full. Why was it empty? They waste water too? The water is warm, but I don't care. I just don't care.

~Roo, you are supposed to clean yourself first. Now we have to

change the water.~

~Sorry I am not very aware.~ I climb out. ~Where is the bucket?~

~Nothing so mundane. Hold still.~ I don't think that will be a problem. Suddenly I find myself being sprayed with cool water. Feels good after the too warm water of the soak. I raise each arm in turn until I am done.

~Now you may enter the soak.~

When I do so, it is full and Healer is already there. It is deep! I extend our my arms till I finally reach the, what? I look down. It is Healer's lower arms. Harder to taste underwater, but the sight is enough. I instinctively retract an arm. This is crazy. He has been a better friend than a lot of people I have known.

Sufi pushes me aside and submerges herself. We momentarily inner twine. Is this allowed with a teacher? She must be twice my age. I have no idea how old Healer is, but I do not want to think about that. I work to maintain myself above him till I get tired and sink into water.

Matriarch

When I become aware again I am in a soft place covered with cloth. Sufi is next to me. I tentatively reach out but do not run into Healer. I slowly move enough cloth till I can see out from under it. Then I nearly ink.

Before me is Healer in new fancy cloth. I didn't really expect him to have only one. After all, how many shoes did Sussi have? I miss them. I hope they are okay. I did not see anything about them in the food area. Did not see anyone show much of anything.

Crab! There is a bubble in front of the eye containing hand of Healer. He raises another hand with what looks like a piece of wood painted yellow for some reason. He slowly pushes the piece of wood into the bubble. It goes in one side of the bubble and comes out the other side. That is something I never tried doing. Interesting. The bubble disappears and the stick falls in two.

He forms another bubble and raises another yellow stick. He repeats the experiment. This time the stick goes in one side of the bubble and even though he pushes the stick in all the way, it never comes out the other side of the bubble. He makes some sound from his oral pore. Something in his own language I am guessing.

Are you through playing yet? Who showed that? Who made the bubbles? I reach for Sufi and feel her breathing slowly. She is still unaware. I know that I did not make them. Wait, I did not see anyone show that. I carefully look around the room and see it! I quickly hide and cover myself. I thought Healer was ugly, this is a monster!

Your special one is aware.

Excrement! Get out of here before she sees you! Oops! Excrement!

She thinks I am beautiful. A very strange sound comes out of his oral pore and the slit turns into a crescent. I wish I understood.

Healer reaches in and hands me, ~Come out Roo. You might as well meet her.~

I hide even further under the cloth.

~It's okay Roo. She is another person from my world. She will not hurt you.~

There is a low rumble sound from the new one.

~She promises not to eat you.~ Doesn't sound like an easy decision.

Why does she hide? Another person showing in my ganglia. How can they do this?

I peek out from under the cloth and see a Holy Sphere floating in the air less than an arm away. I don't know how I can tell, but I sense it is

somehow aware of me. I bubble us out.

~Sufi, we need to get out of the bubble.~

~Why did you bubble? I was having a wonderful dream.~

~Not now, we need to hurry.~ I am out of the bubble first, but just as Sufi is crossing the edge, Healer and the two others appear at the edge. I was not in time. He figured out how the bubbles work somehow.

~Healer, I will defend us.~

~There is nothing to worry about Roo. These are friends. The round one does not eat and the other has made a promise. I have never known her to break a promise. You are safe.~ Without the promise she would eat me? Crab.

Where are we and what is this thing about to annoy me? I have bubbled to pink. I was not thinking, just reacting. One of those moving lumps has bumped up against Healer's friend.

~It won't hurt you. What are you?~

I am the exalted one. The magnificent one. The. It raises its back arm straight into the air and sticks its oral slit up into the air as well. Strange stance.

~Oh, please. You are a mortal being like everyone else?~

Sufi asks, ~Are they good to eat?~ Good question. I raise an arm to taste it. The strange surface texture is too much for me and I withdraw the arm.

~Tastes bad.~ I am starting to itch. It takes less time each time we come here. I bubble all of us to a green world.

An interesting experience, however we have company in this world. The sphere apparently shows this. It is strange seeing the words in my ganglia. It is like seeing it with my eyes, but also not. A group of small creatures similar to Menace but with a tuft of something on their oral arms sticks straight up into the air. Pretty blue color. Their beak structure is showing. Disgusting beasts.

Males of the only one on Roo's world. So, Menace is a she. The sphere quickly moves off. How does it fly with no wings?

How do you move with no wings? Same method. Have you not taught her anything Healer?

~I have not had an opportunity as of yet. We are expected at the evening meal with the Matriarch. We have less than an eighth to get ready.~

You look ready. Are you hoping to mate? It does not look at Healer when she shows this. Nor does she bother using arm language. Rather, she is using her radula to lick her surface. Is she eating herself? I wouldn't if I was her. What is that stuff covering her? I have never seen, felt or tasted anything like it.

You two need work. Suddenly a thin green cloth swatch appears on my mantle. I look at Sufi and a blue one is on her. I was not wearing shoes in the soak or bed. Now suddenly I am.

~What are the shoes made of? I don't recognize the material.~

~A nano fiber network with neuronal interface. It will warn you of poisons in any food you are near. Also explosives.~

~Explosives! Are we going to war?~ Outlawed for thousands of years.

~I am afraid you are not allowed to have this technology. At least not yet.~ The fancy shoes disappear and a simple but elegant carbon fiber construct replaces it.

If you don't tell her what is going on she will die in there or kill everyone else. Now she is looking straight at Healer like she is going to eat him. I really hope she keeps her promise. She then turns to me, *I really don't like seafood. I prefer this.* An image appears in my mind of her attacking a huge animal many times her size. It falls to the ground with red liquid leaving its form. She starts to eat it immediately. Nothing on their world is polite enough to cover their oral pores when they eat. Disgusting.

Sufi is trying to entertain the locals. She is being as successful as Sarra was. She has one trying to attack each of her arms. They are fast and occasionally successful. I raise a few stones and pass them past their eye arms. They are immediately attracted to the movement. I tease them into following the stones and send each of them off in a different direction chasing them.

~Thanks. I hope I don't become infected.~

~Pay attention. Your bubble ability is useful, but not the only way of using this ability. It is a variation on what we call dimension shifting. It can also be used for moving between locations on the same world and not just between worlds. I will demonstrate.~ He immediately disappears. I feel something taping me on top of my mantle. I look up to see him looking down at me! Crab, how did he do that?

~Did you become infected by being with me and Sufi? Not enough time has passed. It took the others weeks to manifest.~

~You are not infectious Roo. There is however more going on than you or I are aware of. Therefore it is best to be as prepared as possible. Others on this world are not aware of this variation. If you and Sufi learn it, your will be at a distinct advantage.~

~If this is so important, then how come you did not teach us earlier? Why wait till now?~

~I am restricted by a code of ethics too. I am not allowed to use my abilities within sight of people on your world while on your world.~

~But I saw you bubble a few arn ago.~

~That was unintentional. I needed to figure it out before I could be ready to train you should the opportunity present itself.~

Sufi adds, ~And now that we are not on our world, you are free to do so. Why not do so last night?~

~That would have been a real distraction last night and you might have missed seeing Paff and Menace. It was important that you see her new role.~

~Being me.~ Not that I want the attention right now.

~She is in a great deal of danger for your benefit. Don't judge what you don't understand. Now, I will take you both through the process. I am sure when you see how it works it will be easy for you.~

~What do we do?~

~Be prepared for entering dimension space. You will not be able to breathe while we are in this space. I will communicate by thought as you saw my Long Tail do.~ Only certain insects have tails. A rare word in our language.

Long Tail?

~Your name does not translate very well into their language. Be happy. I could have made it much worse.~

I do have a nice long tail. Very beautiful in fact. The long arm on the back makes various shapes as she looks at it. That must be the tail. It is in the correct position I guess. I am not good at life studies. I notice that the floating sphere is gone.

~Where did your other friend go?~

~She will return when she wants. Pay attention now. We begin.~

The world goes dark. When my eyes adapt I start to see bubbles all around me. Inside each bubble are shifting shapes. Moving my mantle has not effect. Not a problem We can go without breathing for quite some time. One of the bubbles comes closer to us and we enter it. Suddenly we are back on Menace's world but in a different location. The sun has moved in the sky!

~Have we shifted in time?~

~No, just in position. We are on another continent in fact. It is not necessary to shift that far. We could, as you saw, shift just an arm or two, or less. Closer that ones own body length is tricky, but it can be done with practice. I wanted to show you how useful it could be. You are however not strong enough to shift that far.~

~We can shift to any number of worlds, but not to another place on the same world.~

~Think nine dimensional space Roo. The other worlds are much much closer than a different location on the same world.~ An art instructor is telling me this. If she gets it, then. . . .

~Of course! I also like the advantage that you can see where you are going before you decide to move. Let me try.~

I shift us into n space, adjust the axis along the dimensions. A bubble appears before me and I shift us back into normal space.

She learns quick. Long Tail's eyes are wide open.

~Roo!~ Sufi exclaims. Healer looks equally confused.

~Back in the studio where Sufi and I worked. It is the day before all this started to happen. I should be coming into this room in a few moments.~

~Shit Roo, get us out of here now. We can't mess with the time line. Insanely dangerous.~

~Okay.~ I shift us back to Healer's room and a moment after we left on this little journey. Technically we are on Menace's world right now. Feels funny to be in two places at once, but the equations don't prevent it.

How did she exceed her level limits? I will leave you now to let you figure this out. Long Tail disappears, but I know where she went. I can follow her as she shifts. Fascinating!

~My turn. I will not go as far as Roo did. That was scary. Too complicated for me.~

~If this is what you are capable of at level three, I wonder what you will do later?~ That crescent shape forms on Healer.

We shift again. This time it is easy for me to see what is happening. Sufi guides us to outside the room and behind the two Guardians watching the room. It is great how we can spin around in the dimensions to see things from different perspective. We stop and watch them through the bubble for a moment. She then takes us to outside the food preparation area where we were last night. They are busy preparing food for tonight. They must have at least two shifts. We were on the second shift last night. Paff, Kerr and Menace are watching the preparation. She must want to be sure the Guardians don't come back. The ultimate way of hiding without being seen. I am starting to feel faint when we return to the room and come out facing a different direction.

~I would not recommend staying in that long with a normal person from my world. They will suffocate if you do.~

~Your species needs to breathe a lot. You were not in any danger last night then when we were in the water.~

~Yes I was. Remember, I cannot use my abilities on your world. I am forbidden. Even if your lives are in danger or your world is, I am forbidden.~

~No exceptions?~

~One. If someone from my world is the one causing the problem. Then I can interfere. I would still try to prevent anyone from your world

from noticing.~

~You are really a Guardian and not an Ambassador.~

~Of a sort Sufi. I am here for the same reason both of you are. There has been an exchange of technology that should not have happened. I am here to determine the extent of the damage and try and determine how it was done.~

~Will you then correct it, make everything the way it was before?~

~I am not that powerful. The best I can do is to limit further damage. What you just did Roo with time shifting is forbidden, even by you. Do not do it again. There are beings far more powerful that will not hesitate to remove you if you attempt it again.~ I ink big time. It is not fun any more. Back to reality.

~How much time do we have?~ I scan the corridor. So far no activity other than the two Guardians waiting.

~Roo, I think we should look at the hall before we are summoned to go there. I don't like the idea we are going to our deaths.~

~I agree. Ready?~

~Leave me out of it this time. Remember, anything I see in n space I am not allowed to tell you about. I can do more stalling them if they show up before you get back.~

~Good idea.~ I shift Sufi and I. We are intertwined and can communicate by hand. I can see her with the sight, but I am not sure she can see me. She looks pale and ghost like. I am not sure I would be able to see her showing.

~Where is the hall?~ I move us through various views of structure near by.

~This is taking too long. It might be better if we go separately. Let go of me and I will search the area near the food preparation area. I suspect it will be near there.~

~Good idea. I will loop around farther out and come back towards it. Meet back at Healer's room.~

~Roo, remember, we are back on our own world. Healer cannot help us if we get into trouble. We don't know what they are capable of doing. They may even be able to see us in this space. Hide well.~ Then we are food. Could I get us out in time?

I find the hall. They are preparing the setting. Food and entertainment it looks like. There is a large pool in the center as would be expected. What is in the pool is what interests me. I wish I could tell if there is an overdose of magnesium present. Something is moving. Someone throws what looks like another creature into the pool. Almost immediately there is a lot of splashing and the smaller creature disappears. Good to know about. I only see a shadow of what is in there, but I don't recognize either

creature. The prey nor the predator. She seems to be importing everything from Healer's world, maybe creatures as well.

I am loosing oxygen in my system. I need to breathe for a bit. It is easy to get back to Healer's room. I come out breathing heavy.

~You were gone for quite awhile. Ah, here comes Sufi.~ I don't see anything, but then Sufi suddenly appears. How can he see into the space without being there? ~My species could not hold their breath as long as you two do.~

~We don't hold our breath, we can use anaerobic metabolism as well. Extends the time without oxygen when transversing the oxygen minimal layer during mating.~

~You dive that deep during mating? Why? I thought the surface zone was safer.~

~Normally you are correct, but we are designed apparently to go deeper if necessary.~

~I know nothing of your mating habits. Have you mated?~

~No more, but in the past many times.~

~WHAT?! You have mated many time? How is that possible?~

~We are different Roo. All species are different from each other. Do all the creatures on this world only mate once?~

~Most do, though there are some who can mate seasonally. Worms for instance.~

~When we are interested we can mate several times in one day and there are other species who can mate over ten times in one day.~

~Then you must be the only species on your world.~

~We normally have only one offspring at a time. More are possible, but one is the normal number.~

~Ah, that would balance the equation allowing for the selection.~

~We do not select our young.~

~Then you must be severely overpopulated.~

~We instituted a policy of only one child per pair. We have reduced out population to a more manageable level of around six billion.~

~Six billion! You breed like flies on a corpse! No wonder your world tastes so bad.~

The door opens, ~The Matriarch requests your presence immediately.~

~We are ready.~ Any other answer can bring a dart. I know that much at least.

I hand Sufi, ~I learned that under no circumstances enter the soak pool. What did you find out?~

~Do not enter the hall. There are squads of Guardians at portals surrounding the hall. They have those metal throwing weapons and others

I was not able to figure out.~

~They would not risk hurting her, but they clearly don't trust us either.

I wouldn't.~

~I will escort them from here Guardian.~

~I am under orders from the Matriarch herself. I cannot relinquish them to anyone.~

~Then you have only a few arns to leave before she sends them to find you. Or you can die here a horrible death.~ Not a nice person once she has power. I wonder where Kerr is?

She signals affirmation.

~Someone will meet you at the south operculum near the supply entrance.~

~Thank you.~ Not totally mad then. I could stop this exchange but then I would learn nothing.

We proceed. When the Guardian is out of sight she tells us, ~The hall is a trap, but not what you think. Do not use the soak.~

~We already know that.~

~How? You could not have seen or heard of it. Never mind. She intends to bribe you with wonders. You are the Chosen One. Do not let your people down.~

~I thought you were the Chosen One.~

~How did you know that?~ She is shaking. ~The people needed a visible sign. When I learned that I could also bubble I assumed that role to maintain the belief in the Chosen One. I thought you were dead. I waited an entire eight day. Nothing. Once I deliver you to the hall I will inform the others.~

~How will you explain yourself?~

~I am your servant. Nothing more. Sarra also will know and will follow you.~

~What of Sussi and Mandhi?~

~I have been unable to show with them in private. I am not sure where they eat.~

~Thank you. Oh, did the two Guardians ever return to the food area?~ Sufi asks.

She inks. Good. I want her to have no doubt about us. She lowers herself and assumes the Nauti position. Fortunately there is no one about. It would have meant her death.

~Get up Paff. For the time being the Matriarch accepts you as the Chosen One. I assume she thinks she controls you. Let this deception continue.~

~I understand and obey.~

~We will confirm that belief.~

I lower myself and do the Nauti salute to her just as a Guardian shows up around a corner. Sufi is doing the same. Helps to be able to see a good distance ahead of oneself.

Paff sees the Guardian, recovers quickly and shows to her, ~They are ready and will not be a problem.~ She turns and leaves. The Guardian pauses then turns to us.

~Please follow me. I wish they would tell me what is going on. I expected Lagg to be bringing you to this point. No matter.~

We proceed down a long straight hallway. That is unusual. Everywhere I have been hallways always follow a curving spiral path. That is our way. The Matriarch seems to have gone totally over to the gray world style. Even the ceilings are impossibly high, though I am sure that Healer is not complaining. He would have to walk on four arms in a normal situation.

~Stop here. I would like to see this. Roo look!~ Our Guardian consort looks bored. ~Have you ever seen work like this?~

The Guardian comments, ~These were made here in our own studio by celebrated artists.~ He does not say their names. Interesting.

I look at the displays on the side of the hall. Ceramic art work I think. The material is behind glass so I can't taste it to know for sure what it is made of. Not my style but the intricacies are phenomenal. How does it support itself? The colors are not to my liking. Too many and not coordinated. Is this more of the gray world?

~Healer, does this art work look familiar?~

~Retro Dada Impressionist. Ghastly stuff isn't it?~

~How do they suspend the larger masses that way?~

~They cheat. There are carbon nano wires too small to see. If you tried to remove it from the case it would fall apart.~

~Do people on your world attempt to deceive often?~

~Yes, but we know this and are prepared. How is this different from hiding in plain sight which your people do so well? Is not the intent to deceive your potential attacker?~

~But our lives may well be in danger.~

~No one would never hide for reasons of greed or personal gain?~

~Some would.~ Many would. So few survive, it is impossible to gain name status without some deception. But once safely named, deception is no longer necessary. I am not sure I believe that. I am about to deceive the Matriarch now by allowing Paff to take on the role of the Chosen One. Not that I want the title.

Sufi asks our Guardian escort, ~Are there many ways to the Hall?~

~Oh yes, eight total. Er, that I know of. At least some of our culture is maintained.~ He does not like all of the changes. His accent places him as

a coast native. His size says he is younger than I am. There are no runt Guardians unless she has started drafting people. There are certainly more males here than on the coast. Now I know for sure where they ended up.

~Did you choose this hallway to bring us to the hall?~ What is she searching for?

~Hardly. Everything about the two of you has been laid out.~ Two? He does not see Healer or discounts him.

I hand Healer, ~Watch carefully, he does not see you or sees you as of no consequence. I know you are not allowed to use your ability. Your normal senses should be enough.~

He hands me back, ~Interesting.~ He lets go of my hand and purposely allows us to get ahead. This seems too dangerous to me, but I allow him to make his own choices. Would he use his abilities to save himself? I hope so, as ugly as he is I have grown to like him around.

We pass many more exhibits all behind glass. Where did she find so much? There are glass sands near the coast home, but none locally that I have seen. Transporting glass by crab would be difficult. Probably came by ship. The wood trim looks expertly made as well. A huge expense for a hall this size.

I wonder what it would be like to work in the studio here. Would I be happy? Have I already forgotten all the wrong she has done? Any normal person would have been darted by now, no questions asked.

As we near the Hall I begin to hear music. Percussion mostly. I can feel the beat through the floor. I would enjoy being in the sounding board section. I miss Sussi and Mandhi. I am scanning ahead of course. The Hall already has many people inside. I do not sense the Matriarch herself yet though.

A Guardian in full shell is standing before an alcove next to two massive rectangular operculums. Our Guardian salutes the one present and leaves. No move or action is seen from the door Guardian. I look into the alcove next to it and am stunned. I go closer being careful to watch the Guardian in case it objects. Still does not move. I go up to the glass case and examine the sculpture inside.

I know that sculpture better than any object I have ever seen or imagined. I scan it. Not the original though I cannot determine what it is made of. I wish Healer was here. He might know. If I could taste it I might be able to figure it out. That is not really important. Why is it here?

I examine the rest of the case. I finally find a small ceramic plaque. On it is the name Raj! I look further. This is the only symbol or item other than the sculpture itself.

~Roo, watch out!~ I see Sufi frantic in a reflection on the glass. I turn

just in time to see the Guardian above me removing it's upper shell piece. I step back to get a better view and wait.

It is Freng! I shoot a spray of ink on his mantle with as much force as I can accomplish.

~I suppose I deserved that from your perspective.~

~You deserve much much more than that. You destroyed my life!~ I am nearly ready to ink him again.

~Did I? Or I did I save it? You would never have gained your abilities if I had not played my part.~

~And you knew that when you accepted the role?~

~No of course not.~

~Then you were rewarded as you expected.~

~Oh no. I was reprimanded severely. For you were not supposed to have survived.~ He is not helping himself.

~Then how did you become Captain?~ I recognized the emblem on his shell, though why they posted a captain as a door guard is beyond me.

~Why, for capturing you Roo. I was the one who threw you in the pit. The greatest pleasure I have ever experienced. Though seeing your mantle when you looked into the display was a close second. Roo, you don't exist to anyone anymore. You are nothing. Another has taken your role as the so called Chosen One and she does a much better job of it. Raj has taken credit for you art and science.~

~What of my Triad?~

~Ah, that is the best part. They are convinced you are dead. They now belong to the Matriarch herself.~

~Why were they convinced? I have only been gone from them less than one eight day?~

~Because I showed them your corpse Roo.~ He lets that register in my ganglia. ~One yellow skin is the same as another to the white skins. It was easy enough to add your tattoo to one of the natives. After torturing her enough to look convincing of course. I think she said her name was Atal or something.~

That does it! There is a strange sucking sound. He is gone in a thought. Felt good actually. Should have done it earlier though of course the new method that Healer taught us is better.

~Come, we will enter ourselves.~

~Roo, where did you send Freng?~

~He has gone to a place where it will be hard to breathe.~

~I would have sent him to the pits.~

~Still full of water. Not sure they will ever bother fixing the pump. Would not want to mess these precious halls.~

~Good second choice.~

~I did not give it much thought. Maybe sending him to Menace's world where he could be torn apart by the larger creatures would be better.~

~How long do you think it took?~

~I don't know. Mandhi would know. So, what happened to her? Will I ever find them again?~

~At least I know what happened to my Triad. I know you did not like Gero, but he was good to me.~

~It was not a question of like. I didn't trust him. It seems nearly everyone is withholding information from me, he more than most.~

~No one wanted to worm the prophesy. He would not even tell me all that he knew for fear that my closeness to you would cause you to drift.~

~You don't have that problem now?~

~No. We are beyond anything I know. I am bagged same as you now. If anything, I would say we have already drifted. I certainly would never have expected to gain the ability myself.~

~So, you will tangle with me?~

~Till stew.~

~What do your think of Healer?~

~A Triad? With another species? I am not sure he is willing. He has other obligations he is not telling us about.~

~There is a lot he is not telling us, but I feel much better about him. He seems to be genuinely trying to help.~

~I agree. He has too many rules he has to work under though.~

~How do we open the operculum cover?~ I have been struggling with it the entire time. Why couldn't they use a regular old circular one like everyone else? ~Where is Healer? He would know.~

Suddenly it opens a small amount. I look inside the crack formed to see another eye looking out at me. I back away some to allow them a better view and they do the same, so neither of us sees much. Finally it opens more.

~Roo?~

~Yes, Sufi is with me.~

~Where is the Guardian?~

~He was here an arn ago.~

~Come in. I can place you.~ She opens the door further. Kerr is with her. Poor thing.

~Why don't you take care of Kerr? If you don't want to do it I will for you?~ It is humiliating to have one so deformed allowed to live.

~No Roo, please don't. She has said that when Kerr dies I will.~

~Leave then. Go someplace she cannot follow. How about the world closest to us? You liked it there.~ So did I.

~Very much, but I can't abandon my people. They have no one.~

~I am not sure what you can do.~

~I will hold them together until you return. The prophesy says you will go on a long journey. When you return you will save us all.~

The Hall of the Matriarch is huge. Much larger than any room I have been in before. No visible supports either. I scan and find beams of what might be metal culminating at an apex. There must be an enormous amount of weight on those beams. Not sure I want to be here. The path is laid out in a traditional spiral. We are at the farthest edge as far away from the center as you can get. Paff leads us to a space against the wall to the right of the door. It is the lowest position in terms of prestige. Perfect. I even feel safer near the wall in the partial darkness.

Food is being delivered from various portals nearer the center. All of the servers are tall ones like Healer. I can't be sure, as they all look alike. One of them might be him. Since he knows how to show, it would make sense that they might accept him, especially when there are so many here at once. I wonder if this is the entire community? Probably not. There would still be the ones preparing the meal as we did yesterday and who knows how many who grew the plant material or harvested the animals used. Do they do this every night?

~Paff, why are you staying with us? Surely you rate a much better position.~ I am distracted from my thoughts by Sufi's question.

~Most are offended by Kerr. With the two of you I can relax. I think she keeps me around as a toy. She can look ever so much more powerful contrasted to me and Kerr. Better to stay out of her sight and not suffer more humiliation.~

~Looks like we are the last to arrive.~

~That was intended. They did not want anyone offended by having to walk past us.~ We ate enough last night that I am not really that hungry. It is more interesting to watch. Other areas have terminals that they can apparently adjust to get information. There are none of these near us so I can't see clearly enough to know what might be on them. They look like the fast acting one that Sarra used.

The drumming had stopped for the food delivery. I see Menace going from area to area begging handouts just like a crawly. A flute starts. The sound is beautiful. It reminds me so much of Sussi. I wish I had a farseer to see if the artist is her. Several more join the artist and a harmony is formed.

Everyone else has been eating for some time before a server comes up to our area.

~Healer it is you!~

~Sorry I could not be here earlier, but if I served out of turn they

would have noticed. Help me out of this cloth. If I get caught with it still on they will beat me.~ Sufi and I help him remove the outer cloth. Not that I think we really did that much. He is so tall.

~Do you need it again?~ He signs no. I push it into the airless world. Let future explorers figure that one out. Underneath he has the ambassador cloth he was wearing when we came here.

~Why does the Matriarch require that you be covered? Surely it is not cold in this Hall.~ I have felt him enough times to know he is at least partially homeostatic like we are, though at a higher temperature.

~The sight of us without cloth, as most of us are males, would be too much. She also claims we make the air taste bad. I really think this is just a way of humiliating us further. There is no chance that a tall one would ever be accepted in your culture as an equal.~

~Ridiculous. I accept you as one of our group.~

~You are different from the others Roo.~ Both Paff and Sufi give me a push with that comment.

~Freng said all the yellow skins were the same. Second class that is.~

Healer looks at Sufi, ~So, why are you here? You are the right species and the right color. Why have us as friends?~

Before Sufi can comment there is a loud boom. We look to the center and see enormous drums being sounded. Seeing it is part of the activities I continue to eat. So why do you stay with us Sufi?

~What is this meat we are eating? It has a very strange taste.~ Paff is feeding some to Kerr as well. He has to be hand fed apparently. We can't help but to see him eat. Reminds me of crawlies.

~It was the only thing they would allow me to bring to this table. It is the flesh of a tall one. I am sorry. Another humiliation I am afraid. They at least drained it of all the blood before cooking it. Otherwise the iron content would be too high. I would not eat too much. It might make you sick.~

~It should not make you sick though. Please help yourself. There is plenty.~

~Paff, we do not eat our own kind. A strict rule going back to the beginnings of our culture. It is thought, rightly so, that some diseases can be transmitted by flesh consumption.~

~Don't they inspect and only allow healthy individuals to be eaten? We eat our own all the time without any problems. Why waste the protein? What do you do with your dead then?~

We are all attentive and ignoring the stage. Our closest neighbor asks, ~He shows! And more than just a few words. This is amazing.~ He reaches over rudely and grabs a piece, but then brings some of his bowl to us. Not sure it is any better, but Healer accepts it with politeness. Soon

we have an audience of our own.

~Different cultures do different things with the dead. Some bury them in the soil to be eventually returned to the life system. Others burn them to ash to be placed in ceramic containers for storage at places for the dead to be remembered. One culture cuts up the meat and inner shells and feeds it to other creatures.~ He can show, but I am somewhat embarrassed by how long it takes him to do so with just two arms. Our guests don't seem to mind.

~At least the later has some sense.~ We all agree.

Healer hands me, ~I will entertain the others. You and Sufi watch the main stage carefully. They have brought the two world operculums to the Hall. I am curious what they intend to do with them here.~ He turns and moves over slightly so I have a better view and he starts to show to the new ones.

I can see the Matriarch now. She is huge! I have never seen anyone so big before. She must be at least two hundred years old. There are many smaller ones attending to her. Smaller is a relative term. They are all much larger than I am. In fact I don't think I have seen a single individual as small as I am here in the Hall. Even Paff seems somehow bigger than I am now. She has been feeding well while the three of us were in the pit. She is on the other side of the main stage as we are. A further sign we are in disfavor.

On that point she is correct. I sent Freng to the airless world. I could just as easily open a bubble large enough to drain our world entirely of air. It would not happen instantly of course, but everyone here would be drawn into the vacuum quickly and be dead just as quickly. My only regret, that I suspect that Freng died quickly. I had to react before he did though. I saw he had a hand on one of those tall one weapons. I had no idea how quickly he could have operated it. It was self defense. No, it was anger.

~We actually have a very good view from up here Roo.~ Sufi hands me.

~Yes. Those structures near the ends of the stage are the world operculums. It was the last thing I saw before I awoke in the pit.~

~How do they work?~

~Too far away to get much of the structure. I can see superconductor running through them. Must take a lot of energy to operate.~ I will need to ask Healer if they have these on his world or whether they originated here. It looks like stuff I have seen in the movement studies department. So, unless they were using tall one tech on the coast, it was made here. I suspect here. The coast looked fairly normal from our culture's view. Ahead of the others perhaps, but not out of culture like most of what I

have seen here.

I examine the wall next me. It looks fairly new. Not much older than I am. All the buildings on the coast were very old, older than the Matriarch herself. It was rare we saw a new building being made. Well except for the ones intended to be temporary.

~Roo, watch the show. Healer said it was important.~

I turn my attention to the stage. The lights have gone dim in the rest of the Hall. Only the stage and the Matriarch are in full view now. Now I see why this is not a privileged position. The lights on Her make it harder to see the stage. The two operculums are situated in such a way that I can see both front and back of each, but only can slightly see the faces towards the center of the stage. They are both circles, as befitting true operculums, several arms wide partially buried below the stage.

Suddenly people start to come through. It is the strangest feeling seeing people appear from openings when you can see there is nothing on the other side. More and more people appear all wearing different colors of cloth. They swing around the stage and go back into one of the operculums. The dance gets faster then without a showing they mix it up and people are going to the operculums from both sides! You can see two people approach each other from opposite sides and then disappear as if into each other. A very dramatic effect.

A round of whistles can be heard from the audience. So, this is not an every night event. Is our presence the only difference? There are other large people on the platform with the Matriarch. Is she trying to impress them?

I concentrate and look beyond an operculum to see where it leads. One leads to the gray world where Healer comes from. The other leads to a place I am not aware of. It feels like another gray world, but not the same as the first. I cannot see more than into the room the dancers are using on the other side of each.

Different people are coming into and out of them now. I look again. They have switched to new worlds! How many of these does she have? On how many worlds? The pollution is spreading. This is very wrong.

~Wait Roo. Wait till you understand more.~ Healer is beside me when he hands me.

I hand back, ~If one waits too long the moment may pass that anything can be done.~

~We are not alone Roo. Many others are watching as well.~

~Your people?~

~Sort of.~ He does that crescent shape with his oral pore. Thank goodness he remembered his veil when he was eating. It was bad enough watching Kerr being fed.

~Guardians are slowly coming this way Roo. We need to leave.~ Sufi has good sight. I look about. They are trying to hide the fact they are moving in this direction. She fears us enough to be cautious. I would. I look back towards the strange operculum we came through. There are now three Guardians present not apparently watching us, but they are facing in, not out. The others who were interested in Healer are all watching the stage as is everyone else near us.

I hand Sufi, ~Green world is in light this time of day. Make some bubbles outside the Hall near the operculum we came through. Watch what the Guardians do.~ She removes her hand and concentrates.

I hand Healer, ~Be prepared to leave. I am not good enough to unwrap any hand you may be touching.~ He signs affirmation. Paff is already disengaged from Sufi. She wanted to stay anyway.

~Only one left to see what was going on Roo.~

~We need something bigger then.~ I concentrate and make a flurry of small ones above the stage. They move in motion to the dancers and appear to be part of the dance. Even the Matriarch is watching now. So are the Guardians.

~We leave now.~ I use the new method and shift us to the green world. I leave Paff to dissolve the bubbles in my world that have suddenly stopped moving.

Healer's World

~We have a pod of big ones coming towards us on our left.~

~In front of us one of the Matriarch's world operculums has appeared.~ Dark as the world it came from. The opening shows the stage it must still be on.

~That was fast. How did she know where we were going? Even I did not know until the last arn.~

~Was it possible for Paff to follow the trail?~

~She would not show!~

~She may have not had any choice.~

~What do we do? Arguing fine points will not save us.~

~I have an interesting idea.~

~A Guardian has come through and looks ready for battle! What ever it is, do it Roo!~

I make a bubble, a flat disk really. First I move it to scoop up the existing Guardian.

~That won't be enough. A second world operculum has appeared.~

~It will, watch.~ I place the first disc directly in front of the first of theirs. Then I make another one and place it before the second one before any more Guardians can come through.

~Interesting Roo, but how will that prevent them from coming through the other way?~

~Because this disc does not exist only on this world. It also exists on the world I am sending them to.~

~And where is that? Ah, wait! Of course. This would only work if you are sending them back to your world! Great idea Roo!~ I have impressed Healer!

~I thought so.~ A few try anyway. We can see their forms appear briefly as they attempt entrance.

~They will have no choice but to shut down and move the device.~

~We should be gone before that happens or they will follow us again.~

~I assume that now that we are not on our own world you may use your abilities.~

~That is true. To save myself. I may not help you without a promise.~

I am shocked. What could he want? I suspect he is much stronger in the abilities than we are. What could we offer him?

~What do you want Healer?~ Sufi is suspicious too.

~To give up your allegiance to your own culture.~

~I don't understand. What do you mean?~

~They have shut down the first one. There goes the second. They will not have to move it far, even turning it will work. They can see yours to orient on or, spider! They are using your disc Roo! Here they come!" Several come through. Then even more out of the other disc.

~Dissolve the bubbles Roo!~ I do so, but there are seven fully armed Guardians before us. They point in our direction and one fires a weapon.

~Shell Roo! NOW!~ I cover the three of us with the best I can do and we lower ourselves as low to the ground as possible. Healer of course has the most trouble with this.

The ground is shaking and suddenly I feel a crushing weight on me. I think I am going to lose awareness when it stops just as suddenly. I look up to see a huge local charging the Guardians, who are continuing to use their weapons on it. There are several other locals to our left side.

~Remain motionless and they will ignore us,~ Healer hands both of us. I watch on in horror when they reach the Guardians and crush them in their oral pores and numerous beaks.

When there is only one remaining I make a disc and let it run into it and back to my world. One of the locals sticks its oral pore into the disc and lets out a huge roar. As soon as it retreats from the disc, which it clearly cannot fit through, I collapse it.

~Stay here.~ Healer gets up and walks slowly towards the locals. When he reaches them I see everyone moving arms in some sort of communication. Finally one at a time they lower their oral pore arms to him and he touches them. When he is done, they all fold partly in half towards him and leave.

Healer gets back to us. We have risen to see better.

~Take us out of here Roo.~

I move us to the coast on my world.

~Still amazes me that you can do that Roo. At level three you should not be able to move anything that far. How do you know where you are going?~

~The equations of course. Isn't that how you do it?~

~I am not able to solve ninth degree differentials in my ah, ganglia.~

~You are severely handicapped for this work it would seem. What did you do with the green locals?~

~I healed them of their wounds caused by the Guardian's weapons.~

~I thought you could not use your abilities on a locals world.~

~This problem was not caused by a local situation. How could I let them be killed by your people? Besides, they know me. I have been here before.~

~What?~

~Then why not prevent them from being hurt in the first place.~

~There would be no honor in facing an opponent you knew could not harm you. In this way their deaths were not wasted. Each culture is different.~

~The Matriarch's people may guess we are here.~

~I am guessing they will not be able to move their devices that quickly even if they do. We have seen no evidence that they can do what Roo does with the equations either. No wonder she is such a threat to her.~

~I suppose not. Looks like it will be a spectacular sunset soon. Do we wait for it?~

~Please explain what you meant earlier Healer?~ I still think the sunset is worth watching.

~To give up one's culture means to no longer place it above any other. If you decide to join us you have to give up any belief that your own culture is any better than any other, no matter how strange.~

~You mean you do not see your own culture as better than ours, either the high or low tech bay cultures or the coast culture?~

~Definitely not. How about if I show you my former culture. Then you can decide.~

~Former?~

~I have made this same promise Sufi. It would not be fair to ask of you something that I myself do not accept.~

~Why do you want us as part of this group you now belong to? What are two low beings going to give you that you tall ones cannot do?~

~You don't see? I could not have done what you did at level three, not even at level six. But what you offer most is a new perspective. Don't think for a moment we are all tall either. You met Long Tail in my room. She is not much taller than you Roo.~

~There was one other whom I saw as well.~

~Ah, you saw her then. When you are ready I would be honored to introduce you to her.~

~Where do you want me to take us?~

~It might be better if I do the deed this time. If for no other reason than to prove I am able and not deceiving you.~ The path he took through the dimensions was not very efficient. In a moment we are on gray. I can tell by the shapes of the structures. Ugly. I cannot imagine why the Matriarch chose to use so much of this culture except for the fact that they are ahead of us tech wise.

~I am having trouble breathing!~ I will lose awareness if I don't go to anaerobic metabolism.

A moment later, ~Sorry Roo and Sufi. I had forgotten the oxygen level is much lower on this world. I have adjusted your blood to

compensate. You will learn how to do this soon enough.~ That was a strange feeling.

~Healer, if the Matriarch traded with your culture what would your people receive in exchange?~ Sufi's question. We are walking down a hard path towards the ocean. The path tastes horrible. Glad I am wearing shoes. Is this where he lives? It will be interesting to see Long Tail again and whom ever else he normally lives with. I notice locals all looking at us. I do not know this species well enough yet to know what they might be thinking. They are not bothering us, or hiding though. That is strange. If a Triad of three tall ones were to have shown up at my community four eight days ago I would have inked and not come out for eighths.

I miss the first part of the answer, ~ . . . Nauti sphere.~ What about them?

~Why would anyone give one up? They are sacred to the bay people.~

~It would appear they did not give them up willingly. Another item people here especially like is gold.~

Now I ask, ~Why? It is too soft to be of much use?~

~It does not corrode.~

~Ceramics are better than gold. They do not corrode and they are strong enough to do useful work.~

~I know it is crazy, but for most of our history, my people have been obsessed with gold. My people are not as advanced as yours in ceramics.~

~Since gold is of so little value to us, no one collects it. Where did we get it to trade with then?~ Good question Sufi.

~They mined it from the streams inland using slave labor.~

~The bay people.~

~And the river people. Very destructive. Causes a lot of pollution.~ Is there anything the Matriarch will not do?

~Ah here we are. We need to bring some extra food with us if you two are to be joining our group for a while. Let me know if you see anything you are interested in. Remember, no tasting or eating. On this world an exchange of standardized units of credit is necessary.~

~Isn't that inefficient? The energy necessary to keep track of the credits would easily outweigh any benefit.~

~True, but necessary to insure that one is not cheated.~

~A cheater would soon not have any help from anyone. Only a desperate person cheats. Ultimately they would simply be darted. End of problem.~

~We don't dart people here. We put them in prison or make them work the farm. Not as bad as the pit, but almost. The main problem is that people who are good at math and deception hoard what others need to

survive and then take advantage of them. They are not imprisoned because they have the support of other powerful people like them.~

~You have more than one Matriarch at a time? How does that work?~

~Much more complicated than that. We need to concentrate on food.~

I rise high enough to see, ~The crab look good, but you say we cannot taste them? How will we know if they are good for eating?~

~People are not used to seeing your species. It would be better if I do the quality assurance. Just let me know what interests you.~

There is so much. I have never seen this much food in one place before. I raise Sufi up so she can see. Again, this does not bother the tall one offering the food.

~How many people is this intended to feed?~

~At this one stand or on the entire wharf?~ I look down the wharf. I count seven locations offering food.

~The entire wharf.~

~Several thousand a day.~

~What? How many people live in this community?~

~Most do not eat seafood every day, they can't afford it. In this village are about fifty thousand.~ A hundred times greater than carrying capacity if they are anything like us.

I am afraid I inked. Being an arm above the ground it made quite a mess. I look down trying to figure out how to clean it up when it disappears.

~I did not mean to upset you Roo.~ Sufi seems to be taking it better.

~There are definitely differences in our two cultures. May I ask how your technology compares to ours?~

~An interesting question from an artist. I have to assume this comes from the obvious population disparity just presented. Our tech has allowed for this large population. It is unfortunately, as you might guess, not sustainable. An adjustment will happen shortly. Not to worry though. It is a natural process.~

~How will it happen, the adjustment I mean?~

~The usual means for our species; plague, war or famine. It has happened before many times, just not on this large of a scale all at once. Still it is a necessary part of the learning process. A remnant will survive that we can work with to try and avoid the same thing happening again.~

~This does not upset you?~

~Sure, but even if I could gather all the help I know of, all we could do is postpone it, not prevent it. Better if it occurs as it should than for us to interfere on a large scale.~

~Is this to say Sufi and I should not interfere in our own culture?~

~That is not for me to say. The oysters might be to your liking.~

~Roo, look at the scallops, oh and the long siphon clams.~
~I don't see any cow.~ Not that I am fond of it, just surprised there isn't any here.
~Does not exist on this world. The land slugs are much smaller here. Insects too. The lower oxygen level prevents them from getting larger.~
~How come the oxygen level is lower. I would have thought that being parallel worlds would mean they would be closer to being the same.~
~Like the airless world you found Roo?~
~Something catastrophic must have occurred there.~
~Without going there it would be impossible to show. On our own world we had an asteroid strike sixty five million years ago that adjusted our climate. Then recent activity from our species made the situation worse. All part of the story.~
~How about that strange food you gave us at your rooms on our world.~
~That was fish. Many species. I believe you had the smoked salmon. Too expensive for this stand to carry. Talapia would be better for you, locally grown and less likely to cause an allergy problem later. We can get some squid easier where we are going.~
~Squid is good. How do you prepare it?~
~I'll let the cook decide that.~
~How come no one seems to be upset with seeing us?~
He makes a strange sound, ~Roo, our species cannot ink. If they could this place would be a total mess from seeing the two of you, believe me. But to answer your question, see this emblem on my front. It identifies me as a Guardian of the special ability kind. We have been known to frequent this area of coast. They will have had some experience with strange visitors before.~
~Are we Guardians then?~
~You are more Guardians in training.~
~No emblem then.~
~Not yet. The locals have occasionally seen people from other worlds. They are not very happy about it, especially when one of them does something that seems perfectly normal for their world but is not appreciated on this world. Like eat someone.~
~They probably deserved it.~
~He did, but it is not allowed here no matter what the reason. We don't taste that good anyway. The Lygian ended up suffering much pain from the reaction it's external digestive system had to the foreign meat.~
~I disagree. The one we had an eight ago was strange, but edible.~
We have left the food area and are walking on the sand towards the

water.

~They probably feed him lots of lycopodium a day before to disguise the taste. Otherwise even the cooks would have had a hard time preparing it.~ We reach the water, ~I thought you might appreciate a bath in the sea before we get there. We do not use as much salt in our cooking as you do.~

~Thanks Healer. You understand us well.~

I enter the water. Cold, but feels good. Strange taste. I can't figure it out. What is it?

When I come out I ask Healer, ~What's in the water?~

~You noticed huh? I keep forgetting you can taste so well. Our world was severely polluted. We are gradually cleaning it up. You have nothing to worry about. Any aftertaste will go away in a few days.~

~Spiders.~ Sufi attempts to shed as much water as possible from her skin.

~Spiders, huh. What is your story Sufi? How come spiders? Normally sea spiders leave us alone, even as crawlies.~

~Was not sea spiders. When I crawled out onto to land for the first time I ran into a nest of sand trapdoors. Lost the use of two arms for I don't remember how many eight days.~

~Why weren't you tagged as defective?~

~There was a shortage that year. I am guessing the inspector felt sorry for me or just was lazy. I got over it and survived. What about you and crabs?~

~I was nearly an unseen when I got cornered in a crab pen. Not too smart. I can still remember the claws around me trying to poke my eyes out.~

~How did you get away?~

~The keeper saw me and zapped the crab. This caused it to clamp down harder at first, but at least I survived. I was not even supposed to be there. I had taken a short cut from the studio.~

~I often thought that we are selecting more for luck rather than ability.~

~And it is lucky that we are here? Banned from our own world by a power mad Matriarch bent on world domination? This does not feel like luck to me.~

~We are still alive despite all odds.~

~Healer, what do you show when you get upset?~

~Mostly just the common one used here, excrement.~

~Did it attack you?~ Maybe waste here is different? I will have to be more careful.

~Nothing like that. Just a way of showing surprise.~

~Where do you live? How far away is it?~

~Just on the other side of the sea bay.~

~When do we eat?~

~I see what you are showing.~ All three of use rise into the air and accelerate to a speed faster than I thought possible. We reach the other side of the bay in a few arm.

~Crab!~

~Spiders!~

~Glad you enjoyed the ride.~

~Next time can we swim instead?~

~On this world you would not have made it. There are a lot of things out there who would have been very happy to have you for dinner. Come, I will show you.~

We set down on a firm surface a few arms from the edge of the water. There is a made wall between the water and the other structures. High tide must reach near the top of that wall judging from the height of the seaweed.

~Long Tail!~ I whistle and show.

Dinner! How nice of you to come feed me.

~You are perfectly capable of feeding yourself.~

Not the same. Much better when others serve.

~Speaking of service. Will you show our guests the 'larger' fish. I need to see the others.~

Ah, my dream of the ultimate meal. Someday when I am large enough it will be mine.

~Only in your dreams Long Tail~ Healer leaves.

Follow me, then you will understand.

Long Tail hops up onto the wall and goes over. If we rely on our normal means of locomotion we would never find her in time. I raise both of us over the wall.

We follow Long Tail along a path that weaves between several structures. I am not sure where she is going. She stops at regular intervals to assess spots on the ground and against structures. I taste one such position and am confused with a complex mixture of organics. Interesting. At each station I taste it. They are the same.

Long Tail stops longer at the next station. I come up to the spot and taste it. Ah, tastes different.

I must remark this spot to re-establish my dominance. She proceeds to spray a concentrate of her smell on the spot. It is the same as the other spots I have tastes. Now I would know Long Tail no matter when she had been.

~Who is the interloper?~

A young one who thinks too much of himself. I will teach him a further lesson later.

~Do the tall ones mark their territory also?~ Sufi asks.

They are an inferior species who know nothing of marking. They prefer to fight constantly instead. They are not even aware of the presence of a mark. They see us marking and try to prevent this activity. Then they don't mark themselves. Beyond comprehension! Be careful! I warn you now! They even will remove the reproductive organs from you to prevent your marking anything. Barbaric!

We enter a large structure. It is cooler inside. I can taste moisture. I see the water behind thick glass. I have never seen a glass wall this size before.

~We are above the sea. Is this rain water?~

Sea water. Watch closely and you will see my prize. She touches her oral pore to the side of the glass and waves her opposite arm back and forth in the air.

~I don't see anything.~ Sufi also has her eye against the glass. I am not as brave.

I see a vague shape first. Lighter than the water it moves slowly towards us changing shape all the while. Just before it reaches the glass it comes into focus. There must be a large debris concentration. It rams the glass where we are waiting. I can't help it. I hide instantly. Long Tail raises her forward arms. At the end of each are an array of sharp objects. Not sharp enough or hard enough to effect the glass, she still tries to attack the creature through the glass as it swims away.

~It is huge!~ Yes. Very large. Large enough to consume all of us at once is my guess.

Someday I will have it. Long Tail is smaller than I am. She is mentally unstable. Is this true of all of her species?

You are the same as the stupid tall ones. No imagination. She walks off on four arms just as Healer comes in. We wait for him.

~Long Tail is not healthy.~

~She is typical of her kind. Remember, each species has its own culture. No culture is better than any other all the time. To say this another way, all species currently here are here because they are survivors. They have had the same amount of time to evolve as we have. They are the best for their micro-environment there is.~

~When is her culture the best?~

~Urban warfare comes to mind. They can sneak into an enemy camp, remove information and supplies, and make it back without being detected, without special abilities, not even your ability to hide.~

~I don't believe you.~ Sufi says it, but I don't believe it either.

~You will. Give it some time.~ I am beginning to associate that crescent shape of his oral pore with amusement. This is scary. The color of the water means I cannot hide against it. I doubt I could bubble out to a random world to escape either.

~What do you want of us Healer?~

~First we meet the others.~ He starts to lead us away from the pool, ~First, one in particular.~ I think that is what he shows. He has turned away from us when he showed it.

We leave the structure with the pool and walk a path towards some others. I taste the plants as we go. This is the gray world. All the plants are strange to me. Maybe not all. I taste something familiar and stop.

Sufi sees me looking at the tree, ~What is it Roo?~

~This tree looks like a cypress. How can that be? Everything else is so different.~

She comes up to it and tastes it, ~Definitely a cypress, so what?~

~How did it get here? The shaman said she accidentally introduced plants from another world to hers. Have they done the same here?~

~That tree is a native Roo. Not everything is conspiracy.~

~Isn't it?~ Usually is back home. I don't like it, but it is. Is was, was is.

We pass several tall ones doing chores. They give us no attention at all. Long Tail is eating out of a large bowl near a tall one preparing food. I walk over to here and am greeted by a strange low pitched noise. She looks up and breaths air at me rapidly.

~I would stay back while she is eating Roo.~ Danger? I shield instinctively. Amazing to me that it has become a reflex.

~Roo!~ Sufi whistles! I don't even see it. Long Tail has tried to attack me! I can feel it as her front arm lashes out at me with full force. I am nearly pushed over, shield and all. I back away slowly. She looks like nothing has happened and continues to eat.

~She is like that when she gets a fish of a particular species we don't get very often. We are lucky to get any for ourselves. A special treat tonight. They used to raise them in the pool you saw just now.~

~Was it the one in the pool?~ I think now that the internal structure of the pool creature was strange. It's shell was different from the others we have seen here. Softer for some reason.

~No, different species. Also tastes good, but extremely rare as they can't be raised on farms.~

~You are keeping it to eat then?~

~Long Tail thinks so, but no. We will study him for a few eights and then let him go.~ We enter one of the structures. Tall just like they are. Makes me uneasy. Sufi and I hold hands as we enter.

~Thanks Roo.~ I acknowledge Sufi with hand com.

Inside the room looks almost like home. There is even a pool in the center. The ceiling is even low. Healer looks in from the outside and tries to show us.

~I wait outside.~ The operculum closes. We are alone in the room. I decide to check out the pool, but when I get up to it I see there is already someone in it.

~Sufi, someone is here. Prepare to bubble out.~ I could kill whoever it is of course. Assuming they are not equipped with special abilities. Not a wise assumption around here. I suspect that Long Tail could have killed me if she had wanted to.

~Roo, come back here to wait. Not polite to watch.~ Not that it stopped them from asking me to enter a pool at the close alternative world. The pool is clearly too small for several people. Not even a Triad would fit in it easily. A private pool then. Not many can afford one. Who is it?

We wait. I did not get a chance to taste the water. Does it have a high salt content? A figure finally emerges. I can't read their tattoo in this light. The person uses a hose device to spray themselves with another liquid. That would suggest the pool is high salt. Must have felt great. Will we get one too?

I can finally see the tattoo, Gryci. An unusual name.

~Roo, I know this person. They are dead!~ Sufi is excited and goes up to the person. I follow not knowing what this is all about.

~Gryci, do you remember me?~ She looks at Sufi confused for a moment then reads Sufi's tattoo.

~Sufi, what are you doing here?~ Gryci seems frail. Something is wrong.

~We thought you were dead.~

~Almost now. I have cancer they say.~ Healer should be able to cure her on this world. Why hasn't he.

~We can get help. We know one of the tall ones who can cure you.~

~There are many here who can cure me Sufi. I don't want to be cured. I have done my part. Now it is time to go. Is this her?~ Sufi affirms.

~I really didn't think she would come. She is so small.~

~As we predicted.~ Okay, not another plot please!

~How far is she along?~ Along what?

~Level three. DS, TK and scanning.~

~I see you use the tall ones code. Not sure I approve. She is here without any help?~ I had a lot of help. Many died too. Friends all. Er, not Freng.

No psiotic enhancing?~ What is psiotic?

~Excuse me please. Who are you Gryci?~

~You have not told her?" Sufi signs negative. ~Sorry Rooi. I am Raj's teacher. I was the first to solve the equations.~ She must be ancient. How come she is not huge like the Matriarch?

I state, ~Then you can bubble.~ Makes sense to me if she solved the equations.

~No. I found the numbers that fit and worked, but I do not live the equations as you do.~

~There are more than Roo. She prefers to be called Roo and not Rooi.~

~Roo then. Makes no difference. Who else?~

~The two who nearly became her Triad are level two. Two others, a couple, one from E571 and one from our world.~ The worlds have designations? How much are they not telling me! ~They have formed a pair and are keeping the Matriarch busy while we continue.~

Let me tell one too then, ~And one other.~

~I am affected as well. Level two it would appear.~

~This is amazing. Much more than we could have ever hoped for.~

~The Matriarch is growing stronger. She has two working gates now. Your sabotage only slowed her down.~ What is a gate? She must mean the operculums? ~If Roo does not progress it will not be enough. The Matriarch has done much raiding of other cultures. She has gained much in weapons of hate and fear.~

~She was not supposed to have lived this long. What went wrong?~

~She has help. Someone is curing her of the gradual death.~ What is this? I have never been shown it.

~Come, let us eat with the others. I have heard they caught a tuna by accident. Help me up.~ Sufi helps Gryci rise. Why does she need help?

~Are you sure it was an accident?~ Sufi signs amusement. What is a tuna? I need to rest. This is too much at once. Was that a tuna that Long Tail was willing to kill for?

It takes a long time for the three of us to go a short distance. Gryci moved very slowly. We need to stop many times for her to rest.

~To continue your education Roo, I solved the equations, but I did not see the implications. Raj was young and ambitious. He was very good with conductors and electromagnetics.~

~Teacher, I am no good at either and will unlikely be able to understand you.~

~No matter. The point is, he used the equations I solved to create the first gate.~

~And took all the credit if I know Teacher Raj.~

~Ah, so you have met him.~ Gryci shows amusement. Her skin shows many wrinkles when she does. What kind of disease does she have? ~Yes

and more. He tricked me into entering the gate by creating an identical room on the second world. I walked through the gate unawares. He then shut down the gate and moved it. I was trapped in an enclosed room with no apparent way out.”

~And you can not bubble?~

~Bubble?~

~Roo's word for DS. She has a particular adaptation. Show her Roo.~

~The 'gate' is a flat bubble really. I can make those now, as well as shift into the next location without any apparent structure. But, the first manifestation I achieved was a sphere. I am sort of a limpet about Holy Spheres.~ I make a small one to pink about the same size as our first one. Dark there at the moment, or nearly so.

~Roo got the idea because of a sculpture she was working on. She made the sculpture before she solved the equations.~

~Really? That might explain how you can see and feel the equations. Apparently an advantage. I may have to take lessons from Teacher Sufi.~

Sufi flashes embarrassment. I don't think she would survive long enough.

~How did you get out?~ I finally ask.

~Oh, where was I? Sorry. Let me see. I was in the room for a long time. Got very hungry and severely dehydrated. Turned out it was very simple. Raj had made the mistake of using a structure from this world. I figured out how to open the 'door'. Do you know that word?~

~The tall one's version of an operculum. Usually rectangular. Very upsetting.~

~You really are limpets on circles. Get over that prejudice Roo. It can hurt you in the long time.~ I reluctantly acknowledge.

~Then what happened?~

~There is not enough time to tell you everything. My, you are curious. Just let it be shown that I eventually made my way here and have been here ever since.~

~You are the one who taught Healer to show?~

~My best student. Most here can at least show some though.~ That is a relief. I am not sure I like Long Tail seeing my thoughts and do not want to be dependent on her.

An empty pad in the center appears to be for us. The tall ones are all positioned at wooden structures that are nearly an arm above the ground. There are misters and a pool to dip food in. They know us well. Feels good to be moist. This place is so dry. Surprising this close to the sea.

We must be close to the holidays. ~Gryci, when do the celebrations happen here?~

~Oh many eight days ago. Will be winter soon.~

~What? It was summer on home world.~

~Roo, we are not home. You already noticed the time of day is different. So, of course the time of year is also likely to be different. After all, we separated half a billion years ago.~ She turns to Gryci, ~How many days in a year here?~

~I believe they have three hundred and sixty five.~

~And one extra day every four years.~ A tall one I don't know. I freeze and resist the urge to hide.

~Hi, I called Fish. I catch most of the fish we eat.~ Not great but understandable.

~You caught the tuna?~

~Lucky. Earth warming I guess.~ Huh?

~He means that the world has warmed because of pollution. This has caused a species of fish to appear here that would not normally.~

~Crab. Why does the Matriarch want to emulate them then?~ We are served cooked food.

~I am sure Long Tail got raw.~

~Long Tail is of this world. We are not. Safer to cook the food. Unless you like getting sick?~

~No, just that raw usually tastes better.~

Fish is watching this conversation and disappears for a moment. He returns with a small bowl. I admit I am using my scanning ability to see behind their cloth cover to determine gender. Healer said that only males have the extra small arm between the two lower arms.

~Try.~ Fish sets down the bowl before us. I taste it. Cold. Not cooked.

I acknowledge Fish, ~Thank you.~

~We use spice with raw.~ He leaves.

There is a small amount of some kind of ground plant material next to the fish slices. I taste it with the tip of my hand.

~Rhizome!~

~Save some for us Roo!~ Sufi looks interested now.

I carefully bring the bowl over. I look around for an implement to portion the spice. I rise into the air to see around better and see a metal shape on a table that might work.

~Hey, nobody touch my knife!~ Fish is rushing towards me. What do I do? I quickly return the knife to the table. His knife? Kitchen materials are not held in common? I bleach white in shame.

~Sorry Roo. You not know. What you want?~

~I want to separate rhizome spice.~

~You like?~

~Very much.~

~Here, have more.~ He shows me a bowl as large as the one the raw

fish is in. How many plants did he have to use to make this much? I am amazed.

I receive the bowl, ~Thank you Fish.~ Not an easy word to show yet. I take the bowl back to Sufi and Gryci.

~Roo, their rhizome is good even on the cooked tuna.~ Then it won't go to waste. Soon we are finishing the bowl offered. The fish with it. The raw first of course. A strange taste, but good. Maybe this place is not so bad.

~I am very tired Sufi. I need to rest. Any idea where we will be put?~

~You are welcome to stay with me. They gave me more space than I need and the pool is already there.~

~I would like that, but first I need to know you are safe to be with. Your skin looks bad and you are very weak.~

~Ah, you noticed. I am afraid it is a fatal condition.~ I bleach. ~And it is already too late for both of you. You have been infected.~ I ink.

~Roo, she is teasing you. There is nothing wrong with Gryci. She is just old.~

~What does that mean?~ I do not know the word or context.

~If we are not killed, darted or catch a sickness, we will eventually become like Gryci. Everyone. No exceptions.~

~What about the Matriarch?~

Gryci answers, ~There is something going on with her. She is the exception. The reason you are not aware of the condition is that so few reach my age or hers.~

~What about the tall ones or Long Tail?~

~It will happen to them even sooner. The tall ones only live about half as long as we do and the larger versions of Long Tail about a third of that.~

~Crab. How do they get anything done? It takes us fifty years just to get someone properly trained.~

~They are usually trained in as little as eighteen years. Some go to thirty, but rarely past.~

~How can they do this? Impossible!~

~They are born live from the female tall one. The can walk and show in as little as three years.~

~Three years! We are still crawlies at three. The quality has to suffer. How do they choose which ones are worth raising?~

~They usually only have one child at a time and they try and save all of them. Of course, accidents and sickness still happen, so not all make it.~

~Roo, remember, Healer told us something similar. It explains why they have so many.~

~And so much pollution. You can taste it in everything, the air, water and even the food is my guess.~

~Did you enjoy your meal?~ Healer comes close to us and lowers himself to our height. Very diplomatic of him. He is different than most people.

~We especially liked the spice. Tastes like some kinds of fern rhizomes to me.~

~It is from a root which is close to a rhizome in function. It looks like you ate more spice than fish. Was the fish enough?~

~Yes, especially the raw.~ Sufi pokes me. ~I forgot I was not supposed to show. Please do not dart Fish. It was my fault.~

~Roo, we do not dart people here. As long as you are not hurt there is no problem. Many of us like tuna raw as well. It is a custom common in a group of people nearly on the other side of our world.~

~How did you see about it? You have far seeing as well?~

~Oh yes. Anyone on our world may show with any other nearly instantly.~ Crab. That is scary. Very hard to hide with everyone in the world watching. Eight billion people.

~By using those terminal things we saw?~

~Yes, plus remember we also communicate by sound. Easier to share long distance than images. There is so much I want to show you.~

~Healer, I am sorry. I need to rest now.~ He looks carefully at me. ~I will be staying with Gryci and Sufi in Gryci's home. I need to go now.~ He acknowledges me and leaves. I hope I will feel better soon. Right now I just want to stop moving.

~We are almost there Roo.~ I didn't realize we were walking. Too bad Sufi cannot do the dimension shift thing locally yet. Have to try and teach her. Teach the Teachers. Crab.

Upgrade

The dream happens again. Two Holy Spheres come together closer and closer till I become aware. I am dry all over. Sufi and Gryci are entangled with me. I relax again and enjoy their presence. Sufi becomes aware next.

~I am so dry! That was strange. What happened?~ She looks around. I do also. Nothing has changed that I can see.

~This is amazing!~ Gryci is aware.

~What?~

~I have not felt this good in several eight years. I could almost mate again.~ Sufi is also excited.

~On no. Not me. Never again. Once was enough.~

~With Gero?~ I ask politely.

She affirms, ~All of us at once. I suspect from what we have seen though that none survived.~

~The Matriarch made sure only her offspring survived. I wonder how she worked it out over so many years?~

~I can explain that. They have tech here that can preserve our young at very cold temperatures until needed.~

~So, like the tall ones, nearly everyone of hers survived. Spiders. I bet all the people in the hall were hers. Nearly the entire population by now.~

~I think she kept a few 'others' to do the work.~

~I am nearly her age, so I am not one of hers.~

~I, like Roo, am an immigrant.~

~I did not know that. From where?~

~North Coast drift crawly. Used to happen a lot actually. Current flows in from the north.~

~I had the strangest dreams.~

Sufi and I both show, ~The Holy Spheres.~

~How did you know?~

~We have just experienced the process whereby we have each been given a new ability.~

~So, if the same happened to me as you Roo, then I should be able to move things now.~

~And make bigger bubbles or whatever we will call them.~

~What about me?~

~Small bubbles? We are not sure what is level one and what is level two. Until recently we did not know there were levels.~

~When does the scanning come in?~

~It will happen when it does. You won't be able to force it either.~

~What determines the sequence?~

~Healer says it is different for every species. Long Tail's kind have thought showing at level two. Tall ones have TK and then scanning I think.~

~If that is true Gryci, are there any exceptions? That is, levels different altogether?~

The Holy Sphere suddenly appears and moves close to me, then slowly around me. Gryci raises an arm and the sphere rubs against it.

~Have you two met Br'thn?~ Is there anyway to tell them apart? I can not see any distinguishing marks on it.

~I saw it briefly on my home world.~

~Her. They are all female. Not sure why. She is the first 'thn of this world.~

~Is there a Holy Sphere for our world?~

~I am not sure.~

~I think the Nauti must have had one.~

~They seem more advanced that we are.~ I wish I remembered more.

~Let's greet the morning!~ I suggest.

~What?~

~On the world closest to ours they greeted the morning. When the sun came over the horizon they were there to appreciate it.~

~The bay even faces east. It will be easy. Come Gryci.~

~Not sure I can make it even though I am feeling better. You do realize that sunrise is not for at least two eighths.~

~Then we lots of time, especially with my help.~ I raise Gryci into the air.

~I, I don't have my shoes!~

~Why should that matter?~

~No one goes into public without wearing something.~

~Why? What should it matter?~

~It says we are not just animals. That we make and use tools. That we are intelligent. Believe me. They have visitors all the time. Any creature that does not wear something is seen as a kept creature used for amusement. Only slightly better than a farm animal used for labor or food.~

~We are in a different world Roo. We need to live by their rules, at least to some extent.~

~Can't make a cow out of a slug.~ Technically they are slugs. Even I know that.

I put my shoes on. The ones they made for me. Not sure who did it.

We proceed out the 'door'. I don't like rectangular openings. Just seems all wrong.

When we get outside I see chaos. What is everyone doing in the dark? Bright glow balls are lit all over the settlement. Tall ones are running back and forth carrying things. There are those mechanical crabs that use Holy Circles against all reason with tall ones apparently controlling them. Mandhi would know for sure.

I see Long Tail ignoring all the activity. She is using her rasp to comb the soft thin spines covering her body. That has to hurt. Must be for protection. Looks more like a handicap than an advantage though.

I recognize Fish and so we move towards him.

~Good, come with me.~ He turns to go. Where? Then he turns around and pulls something out of a belt pouch and holds it in the air between us. ~Healer said good for you.~ I take what is in his hand. Tastes strange, slightly bitter yet sweet too. Like nothing I have ever experienced before. There are three pieces. I hand one each to Sufi and Gryci.

~What is it?~

Long Tail comes up and inhales air next to what I am holding.

The Tall Ones like this after a gift has been received. Not good for my species.

~A gift?~

~She means a special ability Gryci.~

I rasp part of the substance politely. Almost immediately I feel better. More aware. What is this stuff? I quickly finish the rest of it. Looking around I see the others have eaten theirs as well.

Fish is in front. He cannot see anything we show, so there is no point in asking him questions. The settlement is quiet outside the boundaries of the homes where we landed. Why?

There are still glow balls on posts lighting our way. Smaller and less bright than the ones near Gryci's home, but enough for us to see. The ground has a bad taste. I try not to touch it with anything but my shoes, but occasionally forget. It is easier to carry Gryci than I thought. She must be very light, though she looks to be the biggest of the three of us. I am the smallest as usual. Even after Sufi being hungry for so long.

There is writing on nearly every structure. Images of people doing various activities. Will we have time to learn their language and way of writing? How many thousands of worlds? How many with sentient life? Even if one lived forever it would not be possible to see them all. I look at Gryci. It would also appear that the story of it being possible is a myth. Gryci may be feeling better but even I can see she will not live much longer.

We reach some sort of docks. We go down a ramp to some extensions that go over the water. Strange shaped boats are in slots in these extensions. Good idea, but what happens during a storm. These do not

look strong enough to survive. Maybe they just rebuild them every year. Waste of time and resources. Made of wood too. Definitely will not last, even without storms.

There is a tall one on one of the strange boats. We stop there and I hear sounds from them. We then proceed to get on board. It feels good to feel motion under me again. We are from the sea and even when not in contact it still feels better when in water or at least on water. The surface of the boat is rough though. Why? It would be easier to walk on if it was smooth enough for our suckers to work if needed. I look carefully at their feet. They have cloth on them as well! Why didn't I see this before? Healer didn't I am sure. Long Tail doesn't. Why do they?

I look at the new tall one. This one is different. I scan it. Strange. No male tentacle. Strange that they only have one, but I guess it is enough. Eight billion is proof enough. This must be a female? Or do they have more genders? Or alternative generations like many plants?

Fish turns to face us finally.

~What are we doing Fish?~

~Hold on.~ I points towards the unknown one. ~My ah, don't know word.~ He looks towards it.

~I am his spawn and I am a female. I am called Bait.~ She is easy to see and understand and clearly younger. I am learning that lines on the skin are an indication. As with Gryci. She is severely lined. ~We are about to leave the harbor to gather protein.~ Harbor? I rise above the boat far enough to see it is indeed a harbor. A constructed one. I have to be careful coming down to be sure and land safely on the moving surface with nothing to hold on to.

~How is it you know you are from his mating?~

~Sufi, remember, they only have one at a time.~

~Is that true? Only one at a time? You do not die after wards?~

~Only because of our population situation are we limited to one per couple. Ordinarily a normal tall one couple would have three or four and can has as many as ten or twelve in a life time.~

~And they all survive to reproduce themselves?~

~Depends on how hard times are. In the distant past, a hundred or more years ago, not all would survive. A few hundred more years past and few would survive. Often the female would die in the process.~

~Distant? This is recent history to us. Gryci is at least two hundred.~

~Two hundred and five thank you. I can show for myself still.~ I show that I am sorry with my hands.

~Ever spent time on a fisher boat you two?~ Apparently Gryci has been here before.

~What do we call you and how are you different from a male?~

~You are curious. Seeing as how all of you are females as well.~ She sounds something. Fish opens his oral pore, pauses, then turns around so he cannot see us. She then drops her cloth surface. We all move closer at once to see and feel her.

She moves as we touch her. Gryci stays further away.

~Is this where the male places the sperm pouch?~ Indicating the small apparently closed opening in the center of the exposed front surface.

~No, further down.~ She indicates with a hand. Those five fingers bother me still. It works for them though. “We then grow the young one inside this space.” She moves her hand near the area with the small hole first seen.

~It comes out this hole on the surface then?~ A likely scar from the first offspring.

~No. It also comes out the same opening the male entered. It would weigh approximately five to ten percent of my body weight. The hole in front is actually a remnant of my own passage through my female parent. I have not spawned yet. I am too young.~

She starts to cover herself when Sufi floats up and touches the two bumps on the upper surface.

~Oh, those. That is how we feed our young initially. Our bodies produce the necessary nutrients in liquid form for the first year or so until they can eat more solid food.~

~Does it hurt?~ I don't like pain.

~Not at all. I am told it actually feels quite pleasant.~

Fish has turned around, ~And you will not know that for some time yet.~ She folds in half before her parent.

~I am of the age of maturity. I am allowed.~ Is this like a naming? She needs permission from elders?

~Then believe me that there is no need to rush into adulthood.~

~Make ready to set forth.~ They both turn and go about their tasks. We remain on the surface and watch.

The boat slowly pulls out of the slot in the platform then proceeds towards the harbor exit. There are now several other boats and crew preparing to depart. All are small boats with only a few crew. Interesting. I see no sails nor oars or other propulsion means. Yet we are moving.

I feel a slight vibration below me. I scan below to try and figure out how we move. A strange variation on the Holy Circle is at the rear, just under water. I watch closely. Ah, as it turns it forces water to the rear, thus pushing the boat forward. The shape of the bottom of the boat is such that it neatly cuts the water surface.

I trace back from the Holy Circle to find more that I do not understand. A shaft surrounded by much smaller Holy Spheres. They

move in counter rotation to the shaft. Further back there is a device that appears to be the source of power. I can see the electric fields?! Why use something with so much inherent resistance? A zero conductor would be the obvious choice here. There is waste heat emanating from the entire system.

There is a conductor path leading from the device. It leads a short way to another device. Whoa! It is like it is on fire! Why didn't I notice that before?

I bring my awareness back to the others and notice we are moving quite rapidly now. Gryci and Sufi and holding onto each other tightly and to the sides of the boat. I need to warn Fish and Bait. I scan the boat. It is not that big. They are in some space just forward of us. How do I get in?

A simple slide mechanism. First thing I have seen that is not against our beliefs. I slide the latch and descend into the space. Fish is turning some kind of Holy Circle. Bait is watching out the forward glass.

I nudge her and wait for her to turn around to face me. Their peripheral vision is horrible. ~Bait, there is something on fire below us.~ I try and show this as calmly as possible. She looks carefully at me. There is a glow about her as well. A sort of red color. I look to Fish. He is not glowing as brightly. I look back up towards Sufi and Gryci. Sufi is nearly orange and Gryci is the same color as Bait. I look down at myself and see I am light yellow at the edges.

~Roo, you can see the power source? In what way?~

~It glows blue white and very bright. It is not on fire?~

~No Roo, this is normal for the device. The word does not yet exist in your language for what you are seeing, but it is related to your other gifts. Apparently this is the gift you received last night. Please don't tell Fish what you see on me.~ I acknowledge her. Apparently different colors signify different levels. I wonder what color Healer is?

The boat slows. Fish turns around and sees all of us watching him.

~We here. Bait, gather.~

~Time to work females.~ I am not sure what is expected of us. Bait reaches over the side of the boat, retrieves an orange float and pulls it over the rail onto the surface in front of us. Attached to it is a rope. I taste the rope. Synthetic carbon based. Pollution in our world. So much of this world seems to be this way.

Gryci suggests, ~I believe she would like us to help pull the line towards us.~

~Please let us assist Teacher. You can supervise.~ Sufi is being diplomatic. I had almost forgotten my place. Is it different now?

~I will help place the line so it does not get tangled.~ Gryci has had the most experience, so this makes sense.

~Any time ladies.~ So many words for the same thing. I had forgotten most. Only the context gives a clue. Sufi and I grab the line. It is hard to hold, though the design appears to be sound. Wrapping the line around an arm helps. Within moments I have torn two suckers. Just as the one I tore earlier has almost healed.

Finally the trap appears at the surface. Bait ties the line to prevent it from going down again and reaches over to bring it closer to the end of the boat. We both rush over to see as well. She swings it over the surface of the boat.

~It is empty!~ All that work for nothing.

~No Roo, look. There are a few small crabs on the side.~ We both reach over and grab them. They are small enough to fit between the grate. I must assume they are not the goal of our work. Not much more than a snack.

~You can eat them or I will throw them back to grow bigger.~ We throw them back. Not that hungry yet.

Bait reaches into a metal box and pulls out scraps of meat. She places these on a pan in the center of the trap, then swings the trap over the side again. She looks to the coil of line that Gryci has arranged and acknowledges her approval.

The next two traps are empty as well. I tear one more sucker.

~Now that you have experienced the hard way, we will proceed. Understand the way we hauled the last three traps to the surface is very similar to the way your world does this same work.~

~The lines taste better on our world.~ She acknowledges.

The next float we reach we are prepared to do the same as we did with the others, only Bait tells us no. She then proceeds to feed the float and line onto a contraption on the back of the boat. She moves a lever and the line is automatically drawn in and coiled on a cylinder. When the trap meets the structure it stops rising and swings over to near us and the trap is opened to spill its contents on the surface. This time there are many large crabs.

~Not that big Roo. We eat this size all the time.~ I hate crabs, especially big ones.

Bait comes to me, ~This is as big as the local ones get Roo. Do not fear.~ I relax some. She is good to have noticed. Why did I forget my abilities? I could easily protect myself from anything this size or larger. I am more afraid of these crabs than a fully armed Guardian Freng.

Bait places more meat in the trap and pushes another level. It closes, rises, swings over the side and goes down. I scan. It appears to be a series of Holy Circles with notches on the side, intertwined with each other. Also powered by the same source as the boat pushing device. Only

glowed yellow, so my guess it does not need as much power.

The next trap comes up shortly. There is some strain on the device.

~Don't worry, it can take much more than that. I know you are not used to these things. I am.~

When it swings over there is a very large cephalopod in the center holding a large crab. The trap opens and it and the crab it is holding fall to the surface. There is another crab clinging to the far corner very tightly. Probably what saved it from being eaten.

~I was hoping we would get one of these.~

We have all tried to blend with the boat. Best to be careful until information is gathered. The ceph appears to be equally cautious. A brief showing says this is a male. Shee has also blended with the surroundings. She is watching. I would be headed for the side of the boat about now. Sure enough an arm slowly moves in that direction.

I move to intercept and come into contact with the arm nearest the edge.

~What is your name?~ I hand her. She bleaches white. Well, that was an interesting response. I move away.

~What did you do Roo?~

~I asked her name.

~Look she is trying to show something. I think it is Ancient.~

Gryci says, ~Poorly formed I think. I can only barely make it out.~ We wait while the characters slowly form on our guest. I can't understand what she is showing. All that practice with the shaman appears to have failed me.

~Forgotten~ I think that is what she has said. I raise above the surface to get closer and she immediately goes into the Nauti salute! I lower myself and do the same. I can see the others wondering what is going on. Gryci would not know of course. I told Sufi, but she has not practiced the move.

~Roo, behind you.~ I move my eyes to see Br'thn floating an arm's length above the surface.

~I think she is reacting to Br'thn and not you Roo.~ I return my arms to their normal position. She does not. I look for a tattoo but see none. Can one be applied underwater? It's done with one's own ink mixed with carbon ash. It might be possible if they could collect the ash somehow. Maybe from a lightning strike near the coast. Not practical.

She repeats his message, ~Forgotten~

~I am sure she would taste great, but I would have trouble eating a sentient who did no wrong.~

~I agree Gryci. How about you Roo?~

~It is not our boat or trap. Not our decision.~

~It would be a shame to waste that much protein, but we have more traps. We can let her go.~

I will need to investigate. Br'thn goes over the edge and into the water.

~Can she do that?~

~Apparently.~

~Let's back away so she feels safe to return to the sea.~ We go to the farthest position away from the back of the boat that we can without actually entering the lower chamber, then remain motionless. She waits a moment then slowly reaches out with one arm and then another. Finally and rather suddenly she pulls herself over the edge and is gone. I immediately go for the crab hanging in the corner of the cage and pull as fast as I can before it realizes I am there. One back leg snags a bar, but can't hold on for more than a moment. I then bite the spot to paralyze it.

Bait takes the crab from me and examines it.

~You need to show me how to do that Roo.~

~We all know how. You either learn as a crawler or are eaten by them. Of course it is much more of a challenge when they weigh more than you do.~

~Whoa, and I thought my small time was bad.~ Are there any that are not? I remember the Matriarch's young. They were not having a bad time.

We proceed to the next trap. It contains three crabs and no ceph. I try and teach Bait the stun method, but am unable to do so. I finally do all of them to prevent unnecessary suffering.

Fish comes out, ~Go back.~ He goes back in and the boat turns back towards the harbor. Four crabs are not going to feed many people, especially ones this small. The ceph was more or less normal sized, though a little strange looking. Longer arms and smaller mantle than ones I am familiar with. Maybe forgotten was the only word it knows. Why that word then? Or maybe it was just random flashing and Gryci's imagination? The Nauti salute was not imagination. Too complex to be random and too well done.

~Healer says our worlds may have diverged over five or six hundred million years ago. A lot can change in that time. In fact I would be surprised if that ceph was not a more recent evolution, just as we are. I am no life study expert. Now is the time Gero would have been useful.~

~That is not true. Healer does not know. I suppose it is safe to tell you now Roo. Only Teachers are supposed to know of this, and even most of them do not. If anyone deserves to know the truth now, you do Roo. To make this legal, I hereby bestow on you the rank of Teacher of Psiotics.~

~What is psi what?~ I had better know what this is.

~The study of the life force of the universe. The basis of all existence.~

~Crab!~

~It's what our special abilities are based on and as you are the most powerful of our kind, you are our Teacher and we are your students. You are already doing the work, might as well get the credit.~

~Thank you Sufi. I suspect that our worlds diverged about four hundred million years ago. We have found remnants of creatures similar to the fish we have eaten and others, including the start of some early land animals. Nothing as complex as the tall ones, but not entirely water creatures either.~

~What happened?~

~We are not sure. Maybe the Nauti know. You know they made us?~

~Yes, we have been shown. It would appear they are more advanced in many ways than we are.~

~I suspected as much also. Personally I think they were the ones that prevented the fish from entering the land world.~

~Or it could have been some kind of natural disaster.~

~The destruction was too complete. It would have taken a sentience a long time to destroy every last scrap of evidence of their existence. What gave them away was the fact that some of the ocean floor is now above sea level. Our being on land now has allowed some to find these remains in imprints in stone. We thought they must have been carvings from imagination. Now that I am here and can see a live fish and others, I know they once existed on our world as well.~

~They why do you think it was four hundred million years? That is a long time before they made us. To neglect the land surface for so long seems strange.~

~Again, we will have to ask them. If they will tell us. I am guessing that there was some sort of law against moving onto land. If they had done this any more recent than four hundred million years the land animals would have been too adapted to the land for them to reach and control.~

~If they have psiotics as we do now, they could have floated over the land and killed whatever they found if it was a problem.~

~She's right Gryci.~

~They cannot breathe out of water as we do and we have found no remains of anything more complex than the earliest land animals. Healer said there is a Teacher north of here who is an expert on the evolution of this world. Maybe they can help. You could learn to use their terminals as I have, but it would probably take too long. Faster to go to an expert.~

~We would not necessarily know what to ask.~

Bait comes up to us, ~You three bring the crabs. I will get the rest of the materials. Meet you on land.~

These three crabs are not going to feed everyone. I could eat one myself.

Wait, Br'thn did not have a psiotic color! What is she? Everyone treats her as if she is alive, but no color means no life. I look around me as we walk back. Even the plants have colors. Some are patterned. I can see where a disease or insect has caused damage very easily. It's nearing sunrise and more tall ones are about. They all have the dull red glow that Fish has. Wait, the areas where the shells meet on this one are not glowing. Strange looking.

As we walk I begin to see deformities in patterns in nearly everyone that we pass. I wonder if it would be the same on our world. I make a small bubble so I can see the same scene on our world and end up with an eye full of dirt from a hill that does not exist here. This is not going to work.

~I have to go above us to see something.~

~I had better stay here with Gryci. Let me take over lifting her.~ I acknowledge and rise five arms to try a small bubble again. No dirt, but a moment later I get an eye full of pine needles. Those things can be a hundred arms tall, though probably not at a settlement.

I go up to about fifty arms and try again. This time keeping the bubble to one side as I move forward. Finally I am brave enough to place it where I can see down to my world below. People are smaller, so I have to concentrate more. I will not see as much detail. The full daylight also makes it harder. But, as I was worried might happen, I see that though there are fewer and smaller injuries, they are there. I dissolve the bubble and come back down.

~Thanks, I can hold Gryci again.~

~She is still a little heavy for me, though I can do it.~ She is the biggest of the three of us by at least a factor of two. Do Teachers hold their positions by their intellectual abilities or their ability to literally push away the competition?

~Roo, the sun is showing! I was not sure it would with the fog.~

~More of an increased glow than actual appearance, but it will do.~ I turn to Bait and Fish, ~We stop here for a moment.~ She acknowledges and waits.

With Gryci on one side and Sufi on the other we face the glow in the south eastern sky. Slowly as the glow increase my arms rise into the Nauti sun pattern. The same one that the ceph on the boat signed to us.

Gryci seems less sure of this and asks, ~Why?~

I remain even colored until the sun is clearly above the horizon. At least it looks like it is.

~It is something the Bay people do every morning. At least they used

to until the Matriarch's people enslaved or killed them all on our world. They said it came from the Nauti.~

~But they live under the sea. Why would they greet the sun?~

I blank. ~I don't know.~ We make our way back to our new temporary home. Seems to be everything, including my relationships are temporary now.

Just as we are entering the compound I notice there are a lot of tall ones about. Several times more than yesterday. Long Tail is moving between them occasionally looking up at them and making a strange sound. Sometimes she is given something to eat. This seems to encourage her to continue. Are we expected to do the same?

~Healer is over there to the right. He just went into that structure. Another very large tall one was with him. Hurry!~ Sufi moves faster. She is clearly over any lingering problems from being in the pit. That was fast. Do the abilities heal us?

Dragging Gryci behind me half an arm off the ground must look strange, but I don't have time to think. All my attention is on Sufi as she weaves her way through the tall ones who do their best to scatter out of our way. She quickly makes her way up some steps on the front of a structure that must be at least ten arms tall. Nothing that tall made by our kind.

I reach the steps and stop to examine them. More of the artificial rock construction. Too touch to get a good grip I decide to float both of us.

~Roo, come on!~ Sufi is holding the door open. It covers a rectangular opening two arms tall. I guess this is reasonable considering the size of some of the tall ones. Just as we arrive she lets go of the door and it bumps Gryci as we scoot inside.

~You two are scary. I thought I would die a nice quiet death with all the politics and killing in my past. I thought I was finally safe.~

~Sorry Teacher. I tend to bring it with me recently.~ Sufi is going up another set of steps on the left. These are at least smooth enough to get a good grip on. These I decide to use my arms. I don't want to end up as weak as Gryci. Her I continue to float though. She has taken to curling up to avoid snagging an arm on anything. Good idea. I have a tendency to spread out for fear of falling.

~Roo I can scan! I can see them in the next space. Through that door. It is strange. No color in what I see though. That is strange.~

~I know.~ Healer is there with one other person. The large tall one. They are folded and resting on the floor. I can hear their sound communication, but can't understand it.

~What do we do?~

~Teacher, you have known Healer longer and certainly this culture

longer. How do we proceed?~

~Good, it is still possible for you to learn. Problem is when one gets strength there is a tendency to assume it extends in all directions. I remember when I was you age. . .”

~Gryci!~ Sufi shows brightly.

~The impatience of youth. You make noise against the door and wait for a response. If you gain none, try again.~

~And if that does not work?~

~Then we leave. They do not wish to be disturbed.~

~What kind of noise?~

~A repetitive pounding is the normal method.~

Sufi tries meekly. Not easy to make a sound with hands like ours. I look around for something to assist me, then realize that maybe my ability would work. I try hitting the door with my thoughts and I hear a booming sound.

~Don't break it Roo!~

We wait.

~How long do we wait?~

~That should be enough. The door being closed is another indication they need to be alone. We best wait outside.~

~Do they need to be alone a lot?~

~All the time. Every time they change their cloth they do so alone. They rest alone and eliminate alone.~

~Why? They must need lots of extra space to do all these activities, beyond the obvious height disadvantage.~

~True. Probably the reason they are so polluted. They also heat all this space to nearly unbearable levels. Healer said it was because they evolved in a much warmer drier climate.~

~On the other hand they are not as limited to the cooler coastal regions as we are.~

~There is no where they have not been on their world. They have also have a home orbiting this world at great height and even a home on the moon.~

~That must be a lie! We have made projectiles using hyperceram shells, but the hard vacuum is too much for our instruments.~

~Showing that idea, I wonder what happened on the world with no air. What could cause an entire worlds atmosphere to disappear?~

~You do realize that if you made a large enough bubble, you could destroy any world you are on Roo.~ Gryci looks at me with concern, then looks at her own hands.

~I know. Not an easy thought to live with. It means I can never get angry. As a level two you could cause a great deal of damage and unless

someone closed the bubble, even Gryci's bubble would eventually cause the same thing.~

~Like with Freng.~ It was not a question.

~Who is Freng?~ Gryci is shaking now. Not all positive for these abilities.

~A male who caused Roo a great deal of trouble.~

~I am sorry you were drawn into this hole Gryci.~

~I am probably more to blame for drawing you in. Though you were not hatched at the time. The show continues with or without our help.~

~Was is, is was.~

~That does not seem to fit any more.~

~It never did Roo. You have reached the first level of wisdom. It is only used by those in leadership to keep people from rebelling.~

~I doubt that is the only thing they keep from us. Now I know two, the myth of unchanging continuity and the myth of no internal shelled creatures.~

~Don't forget the myth of no one with abilities such as ours.~

~True.~

~Here they come.~ I look up the steps to see Healer with the large one. I did not notice before Healer does not glow like all other life forms. Just like the Holy Sphere. Strange. I look at the other. He has the dull red glow of a normal person. Only. Only there is a darker area in his middle right side. I concentrate and using the scanning ability also, I see it is confined to one internal organ. What would happen if I tried to make it the same color as the rest of his form? How would I do that?

I concentrate and see only the organ, but at the same time expand my thoughts to include all that is. The equations appear in my thoughts and revolve around each axis in turn. On the seventh The matrix inverts and is solved. Energy flows in and the color of the organ changes. Becoming a healthy red color. Too red. Not wanting to go backwards, I diffuse outwards and change his whole form to the brighter red color.

When I become aware again, he is making loud noises at Healer who has his hands up in the air.

~Roo, you're back. Good. Tell him I did not heal him.~

~I don't understand. I just corrected a color in his glow pattern.~

~That did it. He was going to die soon if nothing was done and he would not let me treat him.~ Healer is sounding at the same time. I assume he is translating.

~Why would a person not want to be whole?~

~He was in a war on the other side of the world. He did some things he would rather not have done. It affected him to the point where he has been trying to destroy himself with chemicals.~

~Like our mag addicts.~
~Precisely.~
~It was not mag though. That affects the nervous system not just one organ.~
~It was not mag Roo. They prefer another chemical. Ethanol. A fermentation product of sugar juice.~
~I know what it is Sufi. We sometime use it for cleaning. Toxic if you are not wearing protection.~
~A lower concentration that kills more slowly apparently.~
~It affects the nervous system, but also the detox organ. Over time the organ is destroyed.~ The large one leaves.
~Where is he going?~
~To get more of the toxin.~
~What? This is crazy!~
~Especially when he finds out it won't work. Roo, you did not just heal the organ. He is now level one. The toxin will not have any affect on him any more.~
~You mean he will be able to make bubbles now?~
~I don't know how it will manifest yet. Will be interesting to find out.~
A loud scream is heard from the direction he went in.
~That was fast.~ The crescent shape appears. ~Thank you Roo. Thank you very much.~
~I did not do anything with intent. I was just curious.~
~I know Roo. That is what I love about you.~ That worries me. Will he try and mate with me at some point? He shows, that like the three of us, he is beyond the need, but can any of them ever be beyond the need, with so many of them on this world? But if the Matriarch's method spreads there would soon be too many of us on our world. One at a time is nothing compared to hundreds or thousands or even tens of thousands at a time. Why does she want their knowledge so badly?
~Healer, I told them what you told me about the separation point of our two worlds. We do not know much about this science of old life forms preserved in stone. You had mentioned that when they arrived we would be able to visit the Teacher of this science.~
~Yes. What is this all about?~
I answer, ~Another part of the construct.~
~There is much I would like to show you of my world as well.~
~What is happening here? There are so many of your people.~
~This happens all the time Roo. Probably some important person. The fact that they haven't told us means we are not part of the program. That is good. They are as curious as we are about anything they have not seen

before. I hate being poked by so many strangers.~

Healer looks at me, ~If someone does poke you or try to Roo, it is not an attempt to harm you. Do not bubble their arms off please.~ That would have been my first reaction. Then I would have thought about what had happened.

~It probably would be better if there was no opportunity then.~ We went right through the middle of them earlier.

~Too late, here comes Long Tail and a group of them.~

They said they would give me more crab if I introduced them to you three. She comes up to me and breathes on me quickly and then backs away. Some kind of greeting?

~I doubt there is any more crab we only brought back three small ones.~

Healer turns to Sufi, ~Those were small ones? How big do they get on your world?~

~Three or four times the width are common in this bay there.~

~The extra oxygen helps.~

~And no pollution and much fewer people.~ I add sarcastically.

The crescent shape forms and he turns to face the others watching us. An exchange of sound communication occurs. It would be interesting to at least be able to understand them. I am not sure it would be possible though.

~Grcyi, can you understand them?~

~Our hearing is not fine enough to differentiate most sounds. We did not evolve in that direction. Yes and no are possible to learn, but another problem is that they communicate in thousands of languages. There are three dominate ones used here with several others used occasionally. The easiest way to see yes and no is their oral arm, which they call a head. If it angles up and down that means yes. If it goes back and forth that means no.~

~Do they always do this?~

~Unfortunately no.~

~They are leaving. What happened?~

~I told them you are dangerous. Safe to look at, but not to touch. Cultural differences that are easy to get into trouble.~

~Thank you. Too much has happened for a mistake to be made now.~

~It would be best if we leave as soon as possible. I have arranged for transportation.~

~Why? Certainly we could dimension shift there.~

~The Teacher needs time to prepare for our arrival and to fit us into her schedule. I can use the time to show you another Teacher who might prove to be interesting.~

~What does this Teacher study?~

~Stars and planets.~

~I know nothing of this study. We do not get many clear nights on the coast.~ Sufi.

~There is a place of study high in the hills, above the fog and clouds. At least it was there a hundred years ago.~ Gryci would know. Did the current Matriarch destroy it or add to it? Certainly our far seers are more advanced. I have noticed that their understanding of glass and ceramics is primitive at best.

~May even be on the same hill. Of course being over a hundred years old it is an antique now. The newest thousand arm diameter one is able to see much further being in high orbit.~ Crab.

~How do you make a glass mirror that large and put it in high orbit.~

~Not made of glass. Carbon polymers and metalized coatings I believe. Held in place by sophisticated electronic math solvers attached to mechanicals.~

~I would like to see that just once.~

~No one actually lives there. It is controlled entirely from our world's surface. Above the world is similar to the airless world you found.~ How does the air stay on the surface then? Even with gravity would it not eventually boil off? Maybe that is what happened on the airless world.

A mechanical crab comes near us. An operculum opens. Long Tail immediately jumps inside. Healer makes a repeating breathing sound and goes in next to her. Sufi looks inside.

~It's safe I think.~ I look inside. There is a flat portion. Sufi is already on it. I climb in and float Gryci inside. Healer reaches over and closes the opening. It begins to move.

~How long till we reach the far seer?~

The crab stops.

~So soon?~ We would have been able to see the far seer if it was that close.

Healer opens a glass portal and gives sounds.

~Long Tail, how do we open the portal?~

She ignores us.

Gryci pushes a protrusion on the side of the wall. The glass lowers.

~I have seen this before.~ She admits.

I rise to look out. There are several tall ones standing around another. They still look so similar, but this one looks different. More like Healer but the color of the cloth is different. Bark instead of ground root colored.

~I can't see Roo.~

~I can scan. You use the window Sufi.~ I trade places with her.

Scanning I see that the stranger is a female. She appears normal dull red

in color of one without the abilities. However, she carries a psiotic source. There appears to be a crude shader net over her as well.

~I can scan as well Roo. Gryci, you use the window.~ They trade places. I had forgotten.

~She is rising into the air. Now she is on the surface again.~

~A demonstration?~

Healer turns to us, ~I am going to open the door. We will go outside and stand before the new one.~ Healer's cloth changes to a patch work of different colors and patterns. He looks very similar to the others who have dull red color. He even assumes that color! He can change his psiotic color! I am guessing Br'thn can as well. I wonder where she is?

More sounds are exchanged. Healer folds in half to the stranger and sounds.

~I have agreed to act as translator. Roo, you are to judge whether or not this person has any psiotic abilities.~

~I already know she does not.~

The stranger rises several arms into the air and returns. Sounds are exchanged.

~Then how do you explain her ability to float in the air?~

~She has used a psiotic power source and a crude shader net.

Interesting that it has the ability to be used in this way to counteract gravity, but it is not because of her ability.~

Sounds are exchanged.

~To prove you are what you say, that is, one with the ability yourself, you will prevent her from rising when I say to.~

~How do you want me to do that?~

~Now Roo!~ I bubble the power supply without thinking. She remains firmly on the ground, though slightly lighter. To prevent the deception from being used again I bubble the net in many places. She tries jumping to start the process, but fails and returns promptly. The others near her grab her top arms to prevent escape.

~Now you will dart her for disobeying the law.~

~No Roo. We will let her go. Lesson learned. She has already released waste. You have taught her well.~ So, that is what that taste is. I remember it from the pit.

~How old is she?~ She is released and sounds exchanged. She looks towards the gate, but then turns towards me when the sounds are given. She responds.

~Eighteen.~

~Ah, so she is unnamed. We can go.~ This is translated for reasons I don't care about.

~She says she has a name. The name translates to the a particular

plant's reproductive process.~

~I know of flowers. What kind?~

~You have not seen one yet. If we come across one I will show you.~

~We should be going if we are to arrive in time.~

~Is there a short interval that we will be welcome?~

Healer pauses. ~True, time in our culture is more structured.~

~May she come with us?~

Sounds are exchanged. Healer points his arm towards the operculum of the crab. She looks at it and at us. Sufi and Gryci have remained blank throughout this exchange.

~Why do you want her with us Roo?~

~We have interacted with few females. A young one may be more open.~

~Not know enough to hide well. Good thinking. But, if she is willing to travel with creatures she has never seen before and does not know, then she must be diseased.~

~Good thinking Sufi.~ Gryci counters.

~Unless her curiosity is stronger.~

Healer interrupts, ~She wants to know if you intend to eat her.~

~Tall ones do taste strange, but not bad. However, we wish only companionship. She must behave however or she will have to make her own way. Is this acceptable to you Healer?~

~Thank you for asking. It is.~ He sounds to her and she jumps into the crab. Healer does the repeated breathing thing again, then changes his cloth back to it's original color and texture.

A loud nasty sound comes from the car and she jumps back out again. Long Tail sticks her head out. The front of the crab opens and two more tall ones come out to see what is going on. They both wear the same color cloth as Healer. They have the abilities as well. They also scan blank. A good way to hide from someone like me.

I did not promise not to eat her.

She sees the three of them in their cloths signifying their abilities and falls to the ground placing her hands in her own waste from earlier. A moment later the waste is gone. One of them probably did it.

Healer sounds and offers his hand to her. What does this mean?

She raises her hand and clasps his. He helps pull her up to balancing on the two lower arms. Ah, he offered help. She does not seem too steady. She points to us and sounds.

~She asks if you really have the abilities.~ Sufi floats into the air.

Since we do not wear cloth that would hide tricks she can see we do not deceive. She goes back towards the crab.

~She is diseased for sure.~

~Healer can cure her.~

We all get back into the crab and exit the compound.

~Who are the two in the front Healer?~

~I'm sorry. The driver is Aimee and the passenger is Flower.~

~I know what flowers are, but what is an Aimee?~

~Just a name. What does Rooi mean?~

I pause. I have to think about this one. ~I think it means smooth stone in Ancient. But mostly it is also just a name.~

She sounds and Healer looks up at the top of the crab and then down at us again and shakes his head back and forth.

~She wants to know what planet you come from? She is implying that you come from some distant place from the stars.~

~It might be easier to just go ahead and answer her questions if you already know the answers.~

~Then we would not know what she was curious about.~

~True.~

~I have an idea.~ Healer opens a compartment. Operculums inside? Why? He pulls out a box and opens that. Inside are some kind of material made from flour, fat, sugar and salt. The small space fills with the taste. He hands one to each of us and several to her. She quickly puts them into her oral pore. Disgusting how she does that without covering herself. Healer pulls a small cloth out of some pocket in his cloth and hands it to her sounding an explanation. She looks at the cloth and then at us. Food hanging out. She holds the cloth over her oral arm at the same time she finishes the food. She then fastens it around her oral arm is such a way that her eyes can still see. She sounds and Healer gives her more of the food items.

I try mine, but it does not have much taste.

~It is very dry in here, even with the glass opened.~ Gryci comments, though I have been feeling the same.

~Go ahead Gryci, you know what to do.~ She reaches into another covered hole and pulls out translucent containers with some liquid in them. She operates it in some way so as to spray herself with what I can now taste is water. She then hands it to Sufi.

~How do you make it work?~ She then figures it out and sprays herself and hands it to me. There is a lever on one side. When I depress the lever against the side of the container spray comes out. Not much though.

~Faster and harder will bring more water.~ Sufi suggests. I am not as big as either of them, but eventually manage to get most of myself wet. She has curled up with Long Tail and has lost awareness.

~It will be at least two eighths before we get there if you wish to rest

as well. We will be maintaining awareness long into the night tonight.~ I am finding that I need less and less rest, but I am sure that Gryci needs some and we were up early today. It is easy enough for me to maintain a blank state and think instead.

I concentrate on trying to understand how this crab works, using my scanning ability as well as I can.

Far Seer

She makes a commotion and we all become aware again. There is so much about this artificial crab that I don't understand. Without tasting the individual components I can't tell what they are made of, only that the materials have changed and its current shape. Frustrating.

The crab stops and Healer opens the operculum. She climbs over Healer to go outside. A moment later, she comes back in and hands me a strange plant. A slender green stalk that ends in a white cone shaped reproductive structure. Inside there is a smaller stalk yellow in color. There is a faint taste in the air near it.

~She says that her name is the same as the name for this plant. I will make up a symbol based on the plant so you can refer to her by this symbol. Her name is Lily.~ At least this will make conversation easier.

It would also appear that she has made friends with Long Tail as she has Long Tail's head in the area where the two lower legs meet and is grooming her soft spikes with one of her upper arms. Long Tail is emitting a strange repetitive sound, soft and low in pitch. Soothing in a way.

~We are here.~ The crab stops and the door opens. Aimee and Flower are waiting outside. It appears to be late afternoon now. We emerge to new tastes in the air. We are on the top of a mountain. There are several structures behind us with a half sphere on top of two of them. We enter one of the flat topped ones to be greeted by what I can only describe by my current understanding as the oldest living tall one imaginable. He is stooped over using a piece of wood to even remain balanced. His skin is like a dried slug and nearly the color of one. The soft spikes on the top of his oral pore are white. Even the cloth that he wears look well worn.

Upon seeing us he nearly topples over in shock. Interestingly instead of using sound to communicate he moves his upper two arms in patterns similar to our hand speaking, but not quite. Healer answers him in a similar way then turns to us.

~I am afraid that I failed to tell him that you were not tall ones like he is. But he is still eager to show you his far seers. Come, we will follow him to the studio.~

~How does he communicate? He does not use sounds.~ Sufi our course.

~He is incapable of hearing sounds. He uses what we call sign language instead. Seeing how I communicate with you, he is eager to learn how. You are the first beings he has meet from another planet. For a star seer, this is the ultimate experience.~

~But we are not from another planet, or rather not one from another star, or . . . ~ How do I describe our situation?

~Please, let us follow him.~ This could take some time. Or so I thought. He sits on a device and is soon very much ahead of us. I cannot walk that fast and certainly Gryci can't. I float both of us. Sufi floats herself.

We don't actually go very far, just into the next room, which is rather large. As soon as we enter the lights dim and stars appear on the ceiling. As it gets darker, the ceiling's appearance disappears. Strange, this was not one of the buildings with the half sphere on top.

~Teacher says this is their observation room. The signals from the two telescopes are combined with known information and integrated to produce this simulation of the sky above. Even though the sun has not quite set, the calculations are able to negate its influence. You will notice it is still present to the west.

We will now magnify the image to look at one particular sector.~

It appears to us as if we could fly faster than the speed of light to a position some distance away. The sun is still to the west of us, but appears to be the same relative size. Therefore we have followed an arc along the same path as the planet itself. And I cannot explain why I am able to follow this reasoning. I had thought I had forgotten. Why can't I remember anything else from before my arrival in the Coast community?

The is a bright, but small disk ahead of us.

~If we connect with the Big Eye.~ The image expands again. This time we see a very large rock with pock marks all over it. I certainly have never seen anything like this.

~What is it?~

~A rock.~

~I had guessed that much. How big is it?~

~And what is it made of?~

~And where is it going?~

~Twelve thousand arms, mostly iron, within several hundred thousand arms of this planet and at speeds in excess of seven hundred million arms per eighth.~

~That means it will skim the outer atmosphere.~

~But not impact.~

~When will it do this?~

~In about two moons.~

~Wouldn't it be fun to watch?~

~What would have happened if it had hit this world?~

~Most life on this world would be gone. It would have been worse if it had hit several moons from the estimated time.~ It is nearly winter here

and near the high holidays on our world. Several moons behind.

~What happened on the world that Roo found that has no air?~

~CRAB!~ Something attacked me on a back arm. I immediately go into a defensive reaction and surround the attacker with my arms in a tight embrace. I frantically search for a place to bite a death blow.

Suddenly I am holding air and crumple to the ground.

~What happened?~ I hand the nearest person.

Lily gets up and runs from the room. I recognize her when the door opens.

The lights come up. Everyone is looking at me.

~It would appear that Long Tail has finally met her match. Are you well Roo?~ The old Teacher is making that repeating breathing sounds and has the crescent shape on his oral pore. The other tall ones also show the crescent shape. I think this means they find something amusing?

~I am well, but I am ashamed to admit that I nearly killed Long Tail. I did not know. Is this allowed in your culture?~

~Not in our culture. We would probably have reacted the same way you did. Come to think of it, when she was smaller we used to put up with similar attacks. They say her species has nine lives. I would guess she has used up all but one now. But to finish your question, it is a common practice in her culture. Best be prepared for it to happen again. Next time, try not to kill her though.~

~What happened on the airless world?~

~It is related to what we have just seen. We could visit this world if you wish.~

The Teacher taps Aimee on the side and signs to her.

~The Teacher would also like to go. But first, they should see the old far seers.~

He goes ahead of us out of the building. We follow. Outside it is dark now, but there is one small glow bulb at the entrance. The lack of light does not appear to bother him. He goes down a path to the right. We follow. We are going to the furthest of the half sphere topped building.

Once we are all inside I see the far seer. It is not very big. I have to remember the one above us to not be impressed.

Flower translates now. I did not know he even knew how to show.

~This far seer, as you call it, has been in continuous operation for over one hundred and fifty years. Of course I have only been the caretaker for the last forty. The last twenty were totally alone. If it were not for these three, I would have not have seen anyone in that time.~

This is really sad. We have far seers that have been in operation for thousands of years.

~What level of technology was this world say two hundred years ago?

~

~Steam engines, primitive metallurgy and animal exploitation.~

Crab. They have done an enormous amount in a very short period of time. Like an explosion in slow motion. Where will they be in a hundred more years?

~Come, time to travel the new way.~

Mechanical crabs and special abilities. What is the new way?

We gather around Healer outside. Lily and Long Tail are a short distance away watching. I don't think Long Tail is happy. With her abilities she would not be a welcome enemy.

He turns around to look at them and says something. Lily shakes her head sideways and remain where they are.

~I did not mean to harm Long Tail. If I had known it was her I would not have reacted that way.~

~She knows. Just does not like to lose a fight. She will get over it before next meal time. Would be wise to be careful for a few days though.~ I intend to be.

~Pay attention Roo. You will need to learn how to do this at some point.~

Aimee moves a few arms away from everyone and looks away from us towards a clearing I can see easily with my scanning ability and only slightly with my vision. Our eyes are much larger than the tall ones, so I am sure they cannot see without the ability. Since the Teacher does not have the ability, they are not doing this for his benefit.

A wind arises. Aimee does not move. The wind grows stronger. I look back towards her and see a shape forming. It looks like a curved section of a Holy Sphere. Just the top and bottom with the middle missing. It is beautiful in its simplicity.

The wind stops. She waves us towards her.

~How do we get inside?~ Gryci, you have been around us long enough. I dimension shift the three of us inside. We can see outside. Interesting. It did not look transparent on the outside. A moment later and they are inside with us. There are seats of sorts designed for them. Three of them.

~You should be most comfortable on the floor where you are.~

~What about Lily and Long Tail?~

~They will arrive when they wish. There is enough room on the floor.~

I move to one edge. I don't want to be guarding more than one front.

Aimee shows, ~First we will move to a safe distance, otherwise we might end up in the side of a hill or worse.~ Worse?

I do not feel movement, but I can see the light from the structure

recede.

~More lights to the left.~ She is correct. It is like a glow fungus spreading over a long forgotten meal. Beautiful in a way.

~Is this not a waste? I know your source of light requires much energy.~

~In some ways. We do not see as well in the dark as your species does. As it gets closer to winter light is needed to complete our tasks. It takes a lot of work to maintain this high of a population.~

~One too high for the world to handle. You are in severe danger of plague.~

~Yes.~

~But you and the others can always stop it from spreading.~

~We will not.~

~Why? You could save these people, but will not?~

~We are not here to prevent their mistakes. They have known of this risk for over a hundred years, yet take no steps to prevent it. Also, we represent the entire planet, not just our own species. We have to look at what is best for everyone. The time of our species being dominant is receding.~

~What will take your place.~

~Their place. We will remain.~

~You said that your lifespan is normally around a hundred years, or half of our maximum.~ Not that many reached it. I look at Gryci. I am not sure I want to. The constant pain must be intense.

What pain? I am happy to help someone in particular to feel pain.
Me. Long Tail and Lily are beside us.

~If you attack the representatives of the alternate world again I will fit you with a limiter personally.~ What is a limiter? Aimee holds up a device. A small Holy Sphere. It does not move though.

Stupid squid! She does not move though. Lily continues to groom her. Be careful Lily.

~You cut that close Long Tail. We were nearly out of your current range.~

You can show me direct and not everyone on board. Stupid monkey.
What's a monkey?

I can now see the curvature of their world.

~Will we get to see the Big Eye?~

~No. We will not need to get that far away. Maybe on another visit.~

~This should be sufficient. If you will now move us to the airless world.~

~Who me? I can't move something this large. The surface is not something I have ever tasted before.~

~Roo, you have made much larger bubbles, fortunately not to the airless world. What the ship is made of is not important. Besides at each upgrade in your abilities, your previous abilities are also upgraded ten fold.~

~Crab!~ I had not even tried. Of course out here there is nothing to scan now. Wait, there are things out here. We are about to collide with a structure! We need to move now!

I bubble us to the airless world.

~Spiders!~

I look below. We are on the sun side of the world. Or what's left of it. There are large distortions in its shape.

The bubble apparently works by placing us in the same relative position to the new world.

We descend to the surface.

~I am not absolutely sure of our location. So much is different.~

~Do your best Aimee.~ They do not need to communicate this way. I say a thank you.

~There is no water as well. The seas are gone.~ Totally lifeless.

We arrive at the surface. The sun is high overhead. Around us is total destruction. Parts of trees are all over. In fact we cannot actually reach the ground because of all the debris. Nothing is green. Everything is gray and dusty.

~There is a structure over here. Or what is left of it.~ The ship moves in that direction. We float over what must have been a made structure.

Teacher sounds.

~There are remnants of a far seer here. Whoever they were, they had the ability as well. This could be a parallel world to ours.~

I wish I could taste the pieces.

~No metal. There is almost no metal here. Ceramics is my guess.~ That does not show good.

~Go to the coast. We all know it well. It might give us a time frame for the disaster.~

~Good idea Sufi.~ Flower comments. He is normally blank.

Aimee takes us very quickly to the coast then asks, ~I have never been to your world. Which part of the coast.~

~How can you tell this is the coast?~ Everything is covered in gray dust.

~I can see below the ash layer. There is sand beneath us here.~

~Home was on the north coast of the half circle bay.~

~There are two that fit that description. North or south of the great bay?~

~South.~ I try and remember the last map I have seen of the area.

Both half circles are south of the entrance of the great bay, but maybe ours is below the lower part of the bay. Yes, I think it is.

~Those mounds could be homes.~ We are close enough now for me to be able to scan. There is a great deal of ash. That implies volcanic activity or at least a fire. Nothing like that near us.

~They are the remnants of homes. They are not quite in the correct position though.~

~How quickly do your homes turn over?~ Turn over?

We are all blank.

~Change. Sorry. The words were valid, but the meaning is different for you.~ Apparently. ~How quickly do things change in your culture?~

~Very slowly. This much change might take several thousand years.”

~That helps. So, we know it was likely to have been a cephalopod culture. I am sorry.~

~What happened? It looks like volcanic ash, but there are no volcanoes here. Nor can a volcano account for the larger damage we saw east of here.~

The Teacher says one sound. Everyone pauses.

~Teacher says it was an asteroid. Something like the one we just visited with the far seer.~

~It was not that large. We know of ones that have hit the surface.~

~It is a combination of size, content and speed of impact. This looks like a direct strike at high speed or a very large one. It is even thought that our moon was a result of one such collision very early in the life of our planet. The mineral mix on the moon is not the same as earth.~

~Before either of our ancestors were alive.~

~We need to go back. We have another appointment to keep.~

~Could this happen to our world?~

~Probably has in the past. Probably several times in fact.~

~How soon will it happen again.~ The Teacher makes more sounds.

~That is why he does what he does. Why Big Eye exists. We calculate that we are overdue for another big one. We want to be prepared.~

~What could you do to prevent something that fast from hitting your world?~

~That would not be easy either. The sooner we know the less we have to do. Any action would be multiplied by time. If you move a rock by a hand width just before it hits, there is virtually no change in the effect, but if you move it by a hand width years before it hits, it never will hit.”

~Yes, this makes sense.~ Gryci comments.

~Is that what you did in your case?~

~We did not need to this time. The point is, is that we were prepared.

One will come probably sooner than we expect.~

~And we should be preparing the same way.~

~You lack the necessary technology.~

~Worrying about one rock does not sound like much. We have far seers as well, better ones than the one on your mountain.~

~There are tens of thousands of potential asteroids that could hit and millions are out there. All it would take is for one of those to be knocked off course and it becomes a candidate as well. And yes, they knock into each other all the time.~

~Crab~

~I want to see the other side of this world. It was misshapen when we first arrived.~

Are you sure? They know something.

~Br'thn!~ Long Tail becomes aware and raises his oral arm. Lily goes white. I did not know that tall ones could change color. Her color is starting to fade.

~Someone help Lily. There is something wrong.~ Br'thn goes up to her to get a closer look. Must be something she learned from the tall ones. With her psiotic potential she would know from the other side of the world.

She has stopped breathing. Lily collapses into the support on top of Long Tail. This time Long Tail does not complain, but rasps the side of her oral arm. She becomes aware again and takes a long breath. Unfortunately she places an upper arm on top of Long Tail. Long Tail reacts and growls a most horrible sound looking at me! Healer sees all of this and growls low in Long Tail's direction. Long Tail stops. Lily withdraws her arm quickly in fear. Long Tail probably weighs more than Lily. There is reason to be fearful.

Lily makes a loud sound clearing her breathing apparatus, then sounds something.

~She asked if Br'thn was real.~

~How did Br'thn find us?~ Across dimensional worlds is beyond belief.

~She always knows where Healer is. He is her Guardian and usually she is his.~ More crescent shapes.

Br'thn disappears.

~We will wait. She will be back in a moment.~

We are high above the former coast. I recognize nothing even though I was just where my home would have been on this world. All gray ash and debris. No water, no hills, no green plants. Everyone gone. Millions of people gone. How long did it take? Did they have any warning? Did they suffer?

Br'thn appears in the ship again. This time there is a black box with her. It floats near by. About one hand equal in all dimensions. Healer takes it from her.

~Br'thn has collected samples we can have analyzed to determine when this happened.~ Does it really matter?

We move rapidly now. The curve the world revolves under us. Soon we are at lights edge, but being higher up we have sun for longer than the world below. It is in total darkness.

~With no atmosphere the light does not scatter. Dark isn't it?~ Very dark.

~What is that glow? Are we at the other side already.~

~No.~ No crescent shapes now.

~Oh spiders! Oh spiders!~ Sufi covers her eyes. I can't stop looking. The core of the world is exposed. The glow is from the molten rock below.

~It will eventually cool, though it may take millions of years.~
Part of the world is missing.

I look more closely. ~There is another glow, of the psiotic type!~

~Yes.~ No explanation given. My range is not that far. How can I be seeing this? How can molten rock be alive?

~We can go now?~

Food! Long Tail is right. We could use some food, if only to distract us from this. I need to use the composter also.

Healer does not ask me to take us back. In a moment we are not only back on their world, but on the side of the mountain next to the Teacher's home and work. I want to learn how to do that. I would have still have been a few hundred arms above the ground at least. I am not fond of risks. Why am I here then?

We say goodbye to the Teacher, strange custom, and get back inside the mechanical crab. Somehow reassuring to be back in newly familiar space.

~Do we greet the sunrise today?~ Gryci asks. I look out the glass and see the eastern sky starting to glow. May be another hour before the sun appears. No clouds and no fog. We are on the other side of the mountains.

~It will be dry today.~

~What about shaders?~

~They don't have them here.~

~What about what Lily was using. That is pretty close.~

~The quality of their zero conductor is too low. All this tech and they can't do a simple zero conductor.~

~How do they stay cool? I am hot already.~

~They like it warmer than we do. Notice how much cloth they use?
Layers of the stuff. Do you see any ice? I don't.~
~What's ice?~
~Water so cold that it turns to a solid. Haven't you ever seen ice Roo?
~
~Never gets that cold at home.~
Flower asks, ~How do you stop food from spoiling?~
~We eat it.~ A crescent shape on his oral pore.
Food? Long Tail's oral arm rises.
Healer gives Long Tail a push with one arm, ~We will not forget to
feed you.~
I was fine while we were in the hills, but as soon as we get to the
valley I become more nervous.
~Roo are you going to be ill?~ How did Aimee know that? Of course,
she must be able to see my psiotic glow.
I answer, ~There are so many.~ More and more crabs, all very close
and moving at high speed.
~Roo, stop looking out the glass. Don't scan either. You will be fine.
We have been doing this most of our lives. Trust us.~ I still think I am
going to die. How can Sufi and Gryci keep looking outside? I cover my
eyes and try to lose awareness. I finally just concentrate on the vibration
of the device moving us.
I am not aware of how long I am like this when I hear a whistle from
Sufi trying to get my attention.

Bones

~We are here Roo. Time to come out.~ I am so weak I can barely move.

This is the one who will save their world. Small ones of my kind have more than she does.

~Don't get her mad again Long Tail. You would not like the result. Last time was just practice.~ I am too tired to try anything. I think what upset me the most was that everyone of the crabs was a different color and every tall one I saw wore different patterns none of which blended with any background I know or saw. They are guilty of every conceivable type of pollution including sight pollution. This is a world magged out.

Stupid monkeys.

~What is a monkey Long Tail? Show me an image.~ She projects an image. It looks sort of like them but instead of cloth they are covered with the soft spikes and have another arm on the bottom. It is the behavior that shows the story. Intensely curious, but also sneaky, lying, and mean. I have to remember this is Long Tail's view of them.

All true. These were their ancestors. Ask the Teacher we are about to meet. I will. I also think about our own ancestors. If the Nauti made us, then they were our ancestors. Most of what I know about them makes the monkeys look like clown slugs, more show than action. If we were not and the stories that I heard at home were correct then we are more related to the octopus, a shy creature who is afraid of it's own reflection.

~What were your ancestors like Long Tail?~ She projects these strong creatures running down graceful creatures at amazing speeds. Proud and strong. Misunderstood loners. I can relate to that aspect.

~I am sorry for attacking you Long Tail. I was frightened.~ Long Tail comes up to me and leans against me doing that vibration effect. I try stroking her like I saw Lily do and the sound becomes louder. Lily comes up to the rest of us and sounds something into the hearing pore of Long Tail.

Lily would like to know if she can touch you.

~I never even thought of that possibility. She may try. Start slowly and if I raise my front two arms like this, then stop.~ The universal hand sign for no, even in Ancient.

She comes up to me and gently places one upper hand on the top of my mantle. She immediately pulls it back and sounds.

Healer interprets, “~She said she is surprised to feel warmth. She thought you would be cold.~

~We are warmer than room temperature. At least warmer than the

normal temperature at the coast. Here the air is much warmer.~

~It gets a lot hotter in the summer.~ It would kill me then if I am caught here without a shader. Lily tries again. Her hand is so dry. How can they stand it?

She gently wraps her arm around me and her other arm around Long Tail. Together the three of us walk behind the others towards a structure made from sandstone and marble. Sufi is floating Gryci. Gryci is making her first bubbles. They are so tiny. Takes practice. Aimee and Flower are behind us silent and blank except for a crescent shape to their oral pores. They seem to find humor in everything.

~Are all of the openings to rectangular?~ No one can see what I am showing. Depressing. If I go home I will be darted sooner or later. If I stay here I will die from depression. I can't even walk into the sea to die an honorable death any more. Everything has been taken from me. I can trust no one for more than surface details. It is obvious that the tall ones know more than they are saying. Is our world in danger of a rock hitting it? Is that why we have been shown all this? How would we protect ourselves? How would we even know? We don't have the support structure. We are doomed.

Long Tail bumps me, *Worry not one from the sea. The monkeys worry too much. They think the sky is falling all the time. Waste much energy and time in pursuit of nothing. Eat, sleep and love. No more needed.*

I wish it was that simple.

We make our way through hallways into a small room. The operculum closes by itself. Maybe one of them moved it with their mind. No one on the outside would know.

~Whoa, it is moving!~ I nearly ink.

~A room that moves? Why?~ It feels like we are falling. I scan the surroundings areas. We are in a shaft. There is free space above and below us. Clearly it was designed for this purpose. There is a second shaft near us. Also those horrible stairs next to us. This is nicer for our design at least.

I count. We fall three levels. The room stops and the door opens.

They are so lazy. They spend so much time making ways to not have to move with their own abilities. It would have been easier to just move and be done with it.

~I am wondering why we did not just dimension shift here and avoid the mechanical crab and hours of horror completely.~

I see you understand my friend.

~Stupid monkeys.~

~Roo, Sufi and Gryci, I would like you to meet Teacher ah, Bones.~

~What is a bones?~ Assuming this name means something. I look at

Aimee.

~The internal shells you see in our kind and Long Tail's kind. Bones is the plural of bone. You will understand in a moment.~

~We call those structures shells.~

~Shells are made of calcium carbonate. Bones are made of calcium phosphate.~

~How can that be? There is not enough phosphate to allow for living beings to store such massive amounts.~

~It did not happen overnight Sufi.~

~Maybe that is why the Nauti banned your kind. They would have taken all the phosphate from the sea to support themselves on land.~

~There might be some truth to that. Your seas are much more abundant in phosphate than ours. On the other hand, ours used to be more abundant than they are now. Our population ate most of it.~

~That is another reason. If land animals of your abilities rose in our world, we would be ruined.~

~You are of our ability. Oh, you don't have the same level of technology yet, but you could.~

~We have been sentient much longer than you. Your technology, though impressive is backwards in many ways. We do not have the pollution and population problems you have.~

~You have seen very little of our technology, nor do you understand how much is involved in making it. I show this not to boast. For example, we have thousands of devices in orbit around this planet and homes on the moon itself.~

~And it is unlikely you will be around an eight year from now at the rate you are destroying your world.~

~Very prophetic of her Flower.~

~Possibly. We will see.~

~We came here for a reason. Teacher, please instruct us.~ She is neither old nor young. There is very black soft spikes on her oral arm. The darkest of any I have seen so far.

~Welcome.~ She opens her arms after saying this. I am horrified.

~She wants to eat us!~

Flower steps between us, then turns to her and sounds.

~Please Roo, she is sorry. She meant to show that she was happy you are here and she is eager to help. I will translate everything from now on to prevent any further misunderstandings. I understand her language better than Healer does. I am not attempting to take his role.~

She interrupts though to show, ~Sorry, know few words only.~ She looks to Healer when she shows this. Her oral arm has turned red. Not enough that she could hide anywhere I now though.

I am in trouble. I have already seen they do not understand us. How do I explain that I need to visit the composter?

I can help there. Let me lead.

Suddenly we are outside in a well planted area. Long Tail goes to a spot with loose soil, digs a hole, turns around, backs up to it and emits her waste. She then covers it up. Very efficient if a bit crude.

Much better than what they would have offered you. They use these ceramic bowls with water in them. A waste of good water and a waste of useful fertilizer. Then they mine and refine fertilizer to take the place of what they have thrown away.

~Stupid monkeys.~

I bury my own fertilizer and clean myself with plant pieces nearby. Long Tail uses her rasp to do the same.

She looks at me watching her, *Our ability to taste is inside our mouth.*

~A definite handicap.~

You get used to it. Since they don't taste their own waste they suffer from sickness much more often than we do. They are the ones who are handicapped.

~Agreed.~

Shall we return? Don't worry, they know exactly where we are and why. The monkeys always seem to know. Very frustrating.

~Can't get away with anything.~

Sometimes, but not often. The secret is to keep them busy. Then you can do almost anything.

~I will try and remember that.~

We reappear in the room with the others.

Sufi addresses me, ~When you disappeared they realized they had been rude and offered their own waste removal method to us.~

~You mean the ceramic bowl and the water?~

~How did you know?~

~Long Tail showed me. Barbaric.~

~Definitely.~

~If you two are done despising our culture can we get back to the task we came for?~

I remain blank. Sufi does likewise.

Someone else enters the room and abruptly stops. They stare at us. I pass a hand over my waste pore. No, nothing there to embarrass me about. The Teacher sounds to the person. They set something down and leave the room.

Flower shows for her, ~We have the results of the analysis of the samples from the airless world.~ He pauses then continues, ~The results show that the asteroid hit their world about one hundred and seventy

thousand years ago.~

~It looked like only a thousand.~

~It would appear that your world changes even more slowly than you thought.~

~Was is, is was.~

~What?~

~It is a showing that we all repeat often. Basically nothing changes or ever will.~

~That could be a problem if something new came up. What happens when a disaster happens?~

~Everyone dies. After the disaster passes the community is rebuilt from people from the outside.~

~So, for example, a plague starts in a community. The community is sealed off, allowed to die and after it is deemed safe, life starts again.~

~Yes. The weak are punished for not being prepared or being genetically inferior. No different from the selection itself. Just in size and time.~

~I thought we were not here to judge each other's cultures. It is clear from your questions how you feel. We will answer no more questions." Gryci is upset. I don't care any more.~

~Teacher Bones, how can you help us?~ I want to get us going in a helpful direction.

With Flower translating I soon forget that he is here, ~My understanding is that you wish to determine when our two worlds diverged in the Froth. To do this we need to find the youngest remnants of either world in the other.~

~You are showing that we need to find 'bones' in our world or shells in yours.~

~Not quite that easy. There are still shells in our world. Species similar to yours still exist and ones similar to the Nauti have existed on our world up to about seventy million years ago.~

~It is possible that our worlds diverged as little as seventy million years ago.~

~Possible, but unlikely. At that time on our world there were millions of creatures much too large to hide or remove all traces of. The land surface especially. Some of the creatures were ten thousand times your weight Roo. The bones alone were over a thousand times your weight. They can be destroyed like anything from a living being, but being that large means some would survive.~

~But the Nauti could have found them and destroyed them.~

~Remember, they lived on land and their remains, turned to stone, were embedded in mountain sides. It was not until we did extensive

excavation did we find many of them.~

~Excavation is illegal in our world.~

~Most of these sites were well inland. It is doubtful you would have noticed.~

~We have been able to move more inland during the cooler times of year.~

~I am talking about the middle of continents.~

~We have a device called a shader. It uses carbon fiber and zero conductors to help us maintain proper body temperature and protection from the sun.~

~The damaging effect of ultra violet of course. Dehydration would also be a problem. You would need to be near water. The prime sites for these remains would be in desert or arid environments where water would not erode them.~

~Then the best place for us to look would be in the same places on our world.~

~Exactly.~

~What about the reverse, our kind on your world. We have been civilized for over a hundred thousand years and sentient for over a million.~

~We have never found evidence of any civilizations other than from tall ones and their recent ancestors.~

Healer interjects, ~How would you know? I have been to their world. Many of the artifacts could pass for either civilization.~

~The technology? Surely that would not pass.~

~Our world tries to use natural means as much as possible. Your crabs are totally mechanical. Ours are mostly biological. Even the controls are biodegradable.~

~Except for all of our ceramics.~

~She is right. They would be noticed. So, we can probably safely show that it must have happened before your people arose on land.~

~How far back could it have happened?~

~Because of drift, it might have happened near the start of life itself, nearly two and a half billion years ago. Most likely after more advanced cells and life forms evolved, roughly six hundred million.~

~Our time segment is from six hundred million to one million?~

~That is why we need your help Teacher.~

~To what end would this knowledge help you?~

~Our culture depends on hiding well.~

~You suspect that some of what you have been shown is not correct.~

~Yes.~

~And if the stories of your history is wrong, then other knowledge

may also be wrong.~

~Yes.~

~The history you have been shown depicts a world that never had creatures with bones. Certainly never ones who made it to living on land.~

~Yes.~

~Then we need to visit your world. I know where to look. If we find what I have found at the same locations on this world then we have a more accurate time.~

~And the truth is revealed.~

~Teacher, you found a way to get back into the field.~

She does the crescent. Must be universal for their species.

~The easiest way may be to go to exact spot on this world and then move to ours. Since our world is likely to look far different.~

~Good thinking Gryci, but I would also recommend being above the surface. The differences between the two worlds can sometimes be massive.~

~It would help if we knew what we are looking for. Remember, none of us has ever seen these 'bones' you show about.~

~In the next room I have some of varying sizes.~ Flower translates.

~Since it would appear you have everything in order, Aimee and I will meet you here afterwards. There are chores we have to do here as well. The Regent can provide whatever you need.~

~Regent? Flower, you are the leader here?~ Long Tail breaths on some of the small bones. I am sure this is not what is meant.

~I share the position with another. He is currently in the leader's hall.~

~How do you share such a position?~

~We keep in contact using mind showing and he can change his form to look like me as I can change my form to look like him, as I do now. In this way we both get the benefit of not being the leader for half the time.~

~You prefer not being the leader?~

~Definitely. Being the leader is horrible. I would avoid it at all costs if you can. You have to acknowledge the trip we are about to take is far more interesting.~ I am not so sure, as much as I would hate to be the leader. I don't even like to be the temporary leader of the groups I find myself in lately. The Teacher sounds to Flower.

~Here are the bones. Do not worry about learning the different types. You can see there are some basic similarities.~

~Roo, watch out.~ I back up to get a better overall view and bump into something. I look up and this enormous set of sharp beaks in their fashion looks down at me.

~The large one would be the easiest to detect of course. That is why

we are going where we should find it as our first stop. It is also more likely they will have not over looked something this large. Therefore it is important to look at the smaller specimens as well. The body plan is the same, only the proportions are a little different.~

~The main ganglia are protected by the hard shell, I mean bone then.~ I can scan the tall ones present.

~Yes. We do not have the advantage of a more distributed system like you have. It is also the reason the one heart is encased in these bones.” Flower watches as she points to the parallel sets of bones that meet at the center.

~The position on this planet that we will be going to first is the one that Teacher Bones knows best. She has spent many years there and has found many of the specimens you see there.~

~We go.~ She shows. At least she tries.

We are suddenly in the dark. It is very cold even if it is a relief from the heat of the Teacher's study area. I cannot feel the ground beneath me. I scan. We are currently only a few arms above the surface. For the distance I can scan we appear to be in a very mountainous region.

A glow sphere appears. At least we can communicate without using hands. Takes so much longer that way.

~I would move a bit higher. Maybe a hundred arms.~

~How long is an arm? Whose arm do I use?~ Flower is not as knowledgeable as Healer. That is interesting.

~My arm is approximately the length of a standard arm,~ Sufi says.

~It was the length of the arm of an early Matriarch.~ Our current one is huge by comparison. We move higher. Once we stop again I make a test bubble and move around it.

~What is she doing?~

~I am making sure that there are no surprises. There have been many in the past. Once one of those mechanical crabs you have came through a bubble I made.~

~That was you? I remember seeing that on the news reports. Everyone thought the person was hallucinating.~

~I just thought of something. Gryci, how come Raj has not built more portals in the nearly one hundred years you have been here.~

~Takes a lot of energy. He probably could not use it again for ten years after he shoved me though.~

~That is interesting. Then the many times she used it at the party must have cost her much.~

~Unless she has found a new energy source.~

~This world has plenty of those and we know she liked to steal technology. Would also explain such a large performance.~ Now that I

can see such things. I wonder is she now has one of those psiotic ones.

~But our technology is relatively new compared to yours. There was really nothing of value to take a hundred years ago. And two hundred years ago we were mostly simple farmers.~

~I'm sorry. I agreed to help, but we have limited time.~ Flower translates.

I bubble us to home world.

Everything is different. Daytime is the most obvious, but I was also right about the height difference. We were a hundred arms above the ground on their world and only about twenty now. Lots of vegetation here, theirs was nearly barren. The trees are dripping wet after a recent rain. There is a lot of life here.

~How do we proceed?~ We aren't going to dig are we?

~If you will assist in scanning Roo this will go faster.~

Teacher looks around trying to decide on something. She goes back and forth across the spot. She then sounds to Flower.

~It is fortunate that she was here when the digging started.~

~A large one should be straight down from where she is. About three arms. It was the first one we found and the reason they continued at this location.~

I can scan that deep without any problems. I squat down on the ground and concentrate. After I get past the organic layers I notice that the stone is in layers at a different angle. I follow the layers down lower and lower.

~There are a lot of tree parts and small clam shells.~

~This was a curve in an ancient river. Bones tended to accumulate here. The shells would have been freshwater clams.~

~What is freshwater? Do you mean clean water?~

Flower thinks about it for the moment. ~Not ocean water, but rainwater.~ Healer made the same mistake. I should have remembered it.

~I can find no evidence of bones.~

~We could be in the wrong location.~

~No, with permission I worked with Teacher Bone's mind to ensure the location.~

~How about the absence of bones?~

~What do you mean?~

~If the Nauti killed the land sea squirts and removed all evidence of them they had to turn the bones into something else. The easiest would be to match the stone around the bones.~

~And they may not have been thorough enough to make it perfect. There was a lot of volume to work. They would not have expected anyone to ever reach this far inland, nor use our method of seeing the

layers. Any unseen would have done the same or tried to. Make it simpler that is.~ I can remember.

~Look down and try and map the space where there are no clam shells. The stone they could have copied more easily, but they may not have bothered with the shells.~

I concentrate again. It is hard work and takes time. There are natural eddies in the patterns. I try and account for that.”

~I can only get a partial pattern. Nothing for sure. Might be where bones were.~

Sufi whistles and then shows, ~I found a small one I think.~ She picks up a rock. It is flat, about several arms wide. ~Not much left. Looks like it was squashed.~

The Teacher rushes over and takes it from her to examine.

~Yes, this is proof. Not a good enough specimen to save, only a partial, but there are no molluscs or arthropods that would have this pattern. Clearly one with bones.~ I doubt she showed in those words. Flower is good. But, what is a mollusc?

~How could something so small be a threat to the Nauti? How old is it?~

~Without tests I cannot be sure of this piece. It was not among the material removed on our world. Probably three hundred million years. As to the threat I do not know.~

~A long time. Maybe we should look at something more recent. I want to know how long ago they decided to do this.~ Another conspiracy, crab. I really was convinced that the Nauti were the heroes. What could cause them to eliminate so many? Were the land creatures sentient? Even if they were not, being on land there were certainly not a threat.

Long Tail disappears. A moment later a loud sound is heard a short distance away. I look around for Lily. She is not with us. She might have wandered off when I was searching. I look to Flower, but he is watching us.

~What is happening?~

~It is Long Tail's responsibility.~

A horrible low rumbling sound is heard followed by a high pitched very loud sound, then silence.

We wait. Nothing seems to happen. I scan in the direction of the sounds.

~They are returning.~ I taste the air. ~They are hurt. There is blood from your kind.~ The boned ones have a distinctive iron taste to their blood. Repulsive. The cooked meat did not have this taste though. Must be possible to remove it in processing.

The movement in the trees and Long Tail emerges first. She comes

up to us, sits down and starts to clean herself. Clearly not concerned. A moment later Lily comes out of the growth. She appears normal. I scan her psiotic state. Dull red, again normal.

~They do not appear damaged to me Roo.~ Gryci comments.

~But I taste blood.~

~So do I.~

Teacher sounds and Flower comments, ~The females of our species lose blood on a lunar cycle. This is normal and not an indication of disease or damage.~ Strange. What could possibly be the reason?

I scan Lily, but can find no evidence of this discharge. She makes the crescent shape of her oral pore, turns around, goes back into the forest a short way and then returns. She is holding a creature, or the remains of one.

~All that noise for this? It could not be more than a hand in length.~

~But is, or was a live boned creature. Similar to the one in the rock.

Different species of course.~

~Bigger and more advanced actually, but yes, similar. Note the soft spines similar to those on Long Tail.~

~It's tail is longer than Long Tail's in proportion.~

~And has almost no soft spines.~

~Does not matter. The point is, is that this creature should not exist on this world.~

~They missed some?~

~Or they were not the ones who destroyed the others.~

~Could also be the size. This creature is very small. It could never be a threat.~

~Actually this kind was responsible for spreading a deadly disease seven hundred years ago that killed millions of our people. They have also caused countless more deaths by eating food supplies.~

~But would not be a threat to the Nauti.~

~No, not to them.~

~So, the larger ones were?~

~Apparently.~

~One possibility. These abilities that we now have. How large must a creature be to have them?~

~It is not entirely size dependent. A certain neuronal configuration is also needed. But, you are correct, this creature would not be able to possess the capability.~ Good thinking Gryci.

~But why remove the bones of ones long dead. They were no threat.~

~And why remove all these creatures, even the small ones, from at least coastal areas?~

~Something to think about.~

~That was too easy. We found the evidence we needed at the first place we tried? A very poor job of hiding.~ Yes indeed. Even a crawly would do a better job if they had the ability.

~We have assumed that the Nauti have psiotic abilities. Do we know this for certain?~ Sufi, what are you thinking? I am feeling weak. If not the Nauti, then who? Why?

~These Nauti of which you speak. Please describe them.~

~Of course. Strange that we have accepted the tall ones as equals and possessing our knowledge.~ The crescent shape appears on Flower, but the opposite on the Teacher. If the cup facing upwards means amusement, does the empty cup mean the opposite? Is it that easy to read them?

Sufi continues, ~The Nauti vary in size with age and ability. I have only personally seen the smaller ones that are captured and tortured for training purposes by the Guardians.~ The Teacher looks at Flower suddenly. He sounds to her and she relaxes. What was that about?

~Even the small ones are larger than one arm in diameter. They have a shell and can only exist in water. On land they are completely helpless. It is said that the larger ones are over two arms in diameter.~

~Describe the shell please.~

~A multi-chambered shell with only the last compartment used. We base our larger structures on the same design, only we use all the chambers.~

~The shape?~

~Spiral of course.~ Anyone would know certainly.

~We need to go to another location on this world. Teacher will work with me to guide us to the new location. We are going to the center of the continent on which you live.~

I approach Lily, ~Thank you for finding the creature. It helps.~

I have told her what you said. Lily makes the crescent shape.

I helped. The other two were my payment.

~What do you mean?~ Lily gets my attention and pantomimes placing two objects in her mouth. Long Tail ate them!

Tasted like a species on my world. Very good.

~That did seem like a lot of activity for just one. Would also explain the noticeable amount of blood I tasted in the air.~

~Teacher Bones has shown me where we need to go next. I am not as good as Roo so will do this in three steps. Roo, if you would take us back to my world we will proceed.~ We rise into the air a few arms. Not my doing. Once we stop I transfer us to their world.

~Once I heard our world referred to as E571. May I ask what this world is designated as?~

~Ah, E1. It was the thirty seventh froth world the first Guardians found upon their return, but the closest to their own. Don't try to understand the numbering system. Every new world we find they assign a new number to. It seems random at times.~

~If it is because of distance from their own then they suspect we are very distance.~

~Maybe.~

~What about Pink? That most certainly is further away than we are.~

~Maybe, if it is not a recent ecology. Might be their world was destroyed a long time in the past like the airless one and a new ecology has formed since. Could even be closer than your world to theirs Sufi.~

~The one closest to ours . . . ~

~We are here. Back to work.~ I lower my arms and shift us. Partial light on their world to partial light on the other side on our world. This is taking longer than I want to spend on one tiny aspect of a broken shell.

~More bones?~ It is cold here. There is frozen rainwater on the ground.

~No, we know they played with those. There were hundreds of bones in the last location on our world. On this world nothing but small ones.~ Flower must have scanned as well.

~A good control world would be the one we found Menace on.~

~Too bad we did not think of it when we were at the last location. So, what are we looking for here?~

~Nauti, maybe. This is the area where the largest Ammonoids were.~

~They died out in distant memory. There was a great war and the Nauti won.~

~Then there should be shells from both species here. If, they were different species.~

~Why does this matter?~

~The live creature Lily and Long Tail found was an early form of what eventually became us. Problem is, is that they were also around some hundred and twenty five or so million years ago. Of course it has changed somewhat in that time, but the basic idea is still there and it was not replaced by later forms like on our world.~

~So, you think the Nauti or something prevented that from happening. Now we are here at a presumably later time period to see if that has changed also.~

~Correct.~

~I found one!~ Lily is good at this. She holds up a small one about a hand in width. We go over to see what she has. She breathes on her hands afterwards. I curl my hands under myself to keep warmer.

~Different species than we are looking for, but also common at the

same site on our world. This is a good sign.~

~Except they seemed to have left the smaller species alone. Might have held true for our ancestors as well. How far back do these remains go?~

~Maybe sixty five million years.~ Flower translates.

~Half way to the present.~

~There are lots of the little ones here.~ Flower holds up a hand full of finger sized ones. Teacher ignores him and is looking at the hill side. She sounds something and a metal instrument appears next to her. She looks surprised and looks at Flower. He shows no change. She picks it up and starts to dig. Once it looks like it will take some time we move in different directions to do our own searching.

I give up quickly and move closer to the Teacher and start to scan the hillside near her. She thinks something is here, but I don't see it at first. There are cracks in the layers. This time the layers are nearly vertical. She is following one particular layer into the hill. I scan deeper and see it! A big one. A very big one. How can I help?

She is making a large pile of dirt near her lower arms. I see this is getting in the way of her progress. Here is something I can do. Using some of the larger shells I scoop the dirt out of the way as she makes it. She notices what I am doing, pauses a moment and then continues. I guess I am doing the right thing. Soon I have four arms and shells working full time. Kind of fun in a physical sort of way. Also helps to keep warm.

~What have you found?~

~Soon,~ was all I would say. Sufi can scan and quickly figures it out. She tells Gryci, then she and Gryci scoop the dirt I have pushed aside further away. Eventually even Lily and Long Tail start to help. Flower shows the crescent shape but does not assist. I suppose I could have used the abilities, but it actually feels good to be moving muscles.

~The top is showing.~ I show.

The Teacher raises her hands.

~We are to stop I think.~

The Teacher pulls something out of her pocket and plays with it a moment. She then hands it to Flower who looks at it. He looks at me and holds the device out. I move closer and raise a hand to accept it. I am not sure how. We have not handled many artifacts from their culture. The surface tastes of artificial organics. So much of their world is this way. I pull it closer to myself and look at the surface.

~It is the shell. Is this some kind of recording device?~

~No, that is the image from the exact same location on our world from twenty years ago. The Teacher was excavating this site when our

economy collapsed. She barely escaped with her life.~ What is an economy? Sounds dangerous.

~Is it safe now? Why doesn't she go back?~

~The leadership has changed. Though it would be safe, they forbid excavating anything.~

~Less pollution. Good rule.~

~Roo, I think you are missing the steg fly. The shell looks the same now and in the image on the device. They are from two different worlds Roo.~

~That means that the separation occurred less than sixty five million years ago. Where is the next stop?~

~One moment.~ I scan around the shell. Every time I have seen one this big before there was a Nauti sphere as well. It is not next to the shell. But this one is not set up as an altar either. Could be the ones we saw previously were younger. For the layers to be at this angle a lot of movement must have occurred. The shell is near the surface now. I scan for the operculum. Starting from there I follow the layer. I scramble on top of the small ridge and down a small crack in the soft rocks.

~Here! Come here!~

~What is it Roo? We are ready to go, you are only delaying us.~

I realize that I don't need to use the bubble method to excavate this time. I dimension shift my prize from below the surface and float it in front of them.

Before us is a Nauti sphere from sixty five million years ago in near perfect condition. Their understanding of ceramics was incredible.

~If your ceramics ability is as good as this, then you are in far advance of us.~ I am not sure we are this good.

~Ours is better. They did not have the advantage of being above the water surface.~ The Teacher Sufi has not taught me everything then.

~But did have the advantage of using the depths with extreme pressures.~

~True, but we inherited their knowledge and tools.~

~Enough!~

~One more thing. There were small Nauti shells around where this sphere lay.~

They appear in formation before us. Flower no doubt.

~Amazing. Is this how they laid?~

Flower answers, ~Yes.~

Before us are nine small Nauti shells carefully aligned in perfect formation. I can almost imagine the dimension lines between them.

~Interesting. They knew of the worlds!~

~Nine dimensions, nine levels of abilities, all around one sphere of

knowledge.~

~Interesting.~

The Teacher is running around frantically. Something is wrong. I whistle to gain everyone's attention.

~Something is wrong with Teacher Bones.~ When she sees us all watching her she starts sounding and moving her hands up and down.

Flower translates. This need to have translations is annoying. Something outside our culture and experiences.

~Teacher says we need to go back to our world. She needs to know if the sphere is there too. But we are forbidden to excavate there.~

~We don't need to. Several of us can scan just to confirm the existence. We have this sphere to read. Presumably if the other one is there it will be the same. No need to excavate it.~

~Good thinking Sufi. You make an excellent Teacher.~ High praise from Gryci.

~How would they know?~ Teacher and Flower look at me and continue to look at me. ~Oh. Our culture is different. I did not mean to offend. We will scan only.~

~If you will move us please Roo.~

~Gather closer. It is easier when I don't have to make such a large shift.~ They move in towards me.

I shift.

~We have lost the light again.~ Flower makes a glow sphere. Of course only Gryci and the Teacher need it, but it does not hurt.

~I have it. The sphere is there, but this is strange. The smaller Nauti shells are not here.~

~But the main shell is. Everything is in the same position, except the other shells are missing. How can everything be so close to being the same and yet not?~

~Teacher says we need to see that sphere.~

~We can't. On our world whole communities died to protect their sphere. If these people do not want us to excavate, then we do not.~ I am trying to make up for the last stupid comment.

~Maybe in time we will be able to convince them and come back. At least it is unlikely anyone else will get here before us. It has been a very long day. We should go home and learn what we can from the sphere we do have.~ This is coming from Lily. I want to know how come we saw no tall ones at either location. Does no one live there? I thought they lived everywhere on their world.

~So be it.~ I don't shift us this time. From here Flower knows the way. I suspect he could do the world shifts as well. We arrive back at the Teacher's studio below the ground. There is a Nauti sphere on the table in

front of us.

~I thought we were not going to take the other one? Where did this one come from?~

~Didn't. It is still in the ground.~

~Then what is this one? Where did it come from?~

Flower shows that crescent shape and then answers, ~No one said I couldn't duplicate it. Exact copy down to the atomic level.~ Whoa! Sufi floats up and places the first sphere next to the second. The first is much larger. Teacher goes up to look at them. She uses an optical instrument to examine them.

~Amazing. A life time of work ahead.~ Flower signs for her.

~Something is wrong with this one. Not even round really. No writing either. Worthless really. If I did not know I could not tell this one from a rock.~

Serves you right thief! Who is that? Long Tail is resting with Lily next to her. A female tall one comes out of the shadows. Someone new.

~What do you mean. I took nothing.~ Flower protests.

You took that which was not offered. A duplicate is still taking. Dissolve it now or I will and I denounce you before the elders. It disappears immediately. No more protests.

~Here is my guess about what happened.~ Gryci speculates, ~The separation was close to this point. We were amazingly lucky to find this evidence. On your world the boned creatures became dominant. On our world they did not. On our world all traces of larger boned creatures everywhere were removed by the winners in revenge or fear.~

~Or to prevent it from ever happening again. Don't forget all the smaller ones anywhere near a community.~

~True. On this world the bones are still here. Our kind lost a war of species here. Something happened that put them at a severe disadvantage. This burial of a matriarch was rushed. They had the spot already chosen. She probably chose it herself long before her death. There was not enough time to make a proper sphere or collect the necessary Nauti shells for alignment of her psiotic essence.~ Do they learn about the Matriarch burial rights when they become Teachers?

~No, you are wrong. That was definitely not a nautilus shell. I know that shell was an ammonoid shell.~

~We live with the Nauti, but sixty five million years is a long time. Maybe they started out ammonoids and later became the Nauti?~

~Not unusual for a victor to assume the identity of a respected rival.~

~What happened that gave the boned ones an advantage?~

~That would take another expedition to determine.~ No, I really need to rest.

~Not now. I have to rest and I have a class in a few hours. We will need to schedule another time.~ Saved by the Teacher and I was not even rubbing my lucky stone. I wonder if they have a ceramics studio around here. It would not take long to make more.

~We don't need the Teacher's help on this one. More of a world study area than old bones and shells.~ No, please, someone save us!

Do I need to come with you to prevent any further transgressions?

The new one asks. This showing to the mind is certainly easier and faster than reading their hands.

Long Tail runs past me and Lily makes a funny sound from a distance. I can hear her running also. An operculum closes with a loud sharp sound. Long Tail sounds and pushes through the opening.

~We had better stop them before they break something.~

Too late. We hear a crash of glass and something heavy.

When we get there neither one of them is present.

~Don't worry, they will appear again after they think we have forgotten. This is not the first mess I have had to clean up after her.~

Teacher Bones is the first out the door. I would be mad too.

We follow her down the hallway to the obvious mess on the floor. There are glass and what looks like terra cotta fragments mixed in with wood from a frame. I go closer, floating to avoid getting cut.

~That's strange.~ I float up what looks like a moonstone. Perfectly shaped. I feel it with my hand. Well done. I wonder who did it. I examine it to find the maker's mark. There is none. Means it was made by a no name in practice. I know, I made a room of them before my naming.

~I remembered something from my past!~ I can see the room in my mind now. A male instructor. Very old, now that I know what old is. He was very kind. I remember watching the waves. Not as strong as on the coast.

~Roo, what's wrong?~ I hold out the moonstone.

~A moonstone. So what?~

The Teacher looks at us and sounds.

~She wants to know if you recognize the piece of clay, only she does not realize it is clay. She thinks it is sandstone.~

~This and the other ones on the floor are not sandstone. These are practice pieces. We usually do not heat harden the practice pieces. Waste of fuel. Normally they would be ground down and returned to the pit.~

~Roo, these are pretty hard. I admit they look like practice pieces, but they are too hard even if someone has forgotten to return them to the pit.~

~They were found in an excavation dated thirty four million years ago. You are saying that these shapes were definitely made, not natural shapes made by some world process.~

~It would seem that someone survived the war or whatever happened. It was long before anyone else could have made these.~

Except one.

~We will not show about that yet.~

~What? Who?~

~Later when you are ready. It is no longer a concern anyway.~

To us, but maybe not to them.

~Pushy Paws, please, this is not easy.~

~Where were these moonstones found?~

~She does not know. This display is part of the world study department's, not hers. She wants to know how she will explain this. I will repair the damage.~ We are gently pushed aside and the parts all start to reassemble and return to the display. In a moment it looks normal again.

~It is not just the squid people who have these abilities then. Our species is capable as well.~ Flower is upset that he had to show what was hidden.

Sufi hands me, ~I suspect that Long Tail is in trouble.~ Yes I agree. None of our unseen would dare run in a studio of a Teacher. I hope they hide well.

~I think it is time we went home. Thank you Teacher Bones. It has certainly been an exciting day.~ The Teacher opens her hand to reveal a moonstone.

~Keep that one until we can meet again.~

~Thanks.~ She holds it in her hand and goes down the hall.

A moment later we are back at the compound.

~Look who's guarding our room?~ It is the tall one that I healed earlier. He raises his hands and a bubble appears between them. He figured that out fast.

~That's strange. Usually when one of us acquires the ability the first level is moving things.~

~All I care about is getting some rest.~

~No food?~

~I'll just catch a few crickets. I have seen quite a few around here.~

~That is not enough for even little Roo.~ Now they are teasing me.

~They would taste so much better fried and covered in that spicy root we had last meal.~

~They would.~ Gryci agrees with Sufi.

~Let's go get some then. The tall ones won't want any, so we will have them all to ourselves.~

~They don't eat crickets? Why not?~

I do. They are quite tasty.

The new tall one. I look at her. Not very tall, white hair and her surface has the look of a dried slug. She must be very old. They can create an exact duplicate yet they age. I scan her.

Not polite to scan someone without permission Roo. I stop immediately. She can tell what I am doing! They probably all can. Crab. I must look the crawly for all the mistakes I am making.

~May I scan you?~ Having to ask permission is going to be hard.

No dear, not now. She walks away. Crab. If she can mind speak she is stronger than I am. Not wise to challenge her. When I started to scan her I sensed nothing. I was blocked. Not like Healer, with him I was able to scan fine, it just showed there was nothing there. These new abilities are not easy.

~Roo, let's soak. If we feel like it we can eat later.~

~Good idea.~

~I have a little mag if you want. Not enough to make us silly, just enough to relax.~

~I would rather not Gryci. I want to keep my head as clear as possible. There is much to think about it.~

~Cool low salt water then.~ Gryci operates some controls. Bubbles appear. She looks at us, ~Try it. It feels funny at first but is really good once you adjust.~ At least it is not mag. We slip into the pool. The only way for all of us to be in at once is to inner twine. Wonderful to feel people next to me again.

Lost

We did finally eat after everyone else had gone to rest. They waste so much. The full moon no longer has a pull on any of us, but rather than concentrate on my one negative experience I chose to recall all the good times I had getting moonsick with friends. Not everything about my life has been bad. There were even a few times when Sufi shared with us as the then younger students gathered. Gryci told of times past, before this Matriarch be ascendant.

~Gero had said that our tech was making a sudden rise, but from Gryci's description it does not sound like that much has changed.~

~Except for the portals of course.~

~There was a lot of tech behind the portals that I was not able to scan well.~

~Don't forget the structures. No person I know would like those. Hideous.~

~We are in one I believe.~

~At least the ceiling is low enough. Those high roofs are scary.~ We all agree on that.

Good morning. Are all of you ready to go?

~What happened to Healer?~ I bonded with him and it is disconcerting to be going from one tall one to another.

He is fine. He and Aimee have a surprise for you. I will take you to them. It is customary for us to eat again in the mornings. Please join me.

She opens the door and waits at the entrance.

~Another adventure. When do we get a freeday?~

We arrive at the feeding area. There are a large number of people present. Lily and Long Tail are among them. I go up to Long Tail.

“What is happening?”

One of their party things. A lot of noise. The only good thing is we usually get better food. This is a harvest festival, being the end of the warm days and a full moon.

~A moon festival? You celebrate the same as we do?~

A stupid monkey thing. Not of my kind. We have no festivals unless you accept a celebration of a large kill.

~How large?~ Sufi asks. I am not sure I want to know.

At least several times larger than I am would be considered a small kill. She uses her rasp to clean herself.

She also exaggerates considerably. I have never seen her actually catch anything larger than a version of the animal you found in the jungle earlier.

~Ah.~ Gryci signals amusement. It would appear that this is part of Long Tail's culture. She does not seem to be upset that she was found out either. We would be ashamed and would try to hide.

It would be wise not to believe everything that Pushy Paws says.

~What is a paw?~

Stupid squid.

It is the hand of her kind.

~But you are not of her kind, so why would that be your name?~

A long story. Please, the food is being served.

Our Guardian is present and takes over from Pushy Paws, who apparently does not object. He gathers three bowls together with a variety of materials. He hands one to each of us and clears a space to sit. But apparently has not learned how to show.

~Let's eat then. Hopefully they will explain later.~

~This piece looks like a moon.~ I look over at Sufi's bowl to see what she is pointing at. A white area surrounding a yellow center. I look at my own bowl and see that I don't have one.

Our Guardian is watching every move and quickly grabs my bowl before I am able to eat anything and pushes others aside to return very quickly with the bowl and yellow center on a white field.

~I think it is an egg. Strange way to prepare it.~

~I have never seen one like this before. Very large. A cow egg maybe?~

~Try it.~ We all stick a hand in our bowl to taste things.”

~Hot!~ I place mine near my breathing aperture and blow wind on it to cool it off. Guardian sees this, disappears and returns with a flat shield and immediately waves it over my bowl.

~We need help. Our Guardian is being more annoying than helpful.~

Long Tail looks busy consuming food in large bites. I almost want to hide watching her. Barbaric. She looks at me briefly and then goes back to her bowl. She can speak to my mind. I suspect she sees it as well.

~You were the one who healed him Roo. Even in our culture that makes him obligated to you. I am sure he would kill to protect you.~

~Crab, I had not thought of that. Now I will have to be even more careful. I have already made so many mistakes on this world and on ours.~

~We need to go home.~

~There is one I would like to meet back there.~ Gryci forms a bubble in front of us. Immediately Guardian is on alert and is looking around for a possible threat.

~Collapse the bubble Gryci before he kills someone.~

~Nauti, I am old to forget so quickly.~ Now I know her special fear.

~Healer!~ I float up into the air and move quickly towards him showing brightly the entire time, ~Help us! Explain to the one I healed that we are not under threat. He could kill someone.~

~Too fast Roo. Slow down.~

~Stop him please!~ I point towards our Guardian. He looks towards him and sounds something quietly. Guardian looks at him, pauses, and then calms down. He folds to him and leaves.

~I told him I would watch you for a while and he could get something to eat. He needs rest also. He spent the entire night outside your room.~

~Spiders. No wonder he acted irrational.~ Healer shows the crescent shape.

~The new tall one, ah, Pushy Paws, said you had a surprise for us?~

~Five hour flying crab ride to the other side of this continent.~

~No, tell me where it is I will deliver us.~

~As you wish. I will project the position into your mind.~

~Don't we get to finish our meal? I am going to shrink to the size of an unseen at this rate.~

~Gryci, it will be some time before you will have that problem.~ I raise my arms in amusement.

Healer is more polite, ~Take it with you Gryci or stay behind.~

We are going somewhere? Lily and Long Tail are beside us attentive.

~I would have thought you would be bored with out trips.~ Sufi comments.

~Better than here.~ Lily answers! Her accent is bad, but I can understand what she showed. Smart one to learn so quickly. Even Healer looks surprised.

I train my students well. Ah, that explains much. I doubt that Long Tail knows our language, but it is clear she can see our minds.

~Still I think it best if the two of you stay here this time. Isn't it about time that you start training your student Long Tail?~ She opens her eyes wide. What does that mean?

No matter. Healer sends me the location and I dimension shift us to several hundred arms above the site. We are on the coast. There is a community below us. Looks typical. Standard design. The shape of the land is not as extreme and the farms are closer to the community. I look further out and see we in a narrow bay. Good protection from storms and a good mix of rain and salt waters. Even better than our home.

~Roo, I meant this location on my world.~

~Sorry, I guess I am wanting to return to my world very much.~

~We call it homesick.~

~As in disease?~

~Preciously.~ We are suddenly over a very different community. We

are not even higher than the structures around us. I look up. We are not remotely close to the top of any near us. I look at the one closest to us. There are huge plates of glass covering its surface. There are tall ones looking at us! A lot of them. Almost every window has them looking at us. I feel very exposed and seeing a hill close by I shift us to that location.

~That was very strange.~ Gryci comments. She touches the plant material we are now on. Sufi is doing the same. I am still upset.

~What is this plant?~

~We call it grass.~

~Ah, we saw something like this on the shaman's world. She said it came from a world at least related to yours. I think I remember it from Menace's world too. Is there a lot of this plant here?~

~Many species, but yes. There is a great deal of it.~

~Company coming. Similar to Long Tail in size, but motion is different.~

~Those are called dogs. Shield, but do not kill them, even if attacked.” Glad he told us. Three of them slam into my shield and are temporarily shocked. They back off and make a lot of sound. I think it is directed at us.

~They have never seen or tasted anything like the three of you.~

~Tasted? From that far away?~

~One of the best. Used to find other animals. About as intelligent as an older crawly.~ I relax.

Personally I think they are dumber than stones. But Long Tail is cautious. Lily senses this and is watching. Interesting how her psiotic glow changes with mood. Not a color exactly. That is the same dull red. Something beyond color.

~We had best leave. We don't need to draw any more attention than we already have. I will deliver us to the final location.~

We are in a studio, not sure what discipline. Not art, science maybe. I don't see any living things, so composition or motion studies, not life studies.

Then I ink and collapse.

~Roo, Roo, come on Roo, come back.~

~What happened?~

~You suddenly collapsed. Why?~ Then they don't see her?

~Through that glass. Look!~ Sufi rises to get a better view and then slowly descends. Healer has the crescent shape. Gryci is confused.

I feel the ink disappear.

~Thanks Healer.~ He folds to me.

~Mandhi! It's Mandhi, right Roo?~ She turns to me.

~I think so. Looks like her and the tattoo fits.~

~The operculum says not to disturb though. We will have to wait.~

~Who is Mandhi?~

~Mandhi and Roo were nearly in a Triad with one other, Sussi, a flute player. Mandhi was a student of Teacher Raj.~

~Raj! I need to show with her!~ That messed his ganglia.

~As I was showing. The three of them were the ones who figured out how to bubble.~

~I no longer believe we figured it out. I think now that it would have happened whether or not we were studying the equations. It is the first level. Sufi, you don't understand the equations, yet, you can bubble. Same with our Guardian Sarra and Paff.~

~I know the equations very well.~

~Yet till we were elevated to the next level you could not bubble on your own. Nor can you do more than a small bubble at this time. Your understanding of the equations has not helped you nor hurt Sufi.~

~I think you are partly wrong. Roo, who apparently has an innate understanding that goes far beyond just understanding the equations, could do far more at level three than I can at level eight.~

~Eight!~

~I never told you that?~

~No. It must have been very hard to suffer in the pit for as long as you did without revealing yourself.~

~It is part of what you need to learn to handle these abilities without going insane.~

~We have no insane.~ Am I going to go insane?

~We dart them and grind them. No one would share an insane one for fear of getting it themselves.~ Crab, am I going to go insane?

~Interesting. Hopefully that won't happen to any of you. It happens to nearly all of us.~

~Crab!~

Then the crescent shape appears, ~But we all get over it with the help of our friends.~ There is some hope. Are these my friends?

~That's strange.~

~What?~

~I don't think there is anyone in the room now.~ I float up to see and sure enough, there is no one there. Crab! I have lost her again.

~Think Roo. Where would she have gone and how would she do it?~

~Depends. You showed us how to shift instead of bubble. If she bubbled to get out she would be on another world. At least for a short time.~

~And the world she would go to?~

~Pink would be an obvious one. It is the world we know the best in terms of bubbling.~

~But we are all allergic to it now. I would go to our home world.~

~So would I.~ I shift us there. The tall buildings are gone. The short mounds are all around us. We ended up in a street fortunately. I did not check this out ahead of time. ~I could have killed someone again.~

~Not with shifting. Very hard to purposely appear merged with something. You sort of slide to the nearest open space. Besides you can 'see' in the n-space what your options are.~

~I wondered about that. I was not sure the images I saw were real or just imagined.~ I am definitely shifting from now on.

~On the other hand you can bubble a much larger object than I could shift at the same level, because you are not lifting it. To shift an object or person you don't actually have to lift them of course, just be able to. You are limited by your level and the mass allowed at that level.~

~Too many people.~

~Some of them are suspicious of us.~

~We would be the same if they suddenly showed in our home.

Remain motionless and non threatening.~

~I am kind of hard to hide.~ Healer of course. I had forgotten he was not one of us.

I use my psiotic scanning and she appears easily, ~Found her. I am going to shift us closer.~

~Roo, don't!~ Too late.

~What?~

~Look back up the hill where we were.~ It is like an anthill turned over. People are moving all over showing to each other. Someone spots us and they start to make their way towards us.

~She is getting away!~ Sufi points further downhill.

~No floating Roo, just walk like everyone else.~

~I would recommend a faster pace. They are gaining on us.~

~Spiders! Guardians too!~ They are coming up to meet us. Not as well shelled as the coast ones I am used to. Looks like simple ceramics. Has to be heavy. They will not be able to move fast. Have to remember that the swords will be just as sharp though.

~Best to just wait till everyone gets here.~ Gryci has wise counsel. All the same I shield all of us. This immediately stops the breeze coming from the ocean. It will get warmer fast.

Mandhi reaches us first. She had turned around when the Guardians blocked her way. She appears to know them as she turned her back on them and allowed them to catch up. How long has she been coming here?

~Who are you and what are you doing here?~ Should that not be the question from the community leader or a Guardian at least? Paff and Sarra had authority. They gained it by using their ability. Is that how

Mandhi gained position?

~You were following me. I have the right to ask why?~ Crab, the simple explanation is the answer.

~Mandhi, it is me, Roo.~ Why doesn't she recognize me?

~Roo is dead. I saw her corpse. There is no doubt in my mind. Your tattoo confirms my showing.~ What? It is hard to see one's own tattoo. Done that way so at least one other would be involved in any deception.

~She is right Roo. Someone has changed your tattoo. Mine too.~

~But not mine. I have seen it in a reflector. I am Gryci, Teacher of Raj who is Teacher of you.~

~The lineage is correct, but Gryci disappeared nearly a hundred years ago. Raj claimed right of succession according to the shells.~ It would be in writing. ~You are too young even if you are speaking the truth. Names are used again. My own name, Mandhi, appears repeatedly in the shells. Could also be from a different community. Only one of each name in a community. That's the rule.~ This is not getting anywhere.

~If I am not Roo, then how come I was able to follow you here?~

~Follow? This is the first time I have seen you.~

~They have special abilities Matriarch.~ Crab, fooled again.

~We were captured on the hill only a few days ago, eight at most.

You have moved very quickly to be on the other side of a continent and Matriarch in this time.~

~I don't know how you know about the introduction to my parent, but that happened two moons ago, not an eight.”

~Two moons and the Matriarch is your parent?~

~I think it is time you leave us.~ She turns to go, the Guardians advance. They run into my shield and are confused. A whistle command is given and more Guardians approach to the same effect. One takes out his sword and breaks it against the shield. I was not sure it would hold against a sharp object. I remain blank and show no emotion.

This gets the attention of Mandhi though.

~Well done, follow me.~ She waves the Guardians off.

~Not like you to be subtle Roo. Good show.~ A complement from Sufi is appreciated.

~Mandhi should be as strong as I am, why risk she would see me as a threat?~

~Good show indeed. You are finally starting to think Teacher Roo.~ Gryci adds.

Mandhi turns, ~Teacher?~

~Of psiotics, because of the abilities. You would qualify as well.~

~I don't think so. Not much reason to practice. How did you make it down the hill so fast? I did not see or sense a bubble.~

~Healer's people do the dimension travel by shifting rather than bubbling. Really just a variation. Easy to learn. It has the advantage of being able to see where you are going.~

~Within the range your level allows. At level four that would mean you should be able to see approximately ten thousand arms in any direction while dimension shifting.~ He should know what level she is at. I can see it easily. Oh, right. He can't use his abilities here. That fact I will hold in reserve.

~You show quite well for a tall one.~

~Thank you.~ He also gives the sign of acknowledgment, which was all that was required. Must be from his culture to show as well.

We follow Mandhi into a large hall. I guess Matriarchs all over like large halls. Once out of the receiving chamber we enter the hall proper.

~Slugs and snails!~ That was what scared Gryci as a crawler? No one is afraid of slugs or snails. Still she is the biggest one here easily. What should be an empty hall is filled with devices and creations. No room for obedient crowds of followers. Mandhi seems to know the way. We follow her through a twisted path trying carefully not to disturb anything.

~What is all this stuff?~

~Security.~ Now I am confused. She continues, ~Roo, if that is who you are, though it does not matter,~ It doesn't? ~The Matriarch declared me lake fly maggot food if I appear on the west coast again.~ Ow! I crawl uncontrollably just thinking about it. Sufi and Gryci are blank. ~This is our future. Soon all the Matriarchs will be seeking an advantage. Did you know that the tall ones can destroy an entire community anywhere on their world from anywhere on their world? And make it unfit for life for thousands of years?~

~Crab!~ I look at Healer.

~That used to be true. They don't know it yet, but none of their long range weapons will work any longer.~ Mandhi looks at Healer.

~Do they hide knowledge?~ I acknowledge. ~Is he doing so now?~

~I don't know.~

~You believe it is possible to do what he says?"

~Yes.~ It would take me some time to accomplish it myself. I would have to learn more about these devices, but I am sure that a force of beings as powerful as Healer, Flower and Aimee, could do it. There may even be more. I wonder if they are a Triad?

~You know nothing about their abilities Roo.~

~Mandhi, any of us could destroy our world with a thought. They know how to do that as well.~

~That is not what I meant Roo.~ Healer signs being upset. When did he learn that?

~They also have diseases capable of destroying everyone but their own group.~ Healer is silent.

I ask him, ~Is this true?~

~Yes.~

~And you have not prevented this.~

~No.~

Gryci asks, ~Please explain the difference.~ Sufi is attentive as well.

~The mass weapons would destroy all life. Innocent life as well as our species. The infectious forms only destroy our species.~

~Interesting. You see yourself as a Guardian for your world, but not for any one species.~ Healer looks surprised at Sufi's remark. I am beginning to be able to read their emotions.

Mandhi adds, ~And you believe we should be the same for our world.~

~That is not for me to say. You have to find your own way.~

~You are influencing our lives though.~

~Only showing you possibilities. The decisions are still yours.~ That is why he will not use his abilities here.

~That is what I am doing. All that you see about you is from other worlds. I intend to learn as much as possible as fast as possible. I am gathering the best minds I can find to study the material.~

~Why are you in such a hurry?~ She looks at Healer, but shows nothing. I hate it when I am not shown what is happening.

~Roo, you need to leave. I have a device inside of me that will release a toxin if I am near Sussi. I suspect that it might happen with you as well.~ I immediately scan her. There is a foreign object near her right major ganglia.

~I can remove it for you.~

~If you do then the one in Sussi will go off and she will die.~

~How could it possibly know you are here? Or on Healer's world? Sussi is already dead.~ I nearly ink at Sufi's remark.

~It is not immediate fortunately. I was not expected to walk here.~

~How did you get here?~ Does she know how to travel large distances?

~I could ask the same of you Roo. Your corpse was beside me when they darted it repeatedly. We are a long way from where we started. I used a common form of transportation on the tall one's world.~

~Interesting. Then you understand our economy and how it works. Even in two moons, for one to come from a world very different, that is fast.~

~I had help. While on your world I am under the instruction of a Teacher.~

~Healer, how did you know where to find Mandhi?~ How come I don't think of these questions. Sufi and Gryci are both smarter than I am.

~Simple. I know her Teacher. You met her.~ I think. That means either Aimee or Pushy Paws. I am guessing Pushy Paws. She seems to know things.

~Teacher Aimee is an expert in all things technical. She is helping me to choose which items to save.~ Save? ~She arranged for transportation to the studio where we work. It was also far enough away to satisfy the Matriarch.~

~You are a Matriarch. Why don't you call her by her given name.~

~That is not allowed when non Matriarchs are present. You could be a Matriarch very easily Roo. I told you that before. It is still true.~

~I have no desire to rule others. I am not smart enough.~ There, I have said it. She does not deny my reasoning either.

~Where is Sussi?~

~I don't know. She must be okay or the device would have gone off inside of me.~

~Healer says we will live longer than normal because of the abilities.~

~Roo, that is a horrible thing to show.~ Sufi admonishes me. Gryci shows amusement. Healer also.

~Teacher Aimee showed me. An accident or assassination can still end our lives.~ Crab. We will be hunted forever. Eventually they will succeed.

~I hope Sussi is very far away then.~

~So do I. Go now Roo. I will be fine.~

~Our world needs us to be together Mandhi. Something terrible is about to happen. I have seen what happened on other worlds. I have been to the airless world Mandhi. It was destroyed from the outside. We need to get ready.~

~That is what I am doing Roo. I suggest you do the same. Now go before it is too late.~ She turns and disappears quickly among the devices. I could find her again easily, but why? She clearly is uncomfortable with me here.

~What level was she at Roo?~

~Same as me.~ I scan around. I sense no one else above normal.

~There are no others. She was alone when the last two abilities were added.~

~Good thinking Roo. This is assuming they are close by and on this world. Even I could leave this world now if I wanted. The others could be out collecting.~

~True Sufi.~ Gryci of course. Healer just shows the crescent shape.

~Take us back Healer please.~

~A long way to walk, but if you insist we best get started.~ He starts out the operculum and down the path.

~I deserve that one. Wait for us.~ This time no one follows us or attempts to stop us. I am sure Mandhi alerted the Guardians, her Guardians.

~I am alone again. I am lost.~

~Don't be a hermit crab Roo. You have the three of us. Paff and Sarra are waiting back home too.~

~Crab, if she did this to Mandhi and Sussi, what did she do to them? We need to get back!~

~Likely what ever happened has already happened Roo.~ True.

I think about it more, ~They were already known and approved by the Matriarch when we left them.~

~Level one is not much of a threat to someone with that many Guardians. I would suspect that they have made some enemies though.~ No doubt, like that Guardian Paff 'corrected'.

~And friends.~ All the people they saved from abuse.

~Remember what She did to the last one She caught plotting against Her?~

~A crusting. I remember. Worse than lake fly maggots and darts combined.~ The accused is fed a mixture that causes them to make shells in random locations all over their body. Very slow, very painful, even to watch. We were all required to be there at the end. Anyone who didn't had better have a good excuse or disappear.

~Let's go home.~ Healer reminds us. He looks around. There is a cloud on the horizon. It could be nothing or it could be borers. Borers have a numbing bite. Then the females lay eggs which are partially developed. Almost immediately they hatch. The larvae exude anesthetic as they feed. Some people do not notice them for days. The larvae avoid major organs until the end. They reproduce asexually until the body is consumed. They then all pupate at once and emerge as adults. Contact with an infected individual is enough to spread the parasites. Whole communities have died from a single borer bite.

~Sufi, you want some more practice?~ I watch the cloud. Good luck Mandhi. I rub a non existent moon stone.

~Why not. I need to work on shifting anyway.~ We gather closer together as she is not as strong. The shift goes easy enough. This time I pay more attention to what happens between. It is real easy for me to follow the dimension lines. At the end it seems off though.

We come out. The buildings are all there, but there are no people. No mechanical crabs. Nothing moving except those flying things. Wish they would confine their waste to the prescribed locations for composting.

~Wrong line Sufi.~ Healer would know. It was crowded earlier, but for all I know, this might be normal behavior. I look at the dust and dirt on the ground and against the buildings. No one has come this way in some time. Obvious now that I see.

~Apparently. Where are we?~

Healer is very nervous, looking around for something.

~We are on E0. Not good. Not good at all. I didn't think it was even possible.~

~Why not? The dimension lines are clear.~

~You see them?~

~Not see them exactly, but I can imagine them based on what I see. The formulas Mandhi and I worked out explain them quite clearly.~

~We can't be here. The one who gave me my abilities is from this world's future. Far future.~

~How far?~

~Around twenty five million years.~

~I thought you said we were not allowed to follow the time line.~

~Only a problem if you come back to your own world. You can change any future you have not been to. Silver Ghost had never been to our future, so it was not against the rules. Unusual, but allowed. Since we, E1, are a froth world of E0, he could not go back to before the split.~

~Then why is it a problem that we are here?~

~We could do something that affects their behavior that then affects their future.~

~And ultimately us.~

~Correct.~

~As far as I remember from the journals, they were not here at this place at this time, but not everything made it into the journals.~

~There are people here. I sense them coming this way. I don't think they have seen us yet.~

We immediately shift and this time appear in the same path between the tall structures with a very large mechanical crab coming towards us at high speed. We shift upwards and the crab goes past beneath us.

~I could have shielded us, but then the person in the crab would have died from the impact. Sorry to be so upset.~

~It is reassuring to me that you can be upset. What happened to E0? Very much fewer people. The path and structures looked like they had not been used in some time.~

~A plague killed nearly everyone.~

~That would be a very good place for Mandhi to salvage material from then.~

~Unless it was needed by him later. Who is Silver Ghost? A strange

name~

~Strange for even our culture. You will learn more about him later. Maybe even meet him. I warn you though, he can see into the center of your being. No way to fool him.~

~So much for hiding well.~

~No one hides from him. The limit of the levels for our type if life is level nine. Some say he is level thirteen. Not even the 'thn can reach level thirteen.~

~Is that how he was able to go back in time?~

~You did that Roo and you are not level thirteen.~

~Yes, that's true. She should not have been able to do that.~

~I didn't know.~

We arrive back at the compound.

~What time of day is it here?~ I look for the sun, but the fog has hidden it.”

Dinner time of course. What took you so long? Long Tail comes up to me and rubs against me.

~I didn't realize we were gone that long.~

~Neither did I.~ Healer looks concerned again. This time he is looking at Sufi though. ~Get something to eat and then some rest. We will take this up again in the morning. Long Tail can watch you now.~ He leaves us.

We have crunchies tonight. A special treat.

~What are crunchies?~

You must live in a very low level world not to have crunchies. We have had them here for over a hundred years.

~I am two hundred years old Long Tail. Be careful what you say.~ Gryci shows amusement. She obviously knows what these food items are.

Try them before you judge my words. Before her is a bowl of material in different colors of orange and brown. The shapes are all similar though. Long Tail sticks her oral arm into them and using her rasp grabs some of them. Loud crunching sounds are heard. There are several more bowls near hers. Lily looks on but does not reach for one.

I cautiously look at a bowl. I taste some with one hand. Fish flavor is the most pronounced, but there are others as well that I don't recognize. Most of the material seems to be of plant origin.

~I don't think it would hurt us.~ I eat some while covering myself properly. The others look at me.

~Interesting. The texture is very interesting.~

Yes. You understand. The taste is nothing to brag about, but the texture is everything. Nothing else like it.

Sufi tries it, Somewhat like crickets or cockroaches. Dried ones

maybe.

Long Tail looks at us. *She could be right. I never thought of that before. Taste is different, but the texture is close. Maybe that is why I like these things. Fish flavored dried crickets.*

Gryci shows, ~They only feed her kind this food. No one else will eat it. They don't make it any more, so sometimes the ones with special abilities make up some for her.~

We retire to Gryci's room and the wonderful tub of water properly salted. Our Guardian is outside. The sun is setting.

~Please get some rest. We will be safe tonight.~ He refuses to acknowledge what I have said. Did he understand me? Maybe not.

I nearly lose awareness in the water. After wards we coil up together. It feels good to be with people who care for me.

Betrayal

I become aware before anyone else. This seems to be a new routine. An effect of the levels possibly. Lily and Long Tail are unaware with the others. I don't remember them coming in. So much for security, though they are welcome. Three species in one rest group. Interesting.

I have so many questions unanswered. Outside our Guardian is asleep. I float over him so as not to disturb him. It is dark, but there are a few glow spheres providing more than enough light to see by normal vision. One is awake. They post watchers. We would do the same. War is rare, but thieves are common from outside the community. Not really a bad thing as it insures the communities do not get too different. Information is the ultimate material of value. What do the neighbors of the bay and coast communities make of what the Matriarch has done and now Mandhi? Will all soon have a means of stealing or salvaging material from other worlds? Why is this happening.

In my wondering I have found that I am seeking Healer. I use the ability to see if I can find him among the others. There is a very bright presence in the large water pool we saw a few days ago. I make my way to the structure. The watcher notices me, but does not interfere. I am accepted as one of the them.

I enter the structure and see the back of Healer. He is signing to something in the tank. I hold back and scan instead. I immediately fall to the floor and remain motionless, trying to blend with the floor. I dare not breathe and move to anaerobic metabolism. I know it is possible, so I search myself and see the method for hiding my own psiotic signature. I am no different than the floor itself now.

I can only see one side of the showing with the Nauti Matriarch. For that is what she must be, she is so large. A very high psiotic signature as well. Possibly as high as I imagine Healer to be. She does not bother to hide. A Matriarch would not.

~There is not enough time. She has come far, but more is needed.~

I have only missed the exchange of honors. If the Nauti are similar to our culture. Healer shows in Ancient. There is no accent. He knows this language better than I do. Why is there not enough time?

~I understand and will do as you command.~ He then lowers himself to the floor. I sense her leaving. He then rises and leaves the structure.

A moment later, just as I was about to reveal myself, another enters and I wait. I am lost in thought. A Nauti Matriarch gives Healer orders, apparently about me. The Nauti destroyed countless species that should have survived as they did on this world. They made us, they control us

still, they know of me. Do they control this world as well? Are they the ones responsible for what is happening with my Matriarch and Mandhi?

Something touches me and I shift to Pink without hesitation. I shudder to think would would happen to me if I had been found out. Best to hide. I shift again to a close world of Pink. It looks the same. A recent froth by my calculations. I shift again. A further branching of Pink. I am a long way from home.

But not far enough. We do not have much time. Please come with me.

I lose all my ink and one of my hearts stops momentarily. I look behind me and Pushy Paws stands before me.

~How?~

She signs to me, ~You are very new to this Roo. Do not presume that others have not gone before you.~

~I am sorry. I did not intend to be rude.~

~I know. Come, we must collect the others.~

~Why do you show now but not before?~

~Because I did not know how before.~ Crab. ~The process is not without consequence. I will have a horrible mind pain soon. Hurry. It would be better if you took us back. I might make a mistake when the pain comes.~

I shift us to outside the water structure. I am hoping that having Pushy Paws with me will prevent any recriminations from my actions. I am surprised to see Sufi, Gryci, Lily and Long Tail waiting. They seem to be surprised to see me.

~Take all of us to this place.~ She shows me in my mind. Just as Healer did for me I follow the lines and I bring us to the location.

~I will shift us from here to the world I wish to be on. Pay attention. You may need to get here yourselves at some point.~ She sifts. Not too far. Less than from our world to theirs.

~I need to rest now. The pain has begun. Long Tail has been here before and can show you to your next instructor.~

I look to Long Tail and she is very nervous. She looks one way and then another. Something snaps and she jumps nearly an arm in the air. She finds where the sound comes from and puts us between herself and the sound.

Gryci makes herself lower. Sufi and I match her. Pushy Paws has disappeared. I scan. A large shape with psiotic ability is coming towards us. About the same level as Long Tail, I am guessing level three. I know she can shift and mind speak. That leaves one more.

I hand Sufi who is the closest one to me, ~Healer was showing with the Nauti Matriarch at the big water structure. I think they were discussing us.~ I really don't want to think it was me. I don't like being

visible in that way. In any way actually.

~Have we been betrayed?~

~Used at least. We are not just following a path. We are being led.~

~To where and for whose benefit?~

~Not ours, that's certain. Would you have chosen this path?~

~None of us would.~

Quiet, she will notice the movement. We are barely moving. Still the creature comes closer and closer. Then she finds us and moves much more quickly.

~Should I shift us?~

We are in no danger, just embarrassing.

It looks like a very large version of Menace. The beak pieces are certainly proportional. Very sharp looking. There are more shades of green. The flat spines are larger, also proportional. Menace was very friendly and easy to get along with. Will this one be as well? Ah male.

He comes very close to us and breathes on us, then reaches over and gently pulls Long Tail up from behind us with the beaks. He then gently sets her down in front of us.

Dino Chow! It is you! I am so happy to see you! He looks at us. *Who are your new friends?* He does not seem at all disturbed to see a new species.

Long Tail growls, *We are betrayed. We are in hell!*

~What is hell? In my mind this appears to be a place of eternal torment. We do not know of such a place.~

You will if you stay here. Hell is a term from the tall ones mythology.

Long Tail. good name, it fits you. Much better than what the soft ones gave you.

He thinks of the tall ones as soft. It will get much worse. Stop reading my mind White Dragon.

~What is a dragon?~

This is going to take all day. I will never get a nap or something to eat.

~You ate soon ago.~ Lily tries to say. She watches White carefully as do we. Imagine Menace at eight times the height. The behavior is just as erratic.

White looks at us, *Can you three run? I don't think you can.*

~We can float. Where are we going?~

We run for the pleasure of running. He starts running at amazing speed. I raise Gryci. Sufi takes up the challenge and soon we are catching up to him.

~I did not know any large creature could move this fast.~ Gryci is not doing so well under this much wind. I shield us. ~Much better.~

At this level I could easily pass him, but remain safely a few eight arms behind. That tail is whipping back and worth as he runs. I have never seen anyone so happy. A small body of water appears, a pond. He runs right into it splashing much water into the air.

I float us several arms above the water. Looks like rain water. I have not been able to sense the ocean and the coordinates show we are long distance from any place I remember from learnings on the world shape. Not that this world would necessarily be the same. It is warm and dry here. The water looks very good. A bit dirty from all the mud stirred up by White. Wonder if it would make good clay?

~Roo, please let us go into the water.~

You people are sick.

I turn around and see Lily and Long Tail walking up to us as if they had not run at all. I suspect that haven't and used shifting instead.

~You don't like water Long Tail? Can you not swim?~ There are creatures that can't or are very awkward at it.

I don't like to. There is a difference. She sticks her oral pore skyward and walks a short way away. Not far enough. White notices and makes a large splash towards her. Large enough to get Lily and Long Tail thoroughly wet. The three of us as well. Feels good. Long Tail pretends not to notice. She does a strange thing and suddenly she is not wet any longer. Lily she does not do this, but Lily does not seem to mind. The day is warm and the water does help to cool off.

~How did you do that Long Tail? Could be a very useful technique.~ For getting out of a lot of problems.

We are not here to learn tricks. We are here to get strong!

He listened too much to the tall ones. They believe that we have to be able to blend in with the non enhanced.

~You don't believe this? Hiding well is more important than breathing to us.~ I demonstrate by blending with the surrounding plants next to the pond.

I can still see you.

~No can't see. Long Tail lie. Use ah, taste air to find.~ Lily comes closer and reaches out to gently touch me. I shift over an arm and hide again.

She is good. If I had not seen it with abilities I would not have believed it possible.

~Where now?~ Lily looks for me, but without the ability she can only find me by touch, not sight. Gryci walks right up to me and taps me on the mantle.

~Easier, if you know what to look for. We can't do blue sky well, so from my angle I look for a higher than normal concentration of plant

colors.~

Lily comes down close to Gryci then exclaims, ~She's right!~ Long Tail ignores this entire exchange and decides to clean herself. She suddenly stops and stares up into the sky. I look towards the direction. I look back towards Long Tail and she is gone. I rise up slightly and look around. I hear a growl and then I see her. The patterns of her surface work well. I have never seen this method before. Wait, some insects use it, but nothing as large as Long Tail.

The creature in the sky is coming closer. Two of it's arms are modified to provide surface for gliding. I scan it. No large empty areas in it's form for gas lifting ability. It suddenly swoops down to the ground level. I rise to see what has happened and am stopped by White's arm.

Not safe. Stay low.

Before I can lower myself the creature is back into the air. This time it is holding something in it's oral arm. Looks like a smaller version of Menace and White.

White growls, *They take many of our young.*

~We lose many to creatures on our world as well. Everyone one of us has stories of narrow escape.~ Nightmares.

Gryci ignores me and goes into the pond and is quickly submerged. Sufi follows her in. It does look inviting.

~How long stay under Roo?~ Lily asks.

~As long as they want. In fact for us it is more comfortable than being out in the hot sun.~

The sun is barely warm today.

~Then we will not be staying, unless you happen to have shaders available.~

~What is a shader?~

Some weird cloth thing that keeps them cool. Don't ask me to explain it. Who would not want to sit in the sun?

~You rest with eyes closed more sit.~ Need to work on her showing.

I can believe that.

You are not much different. Long Tail seems upset.

True enough.

~What those?~ Lily uses one of her arms to indicate a direction. Looks like another creature similar to White. Many of them.

White growls, *Bad creatures. Very dangerous. Do not turn your blind side to them.* This frightens Lily, but Long Tail is already for battle. She is arched up with the soft spines sticking almost straight up. The creatures don't seem worried. More curious. One opens it's oral pore and screams. The others sound and then all of them run towards us.

I shift two of them several hundred arms away. This distracts the

remaining three for a moment, but they are soon back to running towards us. I shift the remaining ones to a different direction.

Now they are coming towards us from all directions. Sure enough they are surrounding us. The three had to make their way around the small pond, but soon catch up to take their places.

Suddenly a jet of water rises and attacks one of them. This startles it. The jet then attacks the others. I get the idea and raise water myself doing the same. Long Tail figures out she can add to this and shifts large spheres of water over their oral pores. It is hard to keep the sphere on their oral arms as they move. They soon break free. However this convinces them that we are not worth the trouble. It would have been easy to shift an essential organ but it is more fun to try and change behavior without killing them.

White comes up to me and breathes on me, *You are learning well little one.* He read my thoughts.

He does that a lot. And apparently so do you. That thought is ignored.

~Come, we go to the compound. Others are waiting.~ Pushy Paws stands before us.

Sufi and Gryci emerge from the pond and upon seeing Pushy Paws immediately go to her.

~Honored one. We wish to petition for our return to the coast community from which we came.~ They make the official and formal signs befitting a high official of the Matriarch.

Pushy Paws asks, ~Is that wise? The Matriarch will arrest both of you.~

~We will offer our services to her and agree to never leave the coastal community. I have seen how Roo dampens her abilities. I believe I can do the same. We will both appear as level ones. If Paff and Sarra can remain with her as personal guards then we can remain at the coast to protect her side.~

~Why do you wish to do this? Why do you wish to abandon Roo and the rest of us?~

~We are not adventurers. I am a humble clay Teacher and not even one experienced in the chemistry. I do not have the imagination to take in so much change at once.~

~I have been on your world for close to a hundred years. I have seen and learned much that could be of use on our world. If the Matriarch is determined, along with Mandhi and possibly Sussi, to pursue this path of alien technology, I believe that my wisdom may be needed.~

I ask, ~What about Raj?~

~Teacher Raj. I have had a hundred years to get over any feelings of revenge. He did what I did before him, what every student eventually

does to become a Teacher. Besides, he will not be able to trick me again. I will be prepared and armed this time.~ She makes a bubble to illustrate what she means.

~Are you sure you want this? We will not be easy to find or contact if you change your mind.~

They both answer, ~I am sure.~

~Roo, you will need to do this. I can only place them on your world at this location. They might not make it back to the coast.~

As much as I would like to force this I cannot. I owe them my life, such as it is now.

~I will not be able to see exactly where I place you. I will put you in the water near the harbor. There is still a chance something will go wrong.~

~You are kind Roo. We will not forget.~ After a pause, ~We are ready.~ I shift them and they are gone.

I collapse to the ground, ~I have been betrayed and abandoned. All is lost.~

Third Mesa

~Maybe, maybe not. Change is hard for your kind Roo. Do not blame them. A few short eight days ago you would have said, 'was is, is was,' as well.~ She is right. However I know I am too much of a threat for the Matriarch to accept and She would be right. Mandhi did not know how to shift within a world. She will not be as strong as from the instruction I am receiving. Whatever the threat is to our world, I just hope that there is time.

~We go to my home now.~ A moment later the landscape has changed. No longer is there abundant life. The pond is gone, the sun is in a different position. We are in a desert. I can feel the moisture leaving my body. I run a psiotic scan of my own body. Strange, no indication that anything is wrong. I should be getting dehydrated.

Long Tail applies her wet rasp to my mantle to get my attention. Lily and White are near by.

~How long was I unaware?~

~Just a moment, but we were concerned. Does this happen often?~

~Sometimes. Got me into a lot of trouble as an unseen. They like it if we work without pausing.~

Could also allow an enemy to take advantage of you. White suggests.

~I can't believe you live here. It is so dry.~

~We do not suffer as much as your kind do from the lack of moisture in the air. I will take you to a suitable area.~

~What is going to happen to me?~

~Right now we all need rest. I am still in pain from learning your language.~

~How long will it last?~

~Not much longer. Thank you for asking. Come.~ We follow her. The structures here are at least made from the local stone. I scan and sense none of the heavy concentrations of metal and artificial organics that others of their kind have. The air tastes better too. Not as good as the other worlds, but better than the bay community or the one with the tall buildings. I have to stop thinking of the others. They are gone. Everyone made their decision and I am not their Matriarch to order them otherwise. If I was, could I order people to go against their desires?

~Roo, stop it! Keep up with us please.~ I am nearly eight by eight arms away. I float to gain distance more quickly, then shift to make the gap disappear.

~Where are the people?~ I scan, but there are no fields nearby. There does seem to be another community north of here. People are present in

fairly large numbers, but none here.

~No one has lived here for over twenty years. I am the last of my community.~

~Why have you not joined another community then? Will they not have you?~

She makes a rapid breathing sound. I have heard Healer make this sound when he is amused. ~I am definitely part of another community. Not of my choosing, but I accept my path. You need to learn to accept yours Roo.~

~What is my path?~ Lily asks.

~That has yet to be known. Be patient. We are here.~ A larger structure is before us. Stone walls, wood beams and a dried plant roof. I scan. There are several divisions inside along the side with a large central room and a more sturdy roof under the plant material.

~The dried plants serve no purpose.~

~Except to appear to be a normal structure for this community.~

~But there is no community. There is no one here.~

~At this moment. At other times it is very full.~ We enter the largest chamber. In the center is a raised platform. I rise to see what is on top. I don't recognize the object. Pushy Paws folds in half before it then rises and goes to the object.

She motions me over. I float up to the object. She moves thin paper leaves from one side to another. On the leaves are markings.

~Is this your language, your method of preserving information?~

~One of many ways, one of many languages. The objects on the wall are all the other languages capable of being recorded in this way. They all tell the same story.~

~An important story.~

~Yes. You will need to be shown this story and record it in the method you would do so on your world. Shells if I remember.~

~Yes. What is this story and why is it important?~

~It is the story of one, given the abilities, who chose the wrong path. This path led to his eventual destruction and an unimaginable amount of suffering of others.~

~Was he of your kind?~

~Irrelevant. The temptation is there for anyone with the ability. Anyone Roo.~

~As Mandhi is learning. As I will learn?~ What of the Nauti? Are they our evil ones? I am so confused and worried about doing the wrong thing. Surely I will become the evil one.

~Perhaps. The others have their own tasks to perform. I want you to meet someone.~ But there is no one here other than us, is there? Lily,

Long Tail and White leave the structure. White I notice has trouble with the operculum. Not designed for his kind. Long Tail waits for Lily to hold the operculum open, though I know she can shift out any time she wants.

We shift. I can see the patterns easily now and becoming more comfortable with the process.

We arrive in a dark room a few eight by eight arms away from our last location. In the edge of the community to the north I had scanned.

You are to remain in this room for the next day cycle. Do not move from your current location. Do not attempt to communicate with the occupant. She can neither see nor hear you or anything. She does not have the ability. She is very old and will soon die. Do not heal her. You are an observer only. No matter what happens you do not interfere. Do you understand?

What about bodily needs? I think.

Deal with it. Part of your training. She shifts out. Crab. A little preparation would have been helpful. Lack of food will be only annoying. How about waste? I suppose I can shift it out. Muscle fatigue is going to be more of a problem. A few eighths are easy, but an entire day is a stretch. If this tall one can neither see or hear she will not notice small movements. That may be enough.

It must be important if she placed me here. Light is coming through the cloth covering the door. The floor is dirt. At least it is cooler inside. She is starting to become aware in the corner. The lines in the skin suggest old age as Pushy Paws said. The room is filled with pottery. Beautiful, wonderful pottery. The forms are near perfect. I scan interior. These pots were all made using the coil method, not a Holy Wheel. Amazing that they can be so perfect done by this method.

There is interesting internal details, someone comes in and sounds to the elder woman. I hide. The latter rises and accepts food and liquid from the former, a much younger female. The younger sets a tray down for her and leaves. She very slowly begins her examination of the tray's contents, feeling each one and using her breathing to taste the contents. Even though she is slow, she never shakes as Gryci did before being gaining the abilities and feeling better.

When she finishes she slowly rises and very slowly leaves the enclosure. I scan to follow her. She goes to the waste area. No need to watch this, though it is interesting that they eliminate waste from a strange location. I wait for her return by examining the pottery better. The shapes are similar, but each is slightly different.

Someone else comes in. Then another and another. Each sets one pot down with the others and leaves. I am sure two looked right at me, but

showed no evidence of having seen me. Too close to have hidden that well. I am sure I am tasting the room as well. Come to think of it why doesn't the old one know I am here. Is her taste also gone? No, she seemed to recognize the food. The new pots look like they have just come out of a kiln. Still warm, no dust.

She returns. She does not return to the resting place. She moves around the room touching each pot in turn. Just like I did in the pit, it is a way to remember where everything is. She spends more time with the three new ones that came in. Doesn't want to forget and hit them by mistake. She then goes to a small table. I want to float to see, but know I can't, so I scan instead. On the table is a lump of clay and various shapers. She ignores the clay. She just sits.

Several arns pass. To do those pots must require intense concentration.

She rises and goes to each pot. This time she spends much more time with each one. Lifting it, passing her hands over every part of its surface, then setting it down. This takes most of the day. There are a lot of pots here. She gives the new pots no more attention than the others.

I almost lose awareness when the strangest thing happens. She picks up a strange object. A wooden handle with what I think is a metal shape on the end. I have never seen anything that shape before. She then proceeds to smash her pots! I can't believe this! Such beauty one at a time is gone. I want to do something. I want to hide one or more. She would know if one was missing. But I promised. I can't believe I agreed to this. I find myself shrinking. I want to meld with the floor, to disappear. Such horror! Why don't I have the ability to duplicate things like Healer does?

Finally she stops. She returns to her resting place and lays down as I have seen other tall ones do.

I am so upset it is several arns before I think to scan the room. There is one and only one pot remaining. It is perfect, it is beautiful. But it is the only one. Why? Why destroy the others, why destroy such beauty?

No one comes in. Nothing is disturbed. Didn't the others hear the destruction? The old female is making sounds as she rests. Soon it is dark. No light is lit in the room. I must have lost awareness for a time.

When I am aware again I do not hear her breathing. We often do not breathe so I do not think too much of it till I remember that the tall ones never stop completely or for long. I scan her psiotic glow and see that it is nearly dark. There are only a few remnants on the surface of her skin and in her digestive tracts. She has died. All that remain are the bacteria and fungi.

I am upset with myself for having missed it. Pushy Paws warned me. I just never expected it. On our world we rarely die peacefully like this. I

saw no pain in her glow earlier. We usually die at the arms of another. A dart is a mercy in many ways as it is quick, even if painful. Most of course die before naming. Very rare person who sees a hundred years.

Gryci is an amazing exception. As old as a Matriarch and on a strange world too. Even if the last twenty years she has been under their care, how did she possibly survive the eighty since arriving on their world? And she was not given the low oxygen cure either. Though Healer said we would adapt eventually.

I note the position of the corpse. She has her oral pore up. Her two upper arms are folded on top of her body. She knew she was dying and was prepared. She died with honor even when alone. I am impressed. I am also bored. Is the day finished yet? I am in a room with a dead tall one fifty broken pots and one intact one.

I scan the room again. I suppose they could rebuild the pots that were destroyed if needed. Certainly any of the tall ones with the abilities could. Why am I here then? Was she important? I cannot understand the shapes carved into the pots and former pots. It is not like the other writing I have seen. Is this important?

Hmm, that's strange. Around her oral arm is a metal chain, I have seen these before, but there is also a small ceramic shape. I examine it as best I can using only scanning. Far too dark to see it with my eyes. It looks vaguely familiar.

Crab! I have seen that shape before. A very long time ago I used to make small shapes to impress others with my skill. My mind comes crashing in on me like a wave on the shore. I lose awareness. The dreams are intense. I am being chased by crabs. I see people, lots of people, but I know them somehow.

When I become aware I know. I remember my unseen time. I remember my naming and my assignment to the ceramics studio. I remember the chemistry classes under Teacher Kirri. I remember growing larger at the Bay community. I grew up at the Bay community just like the shaman showed. It was a wonderful life. Not as much intrigue and death as the coast community. Fewer Guardians.

I then remember Freng. He was an awkward one getting bigger. It was not until later when he was not accepted into the Guardians that he went bad. I would like to know who tricked me to be on the shore at the wrong time. Freng was not that smart to have worked it out himself, but I can see now he was rewarded by being allowed to join the Guardian training. That suggests something political. Since the current Matriarch belonged to the coast community and not the bay one, it is possible Freng was in on the take over. A traitor. I was too nice about his death. He did not suffer enough.

Pushy Paws comes in and closes the cloth behind her.

~You may come out now.~ I stretch and make my way past the shards to the center of the room and the one pot. Now I can feel it with my own hands and not just using the ability. Even more beautiful than I scanned. The surface is perfect. I can't believe that someone could make a clay shape this well entirely without help from mechanicals. The firing is interesting. Not entirely even. Normally I would cast off a pot that is not even, but in this case it actually adds to the overall feel. I am beginning to understand why she made so many. It must have been hard to get it exactly right.

~Her work is prized among our people. She spent this much effort for every piece. As a person she was most revered as the greatest peacemaker our people have even known. For over a thousand years our people have fought each other. The fighting was so bad that other people took our land and killed most of our people. We were reduced to a small shadow of our former culture. Only now are we making a comeback.~

~Because of her efforts.~

~Yes. She was good, but largely unknown until she began her quest to reunite our people. What started her on this journey was a vision and the finding of a piece of pottery unlike any she had ever seen before. It was this new shape, this new understanding that gave her the knowledge and courage to pursue her quest.~

~When did she become blind and deaf? After her quest?~

~Her quest ended only last night Roo. She has always been blind and deaf. Clay is all she has ever known.~

~Where did the shape she wears around her oral pore come from? It looks just like something from my past.~

~From a simple craft fair. Nothing special, but it was what was missing in her understanding. That is all that matters. She worked hard to perfect her technique, though she was already better than anyone else I have ever known.~

~What did she do to become a peacemaker?~

~She made pots and selected only the best. These were then given away. They could not be traded for or obtained in any other way. Only one was given to each group of my people, but each one was made special for only that one group of people. Yet, though they were all different, they were also all the same.~

~The same clay and same shape by the same maker.~

~The shapes varied, but you are right about the clay and the maker. Each piece was unique and had meaning special to the group for whom it was given. None looked the same as the one here.~

~They found peace in their similarities and acceptance in the beauty

of their differences.~

Pushy Paws looks at me and pauses before showing, ~Yes. Maybe there is hope for you.~

I ignore that comment, ~May I see the shape she is wearing?~

She affirms, ~Be gentle. We respect our dead differently that you do.~

I go over to her corpse and gently remove the shape. I turn it around and look carefully. We were not supposed to sign work done at this stage, but I was a bit more creative than the others. If I hold it in tips of three hands just so and twist. Yes, it comes apart. Inside hidden from view is my sign. I go over to Pushy Paws and show her.

~How did she get this shape. I am definitely the maker. She did not find this on your world. I was not here at that time.~

~The last pot is meant for you Roo. She wanted it to go to the maker of the piece she held so dear. She tried for almost sixteen years to find the maker but did not succeed. She made me promise that when that person was found I would give this final pot to them.~

~You knew.~

~Only recently. We have suspected for some time.~

~Did she know I was in the room? Did she know I was the one?~ She affirms.

~How did you know?~ She pauses and walks around the small room

~Gryci washed up on our shore almost dead nearly twenty years ago. Out of curiosity and constant begging by Fish's offspring Bait, then a very young one, we healed Gryci only to learn she was sentient. Bait grew up with Gryci. You may have noticed she knows your language very well. She is also good at ancient and can read and write. We have searched every chance we could to find others of your kind, but Gryci was the only one. At least until the last one you pulled up with them.~ Explains why she could show so well.

~He was not of our kind. He belongs to this world. Long ago we must have had an ancestor in common. A time when our worlds were one.~

~The fact that he could show, even a little, says a lot for your kind and your culture.~

~Yes. Though as we have seen the split was not as long ago as we first thought. Then how did you find my world?~

~Finding your world became a project for Healer. He visited hundreds of worlds before finding yours. There was a person on a related world that helped. A world very much like yours except the Matriarch at the coast was a different person and Teacher Raj had not pushed their Gryci into our world. They were not pursuing technology.~

~That must have been the Shaman. She did does not have a tattoo and does not use a name. Only a very strong person would choose that route.~

~It might have been her. I was not there. Healer finally tracked you down to find out you had been thrown into the pit.~

~Fring did that. He was the one who tried to kill me the first time. He faked my death to the Matriarch so he would save me for some other purpose.~

~Or just to know you died a horrible death eaten by your own Teacher.~

~Teacher, I saw Healer with the Nauti Matriarch.~

~You were not supposed to be there. Not everything is as it appears. It is time you learned more.~

~Everyone is keeping secrets from me.~ Even you.

~You are different from anyone we have ever met. None of us knows what is happening. This has never happened before Roo. We are dealing with powers that can destroy worlds. Do you think it is wise to be reckless?~

~No. But I have to know what to do.~

~I cannot answer that for you. Come. It is time for you to meet someone like no other.~

~We will miss the death meal then?~

~We do not celebrate an important person's death by eating the one who has died.~

I am surprised, ~But then how can you grieve and share in their death?~

~There are many ways. Every culture and world has a different method. Don't assume your culture's method is the best for everyone.~

~Healer warned me about thinking that way too.~

She picks up the shape the potter made for me. We shift.

OM

I am still holding the shape I had made so many years ago. Pushy Paws hands me the new shape made by the potter. It is also trifold. I trace the curves with my hands. I can see how my shape influenced her work.

~That's strange. There is something about this shape that is not consistent with a primitive culture.~ She did too good of a job understanding my shape.

Pushy Paws shows that crescent shape, ~Primitive does not mean stupid Roo. Look more closely.~

I place my own shape down. If it was based on mine it might work the same way. I would be surprised if it did of course, no one else has been able to duplicate my work.

~I was the only one in my class who figured out how to mold the clay into the shape that would work that way after firing. I realize now that even then I was capable of seeing things in more than the usual three dimensions seen by most people. The way my shape worked was by using six dimensional representations. Now of course I understand there are nine.~

The shape does not work in my hands. I try several times.

~Nothing. It is just a simple shape anyone would be capable of. Good work, but nothing special.~

~I am disappointed in you Roo. If you continue to hold these prejudices you will never succeed.~ She turns her eyes away from me. An insult that means I am not of interest, either as a threat or friend.

I am assuming that this shape was done by someone who copied my earlier work, with some variation. Good, but not done by someone who truly understands. What if I assume that she saw more than I did at the time?

I try pushing it under the six dimensions I used. Nothing. She is at least as good as I was then. I try the nine I know now. It feels closer, much closer, but still does not work. Br'thn is a solid life form. They are capable of up to level twelve. She must be about level ten now. If the dimensions are related to the levels, then maybe. I try level ten, or rather I project the shape into ten dimensions in my mind and push. The pieces slide apart easily. I hear a sudden intake of air from Pushy Paws.

But it is I who am amazed, ~How could she know? How could she do this? I scanned her. She was a normal person.~

~I scan normal too.~

~Healer scans dead, even though I know from direct observation he is not, but she died of old age. I was told that those with the ability had

longer life spans.~

~So, how old was she then?~ I have no way of knowing.

~I don't know.~

~Neither do I.~ I finally look around. We are in a clearing in a forest of some kind. I don't recognize any of the plants or trees. There are lots of those soft spiked flying things going from tree to tree. The insects look at least a little familiar, though small. We are still on the tall one's world. I would have noticed a shift larger than that easily. There is a small structure to one side. Pushy Paws motions me towards it. She picks up the pottery pieces, walks to the structure and makes a repeating sound on the surface of the operculum. A sound is heard in response and the operculum opens. An old male with white hair comes out to greet Pushy Paws with affection.

I find myself tense around a strange male, even one this old. He does not hide his abilities either, nearly blue white in color. She trusts him enough to be close at least, though they still have the cloth between them. The trust is not enough to exchange surface fluids.

She turns to me, ~Roo, this male is a shaman among our kind. He also has the abilities, which you already know. His name is hard to translate as the concepts do not exist in your culture.~

~Shaman will do.~

~You show!~

~I do now.~

~Will you also suffer pain?~

~I did when I learned your language, but that was some time ago. Thank you for your concern.~ He turns to Pushy Paws, ~I showed you some time ago that you would need to learn.~

~I thought everyone was wrong. Why would an old red skin be needed in this story? I was wrong. Not the first time, unlikely to be the last. Shaman Roo just separated these pieces from a pot made by She Who Sees Far.~ Her skin does not look any more red than his. Why does she refer to herself in this way?

He accepts the pieces from her and looks at them, *These pieces fit together? It does not look like it.* I forget that with only two arms upright they cannot show and hold something at the same time. Another handicap. It is amazing that they have achieved as much tech as they have. I see him try to fit the pieces together.

~I will show you. Let me have the pieces back again.~ What is Pushy Paws going to do with them? She accepts the pieces that then does a remarkable thing. She moves the pieces together by passing the pieces through each other until they are lined up properly and then lets them become solid again. She then hands the pot to me. ~Roo, show him what

you did.~

~I would rather know what you did? How can solid objects pass through each other.~

~You will learn soon enough. Show Shaman what you did please.~

I concentrate again. The pieces have been replaced expertly. I had to be sure of that before I tried to remove them again. I move to the tenth dimension and slide the three pieces apart again.

~I would not have believed that unless I had just seen it. There was no phasing. It was like they were pulled apart in three dimensions even though I know that is not possible. Like the pieces were somehow flexible, though it is obviously hard ceramic. I have an idea. Wait right here.~ He runs back into the structure and comes back out a moment later with a pot.

He hands it to me and shows, ~Please try this one. Can it be separated as well.~

~Why, where did you get it?~ Pushy Paws watches Shaman. Something is going on.

~Just try Roo. He will explain afterwards.~ Showed like a threat directly in Shaman's direction.

I concentrate. It takes me a moment to see the pattern. It is five fold instead of three. Harder, but only a seven dimensional form instead of ten. I slide the five pieces from each other.

~Amazing,~ he shows.

~Now explain what this is supposed to have shown us.~

~You and I both know that She Who Sees Far was a very talented, very spiritual person. I am sorry for your loss. Her passing will affect us all.~

~Wait, her name was She Who Sees Far? But she was blind from hatching.~

~A person in my culture can be named for their spiritual abilities, not just their physical ones.~

~Pushy Paws, to finish my thought, her pottery was very beautiful but you and I both know she could not phase shift or use any other ability.~

~She was normal?~

~What we call level zero. Though most people would be closer to level zero point one or two. The point I am making is that she could not have done the multidimensional fit that Roo is implying. Further, the pot I just handed you Roo was made by a simple person locally. Also with no abilities. The strangest thing is that he worked collecting sea urchins for a living before he developed a sickness of breathing and had to learn a new skill that did not involved diving under water.~

~And sea urchins have a five fold symmetry. Somehow Roo was able

to see this pattern in what looks to us like a normal round shape.~ I look at the shapes in my arms again. I put them back together slowly. I am looking at myself more than the pieces. I hand the pot back to Shaman.

~I will leave now Roo. You need fear nothing from the Shaman. If you wish, you may see me again after the lesson. Roo, listen carefully. None of us know what is going on. We are all trying to figure it out. I have had the abilities for close to twenty years and Shaman for thousands. Still we greet each day with wonder.~ Crab. When am I going to be able to actually do something useful? Now it really sounds hopeless. I have to remember that this entire ordeal, from the obsessed shapes I took to the lab to the ones I just separated, have only been a single moon cycle apart. No, two or three moons apart. I am forgetting time count. Not a long time in any one's life. Will it take millions?

Now I am somewhere on the tall one's world with a strange male who is more powerful than I am. It is starting to rain gently. The water feels good. Warm but not too hot. The high humidity allows me to stretch to full length without discomfort. He is still looking at the pot. He takes a stick from the ground. Using the ability he makes a hole in the pot and places the stick through the hole until it stretches all the way through the pot.

~Please separate the pot again without disturbing the stick.~

~The configuration is no longer the same. It would not be possible to come apart the same way any longer.~

~Try anyway please.~

I concentrate, starting at the seventh dimension as worked before. Just as I thought it does not fit any longer. I move to higher dimensions and at the ninth there is a fit again. I separate the pot into ten pieces and hold them out to the Shaman. Having suckers helps hold the pieces. I notice that all the ones I tore earlier have healed. When did that happen?

He carefully grabs the stick. You can see the other end coming out of one of the other pieces. When he pulls at his end the end sticking out of the other piece moves as well, until it disappears. He holds up an intact piece of wood, carefully looking at it.

~This pot is still intact. I think it has just been displaced into another dimension. Interesting. I wonder if it would work on something living?~

~I thought I came here to meet someone? Are you the one I am supposed to meet?~

~I am merely the guide. We can try the separation experiment later. Please make yourself comfortable. You will be here for some time actually.~

I hollow out a soft spot in the plants and soil and settle in. He takes up a position close to me and sits in the way of the tall ones. Still does not

look stable to me, but that long jointed shell inside them seems to make this possible.

I will use mind showing from now on to avoid having to move. You can respond to me with your thoughts only as well.

Is it as easy to see my thoughts as with other species?

Each species is different of course, but we all desire basically the same things; food, shelter, water, freedom from stress. From these basics patterns emerge that allow us to communicate. Not all ideas can be though. Cultural differences are the hardest, but that need not concern us at the moment. I will assist you in slowing down your form and thoughts. Many species are aware of time at different speeds.

Just like your species is much faster than mine.

Yes. In a battle of equal technology you would lose. Just as the trees around us lose to the blades of the wood users. We are going to slow down to their level and beyond.

There are beings slower than trees?

Much slower. Lichens for instance are slower. But the one we seek is an individual of sorts and is the slowest of all. Concentrate on peaceful thoughts and I will guide you.

I place myself in a hyper receptive mode. I often use this means when trying to figure out a shape that wants to be represented. I can see the rustling of the leaves getting faster and faster. The sun starts to visibly move across the sky and darken. It would be easy to attack us now.

Do not be alarmed Roo. We are safe here. Nothing can harm you in this state.

Soon the days are in sync with my breathing. In is daylight and out is night. I start to see thoughts in my mind. A discussion is going on about nutrient sources, beetle infestations, gossip about someone near the stream who is leaning too far over. She is doomed for sure.

The trees are showing!

Yes Roo. Be blank. We continue.

The chatter from the trees becomes too fast to understand.

Welcome Little Ones!

Who are you?

I am the One Mind. I am all that is. I am this world.

One Mind is the collective intelligence for the entire world Roo. One Mind has much wisdom, but be careful. One Mind likes to trick us into staying longer than we intended. Come out when you wish. Someone will watch you at all times. I will leave you now.

His form disappears suddenly. I hope he is watching. The ground

around us is moving at such a frenetic rate. I need to be quick.

One Mind, why am I hear?

To ask questions Little One, as do all who seek me out. Apparently the answers are not clear either. Part of the trick to keep us here?

I am not of your world.

Of this place you are not, but you are still part of One Mind. All of this world are part of One Mind.

You know of the other froth worlds?

All are part of One Mind.

What happened on the lifeless world? Was it a rock from the sky?

The world of which you speak is not lifeless, just not of One Mind any longer. Death was not from a rock from the sky. The change was caused by one of your kind seeking too much knowledge before they were ready.

Crab! One of my kind? Crab. Someone like me caused the world to die? Wait, you said the world was not dead. I sensed something there. What is alive there? Something in the heat of the center?

Very good Little One. The magmotics suffered greatly, but they will survive. Soon the entire surface will cool enough for us to grow there again.

What about the missing air?

There are thousands of worlds to gain what is needed. Do not worry so Little One. I hate being called that, but compared to an entire world, what am I but little.

What is my purpose One Mind? Why was I given the abilities?

Your purpose is to serve the One Mind of course. And the Question. As to your abilities, you need to ask the ones who gave them to you.

Who was that? I think back. I already knew how to 'see' in other dimensions before Freng and the memory loss. How much time has passed? I need to search elsewhere for answers. The tall one will know more. *I need to leave. How do I do that?*

Just let go Little One. Your form knows the way. I hope to show with you again soon. Come as often as you like.

Suddenly I am out. It is night. Near sunrise I am guessing. There is some residual slowing as the sun appears then stops. I am alone! Crab! I thought someone would be watching. I quickly search around me for danger, but sense none.

I make my way to the shelter. It looks different. It has not been maintained. I don't know why they build with such fragile and ephemeral materials. I push open the operculum and look inside. It is overpopulated with spiders and other creatures, many of which I do not recognize. No one has been here for some time. How much time as passed?

Friend

A tall one emerges from the forest. Not the same one as led me to One Mind. A male again. I tense up, ready to shift. I hide as well as I can, but he continues to walk towards me. I move my position while adjusting my pattern. He adjusts. Crab. I get ready to shift if this goes dangerous. I am still thinking a little slower than normal.

He shows, ~Be not afraid Roo, for I have been watching over you.~ I relax.

~I do not know of you.~

He pauses before answering, ~I am a mystery to those who try to know me, as I am to myself. If you wish a name in which to refer to this form, you may use Silver.”

~This form? There are other forms?~

His shape melts before my eyes. The form lowers itself into almost a puddle on the ground before rising slightly again. As a person! No longer a tall one. There is even the tattoo in the correct position that says Silver.

~You must be the Silver of whom others have shown?~

~Yes. It is possible. Though we are never what others have shown of us are we?~ He is as confusing as One Mind. Must everything about this time be a crawly puzzle?

~I have just been with One Mind. What does she want? What is her purpose?~

~One Mind does not have a gender. What One Mind wants is the same as all other life forms. One Mind wants to reproduce. That is the purpose for which One Mind appeared.~

~One Mind is already on thousands of worlds and will soon retake the dead one. What more is there?~

~Very good Roo. Few have understood the extent of One Mind's reach. And in only one encounter. Very good. To answer your question is easy. One Mind wishes to take on other worlds outside this one. To reach to other worlds around other stars.~

~How does One Mind do this?~

~One Mind controls us by manipulating the world so that we do One Mind's will. One Mind works through the plant life mostly. We are an incomplete world. Plants and animals were not supposed to be separate, but a mistake was made and now One Mind has a harder task to reach the goal. One Mind will succeed though. She is getting much closer on this world. Much closer recently.~

~I have been to Pink where there is no separation. What do you mean by One Mind getting closer to the goal?~

~One Mind will turn some of the people of this world into spores that will reach up to the stars. Once that is done One Mind will attempt to start again and raise another intelligence capable of ultimately forming spores. One Mind has controlled us to this end since first arriving on this world as a spore some two and a half billion years ago.~

I nearly ink.

~Why are you here and where are the others?~

~You are no longer in slow time Roo. You can relax. The others are not here because they are needed elsewhere. I am here because I wish to be. By the way, have you looked at your psiotic signature lately. You may wish to lower it a bit.~

~What do you mean?~ I turn inward and am startled to see I glow blue white now. ~Level eight? When did that happen?~

~Time is different when one is with One Mind, but your progression has continued to this stopping point apparently. What level were you when you came here?~

~I have forgotten, level four or five I think. I can bubble, scan, move and see psiotic glows. That means four. If I am an eight what has been added?~

~You would not have been able to show with One Mind unless you had mind showing, so that was probably five and happened just before you slowed. Two of the last three include the ability to manipulate form at the individual atom level. This means you can separate or add atoms to molecules and structures at will. Next would follow the ability to work inside atoms to change from one element to another. Such as lead into gold.~

~That could be useful. To convert a poison into an inert metal. It would be better to convert it into water.~

~You can do that as well if you wish. Last is the ability to pass through matter without shifting. Not really of much use if you have the other abilities, but can be useful when you want to make a showing to those without the abilities.~

I look at my arm and stretch out a hand. I then pass it through the ground and out again.

~Feels funny. I noticed that each time an ability was added I could use the others further away. Ah, except the dimension stuff. Wait, the bubbles got bigger.~

~Your range, if you will, extends over the entire world now. Not was far as the moon though. Please don't bubble the entire world."

~I will try not. Everything stopped at level eight. I thought we could reach level nine?~

~Not all species are capable. But I suspect you will be able to. Level

nine normally means mating with an adult 'thn.~

~Like Br'thn.~

~She is still too young to mate, but yes, like Br'thn.~

~How does that happen?~

~You will be invited when they are ready. Should not be too long. It would be better if you were back on your own world though.~

~I need to collect something from this world first.~

~The Nauti sphere?~

~How did you know?~

~Only thing of value from your world here. I kept it in a safe place for you Roo. We can collect it whenever you are ready.~

~Safe place? Was it not safe where it was? I thought the Teacher wanted to study it.~

~The Teacher is dead Roo. Stretch your mind to cover this world and you will see.~

I concentrate until I have wrapped my mind around the world. Show about strange feelings. I then tune to the psiotic signature of living things. There is much life about. It would appear to be fine. What is he referring to? I concentrate on where the Teacher was and look for finer detail.

~That's strange. Where are all the mechanical crabs? Nothing is moving on the roads except for an occasional four leg. Where are all the tall ones?~

~They are dead Roo. A massive plague covered this world and nearly all of the tall ones are gone.~

I collapse and blank. So much death at once. I know of communities that died of plague of course. Happens to every community eventually. But to have happened over the entire world is . . .

~Why was I not shown? I could have helped. What happened? Why didn't you stop it? When did this happen? How long was I with One Mind?~

~You were with One Mind nearly seven years Roo. Were you not warned to be careful?~

~I was, but I did not know it would be that long. I guess I should have once I noticed how fast the days went. It seemed I was there only for a moment.~

~The plague started in the a part of the world that has seen much violence. The disease itself was made in another part of the world however. Someone took it to the violent area and released it to try and kill their enemies.~

~Tall ones would do that? It does not make sense. Do you not have rules against this?~

~Do you not have rules against pollution and tech that has not been

thoroughly studied? Yet your own Matriarch does not follow them. They are the same as your kind. Rules are followed only as long as they are convenient to do so.

Their plan would have worked except for some food animals that also had another disease related to the plague. When the genes combined they formed a much more lethal version with no cure even for the originators. A similar event happened on the world I came from. It would appear that One Mind needs this to happen to further the path to reproduction. This world is behind mine in the current time, but may follow a similar current in the end.~

~You came here from another time. Why is that you were allowed but I was told not to?~

~There is no rule against time travel Roo. The rule says you may not affect your own time line. It takes VERY little to do that so most do not visit their own world. Very few have the ability actually. You are the first I know of who has not reached a higher level first. But, here I am not on my own time line, so I am able to work without worry.~

~Just as I am not when I visit your world.~

~There you have to be more careful. Remember I helped Healer and the others become what they are and they helped you. If too much was done on my world the events that led to now may not have happened this way.~

~How would we know?~

~We would not, but the fact we are here means it has not been changed enough. If it had then the 'thn hierarchy would have had no choice but to destroy us to prevent further complications. They are a very fearful species Roo and see everything they cannot control as a threat. Be careful with them.~

~Then you would not mate with one?~

~I have, but that was a very long time ago. There have been no offers since, nor are there likely to be. I am watched though.~

~Why have they not killed you then? Why take the risk?~

~Even they serve The Question.~

~What is The Question? One Mind showed this as well.~

~A good question. Some have said that it is the question of what is the fundamental nature of conscious reality.~

~Why are we here? That's it? Crab, if the entire universe is asking that question what chance do I have of ever understanding it?~

~It is possible to understand Roo. It is even possible to know the answer. It is not possibly however to explain it to another.~

~You know?~ He does not answer. I believe he does. ~You know.~ I show lightly.

I look around. The pot made by She Who Sees Far is overgrown with plants. I cannot find my shape at all. I use the abilities and quickly find pieces of it. Plants have split it apart and it has started to decompose. Not important. Neither is really.

I look my form over with the abilities. Everything appears to be in order. Ah, except now my tattoo is completely gone.

~How will people know what to call me?~

~Whatever you want. You can change form or anything about your form now, with a little practice.~

~You look better as a tall one.~ I tease him. He gives me a Nauti salute and morphs back to his former shape.

~Is this the shape you were first in?~

~I was first an egg like everyone else.~

~I mean as an adult.~

~I don't know. Too long ago. Unlikely.~

~It is time I started. Please take me to the Nauti sphere.~

Instantly we move. It is too fast to see how we did. I am now in a structure made of mostly metals and organic polymers of non natural origin.

~I feel lighter.~

~The spin is off again. We need to find someone technical enough who is available to fix it. I have long forgotten how this tech works. They don't like it when I substitute tech from the far future. We won't be here long. Now if I can remember where exactly I stored it.~

~Where are we and what is this place?~

~Roo, please, you can see for yourself where we are. Don't be so lazy. As to function, this is one of many like this where they are storing the tech from before the plague. They have been gathering material for some time now. Had to work fast before the plants and animals destroyed it.~

~Why save it? Doesn't all this material pollute or depend on pollution to work.~

~You and I see their folly. I am hoping that with yours and their world showing each other both may benefit.~

~How will my world benefit? I see nothing of value here.~

~Have you forgotten about the possibility of an asteroid striking your world?~

~Is that what is going to happen? One Mind said the dead world was caused by someone like me and not from an asteroid. Besides, now that we know of that possibility we can build the necessary optics to search as well. There is lots of space away from settlements that would work for this purpose.~

~Still a possibility Roo. It is also possible for a plague such as

happened to this world, or a huge volcanic eruption or many other means. This world has much technology and knowledge that could assist. But, I have no knowledge of what will happen to your world. All are still possible.~ Crab, nothing is easy.

He starts to open rectangular operculums against the walls. Why is he doing this? Is there more than one sphere? I scan the entire structure and quickly find it and shift it to myself.

~I have it, we can go now.~

He does the crescent shape, ~Good. I thought we were not going to use abilities after you failed to use yours to see where we are.~ I still have not done that. I reach out. We are in orbit around the world. There are hundreds of structures similar to this one aligned in a Holy Circle around the world.

~Why is the material safe up here? Surely if they made these structures they can come back here to rob them later.~

~People with the abilities made all but one of these. The makers of that one are dead along with all the rest. It will be some time before they are able to reach up here again, if ever.~

~Do you not care what happens to your own kind?~ He looks at me carefully.

~I care very much what happens to my own kind, as I care very much what happens to you. I, however, am not as attached to the ones below us. Roo, we are no longer of the species we started from. You and I have much more in common than we have with the species of our origin.~

~Someone else showed me that as well. It has all happened so fast. Why be given the abilities if we are not to help others?~

~There are some with the abilities who think they were given them so as to make life easier for themselves. You are wise to see the difference. Keep following that current Roo.~

We shift and I find myself on the surface of the world. We are on the shore of the bay where on my world it all began.

~This where I must leave you. The others will be pleased you have learned so much from your experience with One Mind. Do you have a idea as to how you will proceed?~

~Yes, I think so. Circumstances may change my progress though.~

~Good that you see that. Hide well Roo.~

~Hide well Silver.~ We both acknowledge the other and he is gone. Seven years is a long time and a short time. What has changed on my world? Not yet though. I have one more errand before going there. A tall one comes out from behind a nearby structure and is pointing one of those metal weapons at me and sounding.

What the hell are you? I can see his thoughts. I ignore him and shift to

Atal's world.

Here everything looks normal. The sun had just risen on Healer's world. Here it is about to set. I will not show as much which is good. It is a short distance to the shaman's home. There is light inside. I whistle at the opening.

~Come in Roo. I have food ready.~ I taste the air for familiar flavors.

I enter with the Nauti sphere behind me.

~Ah, very good. You have found the sphere of the first Matriarch.

Please rest anywhere you wish.~ It could be the first one, but what are the odds we found that particular one? Over so many millions of years? Of course the odds of anything in the last three moons happening are even harder to believe.

~I have come for the sphere I left here.~

~Of course, but first rest and eat.~

~I have been resting for seven years, but it is also true I have not eaten in that time either.~

~Ah, One Mind. Yes, I remember my encounter. Waste of time if there ever was one.~ I show amusement and she responds in kind.

~Were you not wondering why I had not returned?~

~I was not expecting you till much later. I am actually surprised to see you so soon. This current is not an easy one we follow. Good, you have removed your silly tattoo. What name will you go by now?~

~For the moment I will still use Roo. It is what I am used to, though I am beginning to see the wisdom of abandoning it. These bay mussels are good. What flavorings did you use?~

~Not much, just some simple roots near by. What one eats or what one wears or what one calls oneself seems so unimportant now.~

~True.~

~You will confront the Nauti then?~

~I show that much?~ She acknowledges.

~I thought I would, but in the end I just received their blessing and left.~ We both show normal psiotic glows. No way of telling what level she is at.

~What did they ask of you?~

~Was is, is was. They fear change. All that means is that I will have to be more subtle about it.~

~Hide well.~

~Exactly. Certainly you have seen what a horrible mess the tall one's world is. We will not follow that current, but change is certain. We need to be prepared.~

~I know what happened on the dead world now.~

~That is another reason you and I in particular must be careful. I wish

I knew what happened. What could cause someone to destroy their own world.~

~Silver showed that our loyalty is no longer to our former kind, but to each other now.~

~There is wisdom in that. So, you are saying that maybe something happened that justified the action?~

~Maybe. What has happened on my world since I left there?~

~I have not been back. Now that you are here I need not interfere. Not everything happens quickly and those times it does you can see where it had actually been a long current that finally arrived on the shore.~

~You know what happened on the tall one's world?~

~Definitely a long current before that shore. The others knew it would happen soon. They had starting preparing before the event itself.~

~I was on the orbiting storerooms a moment ago. Waste of time.~

~Silver showed that?~

~I did, but he agreed.~

~We will see if you are correct. At least it will not be boring any longer.~

~I can remember the long arns in the clay studio. I hated it then, but now I long for that simplicity again.~

~Atal has taken over as Teacher here. You could do the same. I was a simple healer before and I still serve that function now. Only I don't always use herbs any longer.~

~Maybe. I had best go. Otherwise I might never.~

~You need not fear that. Once an idea gets bored in like that worm, it rarely comes out again.~

~“Crab.~ I help clean up. We do it without the abilities. I really want to stay here as long as possible. Soon enough we are done.

~Hide well Roo.~

~Hide well shaman. Thank you for your help and the meal.~ I don't look back and quickly enter the bay with two spheres behind me. Sometime I should read them. At that thought I make duplicates of both of them and place the duplicates back in the corner of the shaman's home. There may be a time when I do need to read them. Don't build a home out of wood.

Nauti

The water is cool and not that deep. Once out of sight I shift to my world. I hope they don't have lookers. I don't even try to scan the community as curious as I am. Pushy Paws could always tell when I scanned. I don't want them to know I am here. I double check my own glow and it is missing.

I will have to move quite a ways into the bay before I reach water of any depth. I must have left from this shore so long ago, but I don't remember swimming that far before going down. Being pursued with one's life in danger can do that. Going through water by swimming takes too long. Now that I have decided I want to make it happen.

I make a clear ceramic ultra hard bubble around myself and remove most of the water. I can keep the air clean with the abilities. I scan ahead for dangers. Just the usual swarms of squid, jellyfish and sea slugs all going for the plankton rising to the surface at dusk to feed on the algae falling. I keep looking for a psiotic signature, but nothing close. Maybe it would be better if they find me. I let mine rise to the new blue white color. I should be far enough away now to not attract attention from the Matriarch.

I am like a large glow ball to anyone who can see. It looks like the only water of depth is outside the bay. I proceed through the narrow shallow opening. Once outside the bay the water gets deeper quickly. I follow the canyon down. Using the scanning ability I can see the various creatures growing on the sides. A lot of glowing jellyfish. Some of have dark spots where flat worms have chewed on them. I keep going.

I can't believe that I swam this far that night. Maybe it took several days. My sphere is having some trouble with the depth. I make the sphere thicker to compensate and the stress stops. Of course if I stay in here I will not be acclimated to the depth. I doubt they will want to receive me in this thing. Jerky on them. This is the way I want to travel. Not too excited about the cold outside either. That would slow me down too much. I need to stay as aware as possible.

I have completely forgotten what phase the moon is in. When I was here last time it was a full moon. It may be that they come closer to the surface during the full moon. We got most of our culture from them after all. It is even possible that they also mate to the full moon.

What species hides this far down to avoid detection from the surface dwellers? What are they so afraid of? I expand my range. Something is down there to the right. I move closer slowly. I do not want to appear to be a threat. I sense no concentration of life, just sponges, assorted brittle

stars and a few carnivorous tunicates. To think they produced Silver and the others.

As I get closer I recognize the formations as rubble from structures. There was a community here. They buried their dead, at least the shells. I look around the edges and am lucky to recognize one. It is nearly decomposed with only remnant above the mud surface. The rest I scan as below. Either not someone important or the rest left in a hurry. The shell is not that large. Certainly not as large as the one we found buried inland.

I proceed further down. I am going to fall off the continental shelf soon. The decent is increasing. It only looks like a fast fall on shell maps. Seeing it full size it is more gentle. No life to show down this far. A desert of the wet kind.

Then I see it. With my eyes. They have certainly had time to dark adjust. I scan and nothing appears but rock and mud. No psiotic signature at all. Yet, with my eyes I see many view ports with light behind them. Why would they need them? No rain down here. Nothing to fall on them at all. Then again I can't see them with the ability. That suggests some very high ability people here or tech beyond what we or the tall ones know about.

One of the more brilliant structures is green in color. When I approach it I see that the green is from a coating of green algae covering the surface. Even it's dull red glow is missing. I scan the community on the coast. I can see it just fine. I can see the individual people resting in their homes. I can see the Guardians making their rounds at the edge of the community. I can see one who is level three. Interesting that Sufi has not progressed any further. I don't sense a level one from Gryci, but she could be off world or somewhere else.

What do I do now? The community looks to be able to hold several hundred, assuming the shell we found inland and bear the bay community were all examples of Matriarchs. The subjects should be much smaller. Half at most. I rise over the community to get a better look. I am facing down slope of the shelf. Further down is a larger community. This is just the edge. A beacon really. Probably no one does live here. Why could I not sense the algae. Cold! It is nearly freezing down this far. Of course, cold lowers the signature. I scan again, this time expanding the lower colors. Interesting. I did not know that was possible. Ah, now the algae shows up. I could wait until someone comes to clean it or I can descend to the larger community.

The main clusters are actually growing sideways on the shelf, if I orient myself to gravity. I find the largest structure. This is usually where the Matriarch is found in our own communities. At least it should be a meeting hall or something. I do finally sense people inside. The structures

are complex, but everything appears to be open to the outside through large operculums spaced at regular distances on the downward sides. I scan inside and find mechanisms that can close these in an emergency. The structure itself seems to have been made from the cliff itself. That took a lot of advanced planning.

The largest structure shows no light on the outside. I shift my entire bubble inside the structure to be blinded by intense light. I wait for my eyes to adjust and scan as fast as I can with my ability. I had seen no one in here before going in and I still don't see anyone now. I look around. There are racks and racks of algae hanging. It's a farm! Do they eat algae or do they eat what feeds on it?

Branching out from the large room are smaller rooms. I pick one at random and move through the tunnel to it. Inside the light is much less, but I am still able to see. Inside stalls are large slugs. Cows. These must be the water versions of our land creatures. Much larger here. They are slowly eating bales of algae. One in each stall. The waste goes down a sloping floor that empties at the back. Very efficient. The walls themselves appear to be living coral. Hence the light, just enough to keep the wall alive. Small snails and flatworms work the crevices.

They have transported an entire ecology down to this depth. This suggests that they once lived closer to the surface. We hunt them, but our small boats rarely leave sight of land. We fear them as well. Many stories have been told of ships being attacked only to wash up later with no one on board and bodies never found. The only ones we do get are small males. These usually die in the Guardian pits along with a few Guardians. Stupid males. Sorts out the stupid ones I guess. Though you would hope most of that happened at the crawly stage.

I continue to follow the tunnel. It runs level to the slope. I see other tunnels occasionally going up and down. My bubble can be made to assume a more Nauti shape. I won't stand out so much when I do finally find someone. I morph the shell to resemble a Nauti shell with my form in the fore. I make a smaller bubble to be attached there so I can use my arms to help in communication. I finally add coloration to the outside to resemble a shell. I use a simple design to be what I hope is a low level worker that won't be noticed at a distance.

I really know nothing of their culture. I barely am able to communicate in Ancient. Maybe I should go back. I can carve out a new community. Maybe an artists colony. Crab, people are coming down all corridors to my location. I don't want to be met this way. I shift outside.

And right into the arms of Guardians hidden in the framework. How did I miss them? Maybe my movement inside the farm alerted them. Certainly they would guard the farms. Down here with nothing else to eat

but decayed matter floating down from the surface this would be a huge lunch for someone. Even the algae would taste better than a dead slug.

There is no light. Maybe they don't see me. Of course they must have some way of working down here. What senses could they have? The psiotic glow is normal for a sentient of their size. No one is moving. I could shift to another world or somewhere else on this world. Still I wait to see what will happen.

Glow balls are uncovered. Quaint that they use such low tech. They are in a clear sphere around me. Eight of them. A large number for a single intruder, but the correct number for an honor guard. Is eight a sacred number in this culture?

One of the glow balls starts to flash. Night code. Crab. I haven't had to use that since I was an unseen sneaking around the studios at night trying to decide which one to serve. Of course we used star nauti as these were easier to obtain and hide if necessary. No doubt we got most of the code wrong.

Oh well. I am not hiding any longer. Time to do what I was meant to do.

I am Roo of the eighth level here to meet with the Matriarch.

Well met Roo of the eighth level. I am Captain Tyrinn of the Court Command. Please follow me. He has the ability. If they progress the same as I did, then this means level five and the skills of a Guardian. I do a psiotic scan of him and the others. They all appear to be level twos, if they are not hiding their abilities. No comments on my scanning.

We go to a totally different area than I was searching. A series of smaller structures up and to the left of where I was. Seeing as how their sewage system works this is not too surprising that the Matriarch would want to be uphill. There are no lights outside the structure but I can see the tunnel we are headed for by scanning. Level two, can mind show and scan. Down here those would be the most needed abilities. Do they chose the abilities they need or are they imposed on the willing recipients? The Captain had the same level as the others. All Captains in this group or is everyone here a level two. I don't dare scan the Matriarch's residence or hall. She must surely be higher than I am and might be offended.

I look back into my shell to see that the spheres are safe. My offering. Two of my arms are holding them in place. It would be better if I could have them free for communicating. I use some of my water I was saving to maintain the humidity to form a set of straps to hold them in place instead.

We enter a room with several larger Nauti present. The Captain goes to one side and slowly turns a glow ball brighter.

In Ancient he shows me, ~This is to make it more comfortable for

you. We rarely use light ourselves. As you might have concluded we use the second sight most of the time. Our own eyes are not as complex as yours and really are not that useful. Only the very young near the surface depend on them.~

~You made us, why not improve yourselves?~ It is interesting that I am doing much better with their language. Does being level eight have that effect? Will I be in pain also if I learn a new one?

~There was no need.~

Another asks, ~Was your trip interesting?~ Strange question.

~Too many fears from the past and possibilities for the future.~

~Then stay in the present.~

~There is nothing to fear here. Has anyone threatened you in any way?~

~No. There must be a reason why you have chosen to live so far below the surface. There was a time when you lived in the surface waters.~

~Things change. We adapted. We are an introverted species. Curious, but not wanting to take risks ourselves. That was why we created your species and others.~

~And not because there are predators you would rather not meet.~

~Not all experiments are successful.~

~You removed the threat of the land animals with the internal shells. Surely nothing in the water could be a threat.~

~May we have your name?~ Her glow is the strongest, brighter than mine. No one else could fake that, nor would the Matriarch allow another to be so strong. She also avoided the question.

~You already know my name. I was here before. It was you who set me on this path Matriarch.~ I make the Nauti salute towards her.

~Are you sure I am the Matriarch?~

~Yes.~

~If you were here before why do you wear a shell now?~ Another female.

I shift the two spheres to before the Matriarch.

I am becoming tired of being the only entertainment they have had in some time. ~Tell me which one you wish as a gift.~ They are the same size and made of the same material. Outwardly they appear nearly identical. At the molecular level the newer one has more information. Millions of years underground may have degraded the older one.

~A test! Let me try please!~ The smallest one in the room comes closer to the two spheres. Weaving her way among the others. A male a little more shy than the female holds back hiding just behind her.

~Two of our more advanced students. Please tell us which is the more

valuable to our culture.~ The two advance again to within touching distance, but neither does.

~One is older than the other.~

~But the other has more intricate engravings.~

~Is knowledge of the past more important or knowledge that is immediately useful?~ The Matriarch asks them.

~Studying the past can prevent the same mistake from occurring in the future."

~But a solution to an immediate threat can allow one time to study the past.~

~Then you perceive an immediate threat?~

~No. There could be though.~

This could go on for some time. I offer, ~What of the makers?~

Not so easy to determine. They have to find the proper place where the information is presented. I think I have made the matter worse when one responds.

~The younger one is from a minor Matriarch in the shallow bay clan.~

~The other one is also from a minor Matriarch from a shallow bay.~

Oh please, ~What of their names?~

~Are names important?~

~We use them over and over how would we even know who they really were?~

~It would seem that they are unable to determine which is the prize. Would any of the adults like to try?~ I really am here for entertainment. I am beginning to think that I will learn nothing of my purpose here.

A 'thn appears before me. Not unexpected if the Matriarch is level nine.

I give the Nauti greeting, ~Honored one, it is a pleasure to meet you.~

~You have met her before?~

~Only a relative. This is not the 'thn I met before. Her name was Br'thn.~

~You can tell the difference? Only the Matriarch can do that!~

~There are many differences. Br'thn would have greeted me and expected affection. The one before me has not, so she has not met me before. Each person has a distinct personality. So it with the 'thn as well.~

I turn to the 'thn, ~May I ask your name?~

~Only the Matriarch knows her name honored one. We all call it the Companion.~

~There is one more who knows her name. She does.~ I address her rather than the others, ~You have always known it. If you have not shared it, that is your right.~ I turn the to the Nauti, ~If neither of the spheres are important to you, then you may do as you wish with them. I just thought

that having the burial sphere of the first Matriarch would be important to you. It appears there is nothing to be gained by remaining. Please excuse my interruption.~

My name is Hk'thn. Everyone in the room retracts into their shells and displays the Nauti salute.

~Well met Hk'thn. It is a pleasure to know you. I am sorry that I cannot spend more time with you. Maybe we will meet again.~

I shift to the surface. I am in the middle of the sea. There is no one about. I am surprised at the amount of time that has passed. The sun is rising in the east. I pause to greet the sun.

It really is beautiful, isn't it. The Matriarch has risen behind me.

~I wondered when someone would wake up. When was the last time you were on the surface Matriarch?~

~You already know that Roo. Welcome. You may address me as Lyssi as you are my equal. You are not used to our culture and I apologize. It takes some getting used to. Life is so boring that when we get a visitor we savor it and try and stretch it for as long as possible. Many have become frustrated and left.~

~Except Healer. He could wait out a mountain growing.~

Lyssi shows amusement, ~True. He is a strange one even for a tall one.~

Hk'thn appears between us.

~Is this the first time you have referred to yourself in the first person?

~

Yes, how did you know?

~A good guess. I have limited experience with your species, but I am learning that people are not that different in spite of the varying forms we assume.~

~I have been waiting for so very long for her naming day. The sphere you found is mine. I am the first Matriarch. I have used many names and lived in many locations. I never thought that anyone would actually find it.~

~By chance only. We were trying to determine when the two worlds diverged and why. Who was the one buried with the sphere if it was obviously not you.~

~A friend of the time. The froth bubble happened about sixty five million years ago. On this world I won a great war and on the other it was Sauron who won. Unfortunately I was not well experienced with the abilities yet and could only save one world before Sauron became aware enough to prevent my activity.~

~The tall ones never mentioned this fact.~

~Sauron may not have told them. You see on one world I was given

Hk'thn and on the other world Sauron was given Br'thn. The one without a 'thn supporter had little chance. It is possible that he did not think it even necessary to mention it.~

~A grain of sand.~

~You know of Sauron?~

~I am guessing that he is the one mentioned in a Holy story at a shrine I was at. I have not actually seen the story yet.~

~Will you build a similar shrine with my story when I am gone?~

~From what I have been able to guess they are similar. On their world Sauron is responsible for making the tall ones. On this world you are responsible for making my kind.~

~The processes used were different. Sauron was not very technically inclined. He depended too much on natural variation and heavy selection. The cultures that finally developed are quite different as well.~

~Theirs is a mess. Did Healer tell you there are or were eight billion of them?~

~So it has happened. When you saw me on his world we were discussing the coming plague.~

~I thought you were discussing me.~

~I was worried that they would not be able to train you before the plague happened.~

~They were not. I spent seven years with One Mind while the plague raged around me unknown to me. One Mind did not seem concerned enough to inform me.~

Suddenly she became furious, displaying anger with rapid flashing and arm movements.

~That is why you hide in the depths. It is not some creature you fear but One Mind. I noticed the psiotic shield around your community as well.~

~One Mind is everywhere. It is only in the depths that we are safe from the meddling influences. We still need food to survive. At least the others do. The shield stops the nasty one from using our food against us. You have seen what it is capable of, eight billion people are gone.~

~Not quite all, but they were doomed anyway. Even without One Mind something would have happened, probably would have poisoned themselves with their pollution. What I want to know why you created us? We are within reach of One Mind you hate so much.~

~The greatest concentration of One Mind's power is in the interior of the land surface. The sea moves too much to maintain a good network. We took no chances with our own culture as we have been a target in the past, but we still needed to know what was happening on the land. I could make fly overs from time to time and see the larger things, but there was

not enough time to watch every part of the world all the time.

With no war did you wonder why there were so many Guardians and why scientists kept trying to study inland in your community? They could have gone seaward instead or even skyward.~

~Your young males prevented seaward. The borers prevented skyward.~

~You were designed to seek a land route. We even gave you the technology to make the shaders. We were lucky that the borers evolved. It would not have been good if you had seen me or a few others I have raised to a level high enough to do the searching.~

~You missed a few. Not to mention all the small ones.~

~Only in the extreme interior. The shells they left did not matter much. Only someone with a high enough ability or someone who knew exactly where to look would find them. The small ones are not a threat to anyone.~ Except if there are enough of them.

I never noticed them that much, but now I notice their absence. It is so quiet.

~What about all the flying things? Not insects, the ones sort of like the tall ones. They have internal shells.~

~At first we let them alone. Soon however we realized that One Mind was using them to spy on us. It would appear that any non sentient can be used, IF they associate with the plant network.~ I think they are paranoid.

~Then what about the ones who swam in the sea and in the streams.~

~They taste good.~ True.

~All of them? Is that even possible?~

~They have nearly done it on the tall one's world and there it has only taken them a few hundred years. We had millions.~

~There are or were eight billion of them.~

~There were a lot more of us at one point too. Not eight billion, but we live in the sea, so it was logical that we would harvest from the sea.~

~And the ones up streams?~

~We got desperate. Please understand, we did not start out to make such a mess. We really thought we were doing the correct actions. Only looking back can one see where we kept choosing the wrong path. In thirty million years you will be having this same conversation.~

I keep seeing Pushy Paws words, 'Anyone can become evil and chose the wrong path.' Their own world was once run by someone who probably thought they were doing the correct actions as well. Now, there are new ones running their world and they are trying to do the correct actions.

~Oh crab! You are leaving me in control of the entire world! Why me? Why are you doing this now? I can't do anything like that. Are you

crazy? Why are you leaving?~

~We have been waiting for you for a very long time. We were very worried it would not happen. If I died before Hk'thn reached sentience and there was no one else to care for her, then she would die as well. The community you saw below is all that is left of us. The Nauti your Guardians captured a few moons ago was our last young male. He was stupid and thought if he fought them we could survive longer.~

~Why didn't you just make a successor? I can give others abilities.~

~That only works up to one level below what you are. I can only raise someone to level eight. That is not enough to take care of a 'thn.~

~Then how did I achieve level eight? Weren't you the one who did it?

~

~No Roo.~

~The tall ones did it then.~ Healer must have been the one.

~It was entirely you. Just as I was not helped to reach level eight. It happens very rarely. You are the first one in millions of years to reach even level five. We were not even sure it would happen with your kind.~

~Because you made us and something might have been missed.~

~We did not make your kind Roo from nothing. That is a myth we helped spread to explain how you came to be. We did spend a lot of time training you however. Your genes are a combination of our own and the common octopus. Not even hard to do really. In another few years the tall ones would have been able to do the same.~

~And you gave us technology help.~

~That too.~

~Why me then? How could I have survived all the mistakes I made and then only recently manifest the abilities? And why were people around me affected?~

~Really? How many? That should not have happened.~

~Sufi is a level three, Mandi is level five at least. Maybe more now. I don't know what level Sussi is. I left her at level two. Paff, Sarra and Gryci are all level ones. Oh, and of course the one tall one I gave the gift to by accident.~

~What level were you at the time?~

~Mandhi, Sussi and I all were given the gift at the same time. We continued to rise at the same time. That is why I suspect they are also level eights by now."

~Scan and see if you can find them. I can only find you at level eight. There are two level fives and a few at lower levels. Could they be off world? I had assumed you made these yourself.~

~Only the one that I am aware of and he is off world.~

~Interesting. We have been watching you for some time.~ I scan

below. She keeps saying we. I sense no one below us with even a level one reading.

~You wouldn't be able to find them, if they were there. The community is shielded. Surely you noticed when trying to find us?~

~Yes. I thought something was wrong.~ More hiding from the One Mind.

~We first noticed you when we were given reports of a crawly who was helping others hide from selection.~

~What? I don't remember that. What did I do?~

~You were making tubes out of dried mud. You hid thirty or more in tubes from the shore to the studio. Well hidden too. The only problem was that crabs also liked them.~

~That's why I am so afraid of them.~

~You nearly were caught once and hid in a tube with a hungry crab. It nearly got you. A tough choice between being eaten outside the tube and being eaten inside the tube.~

~What happened?~

~You are here. Something worked out. I was not there.~ A Nauti her size floating in the air would have been noticed and definitely attacked.

~Is that all?~

~Roo, I could fill the year with stories.~ Great. I think I know who was watching me all this time now. Especially in the forest.

It is time. Hk'thn appears. I hadn't realized she had left.

~Time for what?~ I am ready to make another mud tube.

~We have a problem Hk'thn. Since Bajja left us we do not have enough people to form the star pattern.~

Roo can do it. No others needed.

~Do what?~

~Hk'thn, Roo is only a level eight. Even I cannot do this alone. Very few can. Nor do I remember how to get there. Don't forget the last time was sixty five million years ago. Even my memories are not that good.~

I know how and Roo will take us. All 'thn know. Come, we go now.

She turns to me. How did I know she is looking at me? ***We need to go to the vortex point first. I will take us there now.***

We are back on the mesa. ~This is the vortex position? The tall ones have a sacred place in this same position on their world.~ I recognize the high cliffs above the plain below.

~The vortex will be the same on all the froth worlds.~

~Sort of like that scar the tall ones all have on them in the same position.~

~What?~

~Not important. Where are we going?~

~To the Galactic Regional Center.~

~THE WHAT?~ I have dumped my entire ink load.

Center

Galactic Center? How does one travel that far? It was scary enough floating above worlds and between worlds, but at least I could still get home easily if necessary.

~Roo, we need your attention for this. We don't want to end up in the middle of a star.~

~That can happen?~

~Not likely, but we are going to be traveling a very long distance. The Galactic Center is partitioned according to the froth, just as this world is. It gets complicated because most of the froth edges are closer than the center. They take steps to insure you don't meet yourself from another world.~

~Even if you are aware of them?~

~The strange thing is, is that I know of no instance where anyone has actually met themselves. Something always seems to happen. In most cases one has died of some accident. In the remaining cases they are simply in different places.~

~I know of one case. The local leader of the Bay community here was a normal person on a froth world. They got along great, not surprisingly.~

~You are distracting me from our mission. Form a shield around us. I will do the same. We can't guarantee air or water on the other side. When you are ready my love.~ My love? She is her offspring of a sorts. We do not love our offspring. We love each other. People who have earned our respect and trust.

I will show you the coordinates in your thoughts. When you are ready take us there.

Why is she so loud? Whoa, that is far. Far beyond what I can scan and see in advance.

~I am going to make a bubble first.~ I will make a small one in case it is without air.

~Wait! That can't possibly work over that distance.~

Please Lyssi, let her try. This is important. Important for what? What does she know?

I am hesitant now, but with no further discussion I concentrate and make a small bubble. This is no sucking in of air, so it is safe from that problem. I taste the air. Nothing obviously poisonous. I look through and see a large empty room. If I did not know how far the coordinates were in n space I would have thought it was near by.

~Seems safe enough.~ I enlarge the bubble to an operculum large enough for even Lyssi to enter.

~Amazing. Apparently I have not been watching you close enough.~
She floats over to the interface and sticks a tentacle in and withdraws it.
~It really is the center. The walls on the other side are made of 'thn shield material.~ What's that? I scan the walls. Crab, another new substance. I will have to remember this one. That thin and able to keep the air in over such a large surface. That would have been useful when I made my deep sea bubble. I experiment making a small bubble out of the material. Hk'thn is watching me.

We may enter. Others are waiting. They are? I did not see anyone inside the space.

She goes in first followed by Lyssi and then me. I close the operculum once we are all there. I immediately scan all around me. It is huge. The complex is nearly the size of our entire world. There are countless chambers of varying sizes and composition. Each seems to match the needs of varying species. I adjust my vision to see other dimensional configurations and see the complex keeps going. This is a nine dimensional complex. That is interesting. This would be a good place to hide. I could spend a life time learning the new cultures and sentients here. Most appear to be at the higher levels, but not all. Sometimes I see groups with lower level sentients surrounding them. Classes? Here?

~Roo, please keep your awareness here.~

~I'm sorry. It is difficult for me. I am very curious.~

~This is a very special day for Hk'thn. We need to keep our awareness on her and only her.~

~I understand. I will try.~ I would be a nice snack for Lyssi should she choose to get angry with me. All my abilities would only provide a minimum of entertainment during the short chase and catch.

We go through an operculum. I look around at all the different forms.

~Are these all friends of Hk'thn's?~

~Some are, some are simply offering respect. Not all 'thn succeed in reaching sentience. Ah, here is her other parent. I would like to introduce you.~ Other parent? The 'thn with whom Lyssi mated?

This is my 'thn parent. Her name is Kr'thn.

I do a Nauti bow towards her and she dips briefly.

So you are Roo. There is much excitement surrounding you dear.
She then leaves.

~Strange. Why isn't she staying?~

~She will return before the ceremony. Stay in the background Roo. I am deeply appreciative of your bringing us here Roo, but this is her day not ours.~

~I am not trying to gain attention. I am new here. Maybe if I go visit other areas and leave the two of you alone, then it will be better?~

~That is not permissible. It is very important that you be present. Roo, it was you who sparked her sentience. That is the highest honor a fluidic life form can hope to attain. No one will acknowledge you openly because you are not a parent, but it will follow you the rest of your life in many strange and wonderful ways. I have only know two others who are honored in this way and you also know both of them. Interesting isn't it?~

~Is it a virus then?~ Since level four I have been scanning my own form to see if I can detect anything.

~Who can say. Certainly nothing harmful. Never heard of one that can cross such a large species barrier. Come, I will take you to a wonderful place for something to eat before the ceremony. Hk'thn needs to spend time with Kr'thn before then.~

We float down corridors. I can't help but notice all the different life forms.

~Don't scan anyone without permission Roo. Especially not here.~

~A tall one taught me well Lyssi. I am very curious though. I want to know how each is adapted to their life situation.~

~There will be time later. We are almost there.~

~Everyone here is level eight or above, why would they need food servers?~

~For the fun of it. Even noticing what level one is, is considered rude. Not as bad as scanning, but almost.~

~Should we turn off our abilities then?~

~You are allowed to scan anything not living. I am sure you noticed the 'thn shield material and how useful that could be back home. See that Trennfya over there? Notice the device attached in front? You can scan that, but not the Trennfya itself.~

~What gender is it?~

~Not important. Here we are. Let me do the showing.~

~You remember all this from sixty five million years ago?~

~No, a tall one reminded me. If you really like something bring it back with you and learn how to duplicate it. You will eventually forget anyway, but at least you will have it longer.~

~Or get tired of it.~

~True. Here try this.~ She hands me a proper sized eating cup. I lower myself to the floor so that I cannot be observed from below and place the cup in the proper position. I then taste contents. Strange. Out of politeness I try some. Inside my mouth the flavor explodes.

~That is strange. Tasting something that intense inside my mouth. Have you ever tried the raw swimming things with root spice that the tall ones eat?~

~Yes. You are right, that is very good. Too spicy for me, but good.

Remember we are not used to the air land based materials.~ Her skin changes color at each bite of the food.

~What creature is this anyway?~

~Plants only. Never know what the next sentient will be, so only non sentient plant material is brought here as a duplicate. Nothing actually alive here but sentients with abilities.~

~They are cautious.~

~You become conditioned fast enough. Roo, I need to tell you something.~ I am looking at her with full awareness. ~Roo, I am not returning to our world.~

~I guessed as much. Sixty five million years is a long time to be Matriarch.~

~I was not always Matriarch. I let others run things for times when I needed a rest. It allowed me to keep a careful watch on the land areas.~

~I notice that star nauti and other life forms we have are not on the tall ones world. Did Sauron remove them?~

~Did not exist at the time. Sixty five million years is enough time for a lot of life forms to evolve. Remember an asteroid also hit their world and not ours.~

~Right. It would appear that our world is much better off than theirs.~

~Is it? Soon there will be none of my kind. The remaining people are sterile. If your people do not change they will soon follow us. The world is changing and those who do not change will not adapt and will cease to exist.~

~That seems simplistic. Though the pollution from the tall ones world is certainly a problem. I will remove it before any more damage can be done.~

~Like we removed the internal shelled ones? That will not solve your problem. They have seen what others can do. They will want the same capabilities. Do you think your Teachers are stupid? They will soon be able to do the same. Besides, that is not the change I am referring to.~

~Then what? A plague like the tall ones, or an asteroid for our world? Or maybe another froth collapse like the empty world?~

~You understand what happened there now.~

~I had help.~

~Climate change is coming.~

~Hotter or colder? Certainly in all the time you have been alive there have been many climate changes. We survived them before.~

~No we survived them. You are a new species.~

~Not entirely. The ones closest to us on the tall ones world still remember the Nauti salute and the single word 'forgotten'.~

~Really? How can that be? The split was so long ago. How could any

culture remember? Unless . . . ~

~Unless what?~

~Someone has been interfering. Someone has been visiting their world from ours. Tell me, did this person look like me or you.~

~More like me. Clearly only possible to live in water. Would not survive on land for very long.~

~Sounds like an ancestor of yours. With land access impossible because of superior competition they stayed in the water. Could also be drift.~

~Drift?~

~After a froth split the two worlds do not always diverge quickly. I thought with the war going in different directions there would have been enough change. Were the tall ones aware of this species?"

The sentience ceremony is starting for Hk'thn.

~They were not aware until Sufi, Gryci and I made contact by accident. I think one of them was suspicious that the species might be sentient though. She was a level one, but showed beautifully having been partially trained by Gryci.~

~I will have to think about this. I will shift us directly to where Hk'thn and the others are gathered.~ Immediately we are in a new room. There are hundreds of forms present. Lyssi leaves me to take her place with Hk'thn.

~Roo, over here.~ I see another person, only who are they? Then I notice the tattoo, Silver.

~Do you really like our form?~

~Gathers less notice here. I am not unknown and if there are more of your form here, you will be able to hide more easily as well.~

~Thank you for being here.~ Then I see three others, then another four. They all wave an arm. Not something we do. They are all tall ones in our our form. ~Interesting. Who are they?~

~They all wear tattoos as expected. Healer and Pushy Paws you know. The others are part of the group that I have been with from the beginning.~ Twenty five million years. Will anyone still be with me for even one? Finally I see Lily and Long Tail. They are at least in their normal forms. Lily looks different. I go over to them.

~Lily what happened?~

~I watched so many die Roo. So many die. If I had not tried to get into the compound that day and made friends with you and Long Tail, I would have been one of them.~

~On my world chance survival is common to all of us. We all have long stories. If logic ruled none of us should have survived, least of all me. You are surrounded by people who care. Be happy.~

~I am. Thank you Roo~ She comes up to me and covers my mantle with her arms and upper form. She then presses her oral pore against me and makes a sound. Is she trying to eat me? She withdraws to Long Tail who rasps the side of her oral arm. Must be a sign of affection. On the other arm, considering what Long Tail eats, it might not be.

Shhh.

My attention is drawn back to the center of the room. Hk'thn and another larger 'thn are floating about a tall one's high. I assume that is Kr'thn again. Everyone else is against the wall. Too many 'thn about to be sure.

Lyssi, please come forward. She slowly floats towards the center. Kr'thn is not as bright in my thoughts.

Today our offspring is named. Her name is Hk'thn.

A glow envelopes Hk'thn and she becomes twice as large. Interesting process. Not a growing, something else entirely. Pushy Paws is looking at me. It is not polite to scan. Crab.

Let us rejoice.

More 'thn enter the room. Lots of them. Quickly there are more 'thn than other sentients. They whorl around Hk'thn and Kr'thn in a kind of dance. I want so much to understand them, but with Pushy Paws present I don't dare be impolite. The others might forgive me for my newness to the abilities, but I know she knows I know better. I think.

You may scan me if you wish. I don't know who showed that, but suddenly all the others stop moving and just as suddenly disappear. Only Silver remains with me.

Be careful Roo, this 'thn is tricky.

I turn to see the largest 'thn I have seen so far. Nearly an arm in diameter. Crab.

This is Ah'thn, sector leader and a level twelve, a Matriarch as you understand. She has the ability and authority to call for the destruction of our worlds, if necessary. Crab. Silver knows this one. He is still alive, but then he is tricky as well.

You are of the level to mate little one. Mate with me. They can demand this of a sentient?

No one has mated a level twelve before Roo. Silver comments. So, this is an unusual request. Something they are not telling me. Ah'thn draws closer to Silver as if to threaten him, but he completely ignores her. She bobs up and down almost imperceptibly. Anger?

How does the mating process work? I ask him. She seems determined. Best to know what is expected.

First you scan your mate, then you make a new 'thn based on the pattern you see. It is thought that some of your personality invariably

gets mixed it. That is why both are considered parents. A level twelve is a hundred times more complex than a normally mated level ten.

Why don't they just mate among their own kind? Surely they have to ability to copy themselves.

That is forbidden. I also don't think it is possible. Something is missing in their makeup. It is thought that it was set up this way to prevent them from taking over the universe. All the 'thn are considered female for this reason.

Even though they don't 'make' the offspring, but only provide the pattern. Are they symbiotic or parasite?

Good question. But he does not answer it.

My curiosity is strong. I look into Ah'thn slowly. Just a peek. I am drawn in further and further until I feel Silver hand signal me, ~Look, but don't touch.~ I back out in response. Passive, not active. I empty my own mind and let myself float in Ah'thn's thoughts and presence. She has visited many worlds and times. There are countless lifetimes worth of information stored in Her memory. Then I see and understand. I back out as slowly this time as if taking a wrong turn.

That's why they are so afraid of level thirteen. It is a trap, not a limit. I keep this thought very deep so as not to alert Ah'thn. At least I hope I haven't.

Instead I offer, I am afraid you are too strong for me to mate with you Ah'thn. I am honored by your request. It would be better for me to find someone closer to my own level.

I thought you might be the chosen one. Again with the chosen one. Who or what is this all about? And now 'thn are looking as well? Why would they even care about cultures so far below them?

The others have returned while I was concentrating.

Lyssi approaches me.

~Where is Hk'thn?~ I expected the two of them together.

~Now that she is named she is in charge of her own life and I am permanently a level nine. She goes where she wants.~

~Br'thn still stays with the tall ones.~

~Because she chooses. If Hk'thn comes back she will be welcome.

Assuming she can find me of course.~

~Why would she not find you?~

~I too am curious. Free from my obligations I will travel and see the galaxy.~

~I am envious.~

~I was not sure at first, now I am. I have a gift for you. Unwrap it carefully.~ The Nauti sphere appears before me.

~You just dimension shifted that from our world?!~

~Of course not. I am not able to shifting as you do. What do you think we use our empty chambers for?~ I scan her chambers and see they are loaded with all kinds of strange things. Did she get them here? Then she is gone. I hope I did not offend her. Crab, now I am the Matriarch. Crab. I just wanted a nice quiet life in a studio working with clay.

The others are watching. I hate being the center of attention. Well I know what the sphere is. She wanted me to have it for some reason. I will worry about it later. Why would Ah'thn be so interested in me? I was not able to mate with her. I have failed her test. At least I hope she thinks that.

~Silver, I was just thinking. Do you believe in the validity of the levels?~

He does not answer, but shows that crescent shape.

Healer asks me, ~I don't understand. What are you showing?~

I am about to answer when Silver intercedes, ~Let her unwrap her present.~ We do not normally wrap gifts. I am trying to understand.

~There is no cover.~ Then I think I understand. ~This is another one of those puzzles isn't it? Like the pot that She Who Sees Far made for me. That is why Pushy Paws had me learn the secret.~ I don't wait for an answer. I look into the sphere. I see it without thinking and I am right. It was if I always knew. So obvious. Why didn't I see this before? Did Lyssi switch spheres on me. No, I was just distracted.

~I don't think we are going to like what is in this.~

~It is okay Roo. Unwrap it.~

~It all makes sense now. Resonance at the highest level. Quite beautiful.~

~Yes.~

~What are they showing about?~ Someone shows.

~I think it best to unwrap this someplace with, ah, more ah, space.~

~That would be a good idea. I think Ah'thn should come with us. She has been curious about us for some time. I would hate to disappoint her.~

~I have limited range as a level eight. I might not be able to get far enough away.~

I float the pearl sphere to me to prepare.

~Just do the best you can Roo. I am sure it will be enough.~ Ah'thn does that bobbing thing again. I really don't want to have her ink on me. Is Silver getting me into more trouble by insisting She come along. She is not needed really.

I shift us outside the complex into the airless space, about the distance a level eight could achieve. The two of us shield instantly. Ah'thn does not need to. I see that Silver is easily able to take care of his needs. I am not sure why I am able. Must be instinctual. This is one location where

our method of communication is definitely superior. Sound does not transfer in a vacuum.

~It may take a couple of attempts to get far enough away from the complex.~

I should move us. Anxious isn't She? Does She know or just suspect. I keep my thoughts deep so She will not see them. I wait, but we remain here. She either does not know what I had intended or she is testing me.

I explain, ~Where we are going has no air, so I thought it best to start under similar conditions.~ I make a new bubble. Invisible out here but for the slightest shimmer only seen from the edge of our vision.

~Please enter first Roo.~ Silver shows with a sign of respect.

I pass into the operculum. The edge partially obscures Ah'thn who is hesitating. Silver comes through like this is his normal way of traveling. We wait. She can see both of us, but still does not go through the opening. What She cannot see is what we now see on the opposite side of the opening.

I float the Nauti sphere in front of me and pretend to concentrate on it. I already know its secret and know that this is not really necessary any longer. I could flip it with a single thought. I will never be able to get the image of that beauty out of my memory.

~What is the one thing that the 'thn have been looking for since the beginning of creation?~

Silver plays the game well, ~All beings seek freedom from fear. As no one is stronger than they are, what is there to fear? Did you know that no one has ever killed a level twelve 'thn? Next, all beings seek happiness. What could a be a more happy existence than to never have to worry about possessions, status, or any other form of stress?~

~But there is one more thing that all beings seek. Granted some are able to deny this aspect as we have, but as a species, all must acquiesce to survive.~

~That would mean that 'thn are capable of dying too, even if a soft one cannot do it. Scary thought.~ That must have pulled the arm. Ah'thn comes through. I immediately close the operculum. Ah'thn goes into distress. Her psiotic signature fluctuates wildly.

~Just as I thought. Not as scary now is She?~ My theory is confirmed. I know what this all means now.

~I believe you are right. So, what is the gift?~ He looks over my mantle at the sphere. I am honored.

~I think you already know the answer Silver. Ah'thn must know as well. She thought I might be the chosen one.~ I turn to Her. She has quieted down, but keeps quiet.

I am the chosen one Ah'thn, so show me, where are we now?

~A level eight has taken us outside the ah, galaxy. Imagine that. Ah'thn has been trying to get me to perform that trick for some time. Of course I could not bubble before you showed us how.~ Right. I don't believe that either. Though I have no doubt he kept it from the others.

~She is beautiful, the universe that is.~ I know where we are. Why is he making me reveal this fact? To further prove I am the chosen one?

~Interesting that this puzzle requires a twist at the thirteenth dimension. What is it about thirteen that obsesses them so much?~ Crab, I forgot about the sphere. The number thirteen reminds me. While staring at Ah'thn I do the twist. She does not react.

A black sphere appears where the white Nauti sphere was. Hard to see out here with normal sight. The psiotic presence is unmistakable though. Very much alive too. How it managed to remain in stasis that long is a remarkable thing.

~A black sphere. I wondered where they hid that thing. Now what could He be. Oops, I have just turned over the snails.~ He knows our phrases quite well and enjoys the game as well.

~I want to know how Lyssi knew.~

~A secret kept for a long time no doubt.~

~Long before our world came to be.~ Ah'thn moves in a sort of swaying motion now.

~Cut off from the others She will not live long.~

~Oh, why not? There is plenty of psiotic power to draw upon. I am having no trouble.~

~Neither am I. Ah'thn, why are you so distressed?~

No answer.

~I know, what if, and this is a really crazy idea, but what if she needs to be attached to the other 'thn to survive?~

~But she is never physically attached. We see them as separate beings. They even are named when they become independent in the sentient sense.~

~But as we know, there are more than three dimensions. In fact, this may be a surprise, there are more than thirteen.~

~You don't show! Amazing.~ Ah'thn is glowing now. The black sphere is motionless.

~Time to wake up our little one don't you think?~

~There is only one thing that could do that? We need a female 'thn.~

~We have one nearby.~

~He may not be close enough. I think he needs to be in contact.~

I move the black sphere to touch Ah'thn. She moves away. I hold her and force the black sphere to make contact.

~You are strong Roo. Imagine a level eight able to hold a level twelve

'thn against her will. And look, nothing happened on contact. Are you sure this will work?~

~This is fun. I have to admit. Power could become very addicting.~

~We need to prove to Ah'thn we are knowledgeable.~

~True. What do you think it would take to resonate a 'thn?~

~Judging from their obsession with level thirteen, it would take at least that.~

~I suspect more. Much more. After all thirteen was needed for the simple task of removing Him from stasis. Certainly more would be needed to resonate the core, the essence of someone as powerful as a level twelve 'thn.~

~Maybe a level thirteen to the thirteenth power. That would be something. Too bad we poor soft ones are limited to level nine.~

~Who told you that?~

~Why a 'thn of course. They also said, if you reach a certain understanding that the froth is caused by a temporary transverse of level thirteen by a soft one mating with a 'thn.~

~Really. That seems to be inconsistent with my understanding. If true we have no chance. No point in trying really. Out here we would froth the entire universe.~

~Probably should not try then. I guess we should leave the sphere here and go home. How long do you think it will take?~

~Well, you are a level nine, but then you have mastered time. Come to think of it, so have I. It will only seem a long time for us.~

~Nearly twenty five million years. One of our initial group tried it.~

~I have a question.~

~And that is?~

~Which Ah'thn is this? The one from my time period or the one from yours? Could make a difference.~

~Very perceptive of you Roo. You noticed that this one was not happy about me being around. The one from your time period would not be worried about a small primitive civilization at the edge of an unimportant galaxy. Ar'thn is our sector Matriarch and she did not come to investigate us. The Ah'thn I know was very worried once Br'thn and many others reached sentience in record time with my species. She has been following me for a very long time. Thought I lost Her when I joined the Magmotics and we shifted our world."

~The entire planet? So that is what set Her on you. I wondered. This must be the Ah'thn from your time period. They obviously know how to follow the time line too to find you here.~ I reach out and touch the black sphere. It comes alive and starts to move.

~Gee, I did not know you were a 'thn Roo.~

~Neither did I. Maybe it just takes a female touch and not specifically a 'thn.~ Ah'thn is nearly glowing blue now. She will burst soon.

~We must race to succeed. We are too far away for this little one to do more than get excited.~

I concentrate and shift us into a different dimension, one outside our space and time. Before us, instead of our universe is a huge structure. It looks like a large water fungus growing on the inside of a pot. Fuzzy and white. It is the true image of the 'THN. Interesting that the stars are invisible in this dimension. Is the 'THN the real structure behind the universe? Sort of like a centrosome in a huge cell.

~Now that is a 'THN. Welcome to the club Roo.~ I must have blanked again.

~Are there many members?~

~Not many. Let me see, there is myself of course.~ Not hiding well are we Silver.

~Of course.~ I play the slug role.

~And now there is you.~ Thump, thump de thump. Old slime.

~Does this mean we have to mate?~ I tease him.

~I think it might be more important that we get Ah'thn back before she explodes. What do you think we should do with the black 'thn?~

~Let him go and let him do what is natural.~

I release my hold on him and he is quickly out of sight, accelerating rapidly. A flash of light signifies he has crossed the light barrier? Whatever that means in this dimension. Crude but effective in the end. Could also be that space and time are different here.

~You may go as well Ah'thn, if you wish.~

I will not be able to catch up. I was dead the moment you separated us. Why did you torture me just to let the mating take place anyway? You could have let the mating occur at the center. Any live 'thn could act as the conduit.

~Wrong time Ah'thn.~ Why doesn't Ah'thn know when we are? Silver does the crescent shape when I show this. He knows. She is very weak and stupid here.

That was a heavy burden for Lyssi to carry for so long.

And to mate with a pseudopod knowing that.

You did.

That was before I knew. They stopped asking me to mate, though I was technically available again after Pr'thn reached sentience. Some said a soft one never mates twice. There are so many available they might prefer variability to more of the same.

SHE knew you knew then?

SHE suspected. I went along with the others till the right time.

How did you find me?

Why do you think it took me twenty five million years?

Do your friends suspect?

They are suspicious, but allow me some freedom. I was alone most of the time. Despite what Lyssi thinks, the One Minds are actually quite helpful. They talk a lot, if you have the patience to wait for the answers.

~It is happening!~ The pattern changes. It is condensing and will soon disappear from our senses.

~Fast little 'thn isn't He?~ He is at that. Ah'thn has gone back to a dull red glow in the visible light. She has given up.

~What did it mean then for a 'thn to become sentient?~

~You have more than one set of ganglia and yet still think as one. Yet, have you noticed you can do some tasks without thinking about it. Your arms seem to know what to do without awareness. I suspect they worked the same way at a much more complex level.~

~Each of the smaller 'thn would need to be able to work independently at some level. Why then did it take a soft one for them to be sentient?~

~They need to witness a certain level of experience. Some cultures are better able to give the exact experience they need. Hk'thn did not become sentient until you arrived with all your profound experiences and ideas. They don't ask for permission to see thoughts by the way. Lyssi's culture was probably chosen to hide Him because it was so boringly unchanging. When Lyssi saw Hk'thn become sentient she knew you were the one. Of course doing the bubble to the center did tend to confirm her suspicions."

~Was I used or did I have choices?~

~Who knows. Why do you think the male was sentient so quickly?~

~Like all males, He had only one thing on his mind. Looks like it is over until the gametophyte sporulates.~ I forget Silver is or was a male.

~Best we get back. Want me to scrub the shell?~ He does not seem to be offended at least.

~It would help me to know you are capable as well. In case I get into trouble later.~

~You and trouble?~ I show amusement as does he. I can't imagine more trouble than witnessing the end of the universe and the beginning of the next. That should be any moment and I don't think we should be here when it happens. There are a lot of dimensions. No way to know if it will be the same next time. We might not be able to get back. I am not willing to wait a billion years for a sentient to show with again.

Silver does a shift first to get us back into our own dimension and then a bubble that the three of us pass through. Ah'thn is like a fly on a thread of spider silk. I remember having fun with those as an unseen. Not

easy in the case of flies. She is still alive despite her predictions. Maybe it takes time.

We are outside the complex. Back in our own time I can sense 'thn and soft ones as if nothing has happened. In a sense nothing has. Something will a long time from now however. A very long time from now. I hope Lyssi has found a good world to play in. A nice world with warm shallow gray water teeming with life just like when she was hatched.

Before we can get back into the complex though, 'thn appear. They surround us by the hundreds. It reaches a point where the stars can only be seen through them. Interesting response to our return.

Leave now. Ah'thn?

I shift us outside the sphere they have made around us. From the outside we look back. The sphere closes. There is a tremendous amount of light coming from the center. In silence, a wave of force radiates outward from their sphere. It passes through us with only a small sensation.

~We are at the epicenter. Further out it will be more impressive. Look at the center.~ I turn and see it shaking. A few bubbles explode. The occupants quickly reassemble the blown out portions.

~What happens when it reaches a world?~

~You didn't think the froth was caused by one of us touching level thirteen did you?~

~I don't understand. It is not every day that someone mates the 'THN, yet the froth has happened many times.~

~Think of it as pruning a tree.~

~Apoptosis.~

~Precisely. Every organism has to have a means to correct mistakes that creep in.~

~Or damage to itself. What happened to all of the offspring that Ah'thn started?~

~They also will cease to exist. As will any soft ones attached to those not yet sentient.~

~A harsh method.~

~Better to lose an arm than die, even if the hand was not at fault.~

~Why the froth?~

~You saw how big the 'THN is. A correction across many dimensions would have an effect.~

~Why would a 'pruning' result in a duplication of a world?~

~More like a sector for a level twelve. Think of it as an after shock when the power void collapses on itself. Don't worry, the 'thn will come back quickly to the affected areas. I believe the others are waiting."

~Wait, we are in this sector. That means~
~Yes. Exciting isn't it?~

Epilog

Still dark I wait on the wet sand facing east. The sun will rise over water at this location. Even though I was hatched on the west coast I do like the great the sun with water before me.

I meditate on all that has happened before and after my becoming Matriarch. So much. Hard to believe it is only one life.

The glow begins. There are clouds in the sky that glow brighter and brighter red and then orange. The first sliver of the sun itself shows and I assume the Nauti position of respect. The Nauti are no more. After returning from the center we tried to find them to tell them of that their sacrifice was not in vain, but they were already gone. No traces could be found. After erasing so many it was poetic.

I hold position until the entire Holy Sphere is above the horizon, then turn to follow the path back to the others.

Once in the coastal forest I find the telltales. Interesting device. We can see it once we reach a certain level, but it repels those who can't see them. Keeps out the curious that would only disturb our work. Nice to have such a comfortable place to hide.

Another meeting. Had I known that a Matriarch had to attend so many meetings I would have stayed in the forest. All of our froth worlds are called Earth. Crazy name I know, but the outsiders insisted on a consistent name even though we have more than fifteen sentient worlds in our froth association so far. Thousands to go. Nearly every world seems to have a sentient, even Pink has a one. They live far from the coast, which is why we did not see them at first. Still low tech and only level one psiotics. We leave them alone. They will be invited to join us when they are ready. Of course there are some who refuse to join.

A storm will be upon us shortly. The rain will feel good. I sign amusement. The tall ones will not like the rain. They are the one species who still insist on wearing cloth, even though everyone at the conference can see through it. They are so horribly ugly, maybe this is really for our benefit after all.

Two tall ones act as Guardians at the operculum. Their uniforms are ceremonial only and would not stop the smallest dart or ceramic blade. Level threes at least. That is enough to keep out anyone thinking of creating trouble. We do not show our abilities to non gifted if we can avoid it. There are some who, not knowing this, would make an attempt to learn more of this meeting.

One shows to me, ~All present to the Matriarch.~ One winks at me. I am learning their subtle language. I recognize him as the one I gifted on

his world.

How are you doing my most loyal one?

He opens his thoughts to me, *Thanks for the visit to Green. I think I may fall in love with a local. She makes the best spicy fish in the froth.*

If it is better than Cook's raw tuna I will schedule a visit as soon as possible.

I will set it up for you.

I enter the hall and lower myself into the soak. Immediately a pair of Blue worlders come over and gently massage my arms. Wonderful. When I reach the other side, they depart to greet the next person as their kind do. I do love all the affection that we share here. A safe place for all.

The difference between my two homes has not yet manifest. There are two Mandhis and two Sussis. I am staying away from both though I want to meet them again desperately. I don't want to be responsible for one turning out well and the other badly. Of course, by my absence it could also be that both go well or badly. Random variations should start to affect things soon. On Silver's world it took about fifty years or so before they were far enough apart that he could come back to the one closest to his own.

Being on Blue Earth is nice though. Not any bluer than any of the others. Called that because the local sentient spends most of its time in blue waters. They don't normally come this far inland. We built canals so they could participate more fully. An internal shelled world. So far we have only found the three, ah, now six, worlds that Lyssi affected. There should be more. How many were affected when the Black world froth collapsed? From the dominate species to one of many. Takes some getting used to. I did not realize the 'THN needed to be cared for so much. As it was explained to me we are their guardians. Only peripherally do we help our own and other sentients. But, we also serve the question. I am not as convinced that the 'thn, 'THN or the One Minds do. They seem to care more for their own agenda. At least no 'thn is bugging me to mate. Not sure I could with what I know. Maybe in time. It is said to be pleasurable.

~Honored one, it is time.~ I refuse to wear a timing device. This annoys the tall ones, but I am not the worst. The Green Earth people seem to find any excuse to go sunning. My idea of Hell, another new word I have learned. At least I don't need to find a shader any longer.

When I enter the Hall I immediately see Lily. When she turns she see me and comes up to me with that crescent shape on her oral pore.

~How are you Lily?~ She stops the crescent shape.

~There was so much death Roo. If I had not met you and Healer at the gate that day I would be one of them. I owe you my life.~ She bows and

gives me the Nauti sign. She appears to be a level four now. They grow so fast. I do the same in return.

~How large was the final count?~

~Actually less than we first thought. A third lived. Nearly all in some locations.~

~And none in others. I know the pattern. That is still a lot of people.~

~Thanks to the Froth Association we hope it will be different this time. I hope we are offering enough in exchange.~

~It is not a trade Lily. We all benefit eventually. It is time my worlds joined the tech worlds. As each has different experiences and sees the world in a different way, we hope such insights will allow us to progress more rapidly.~

~To answer The Question. We have had so many lessons my ganglia hurt.~

~I am being given the same lessons. I understand.~

~But you are the Matriarch. Doesn't that get you away from such time muck?~

~No, even more important that I understand. Difference is I have a tutor instead of classes.~

~That would be nice.~

~It is Silver.~

~Dogs, that is bad. I feel for you.~

~Thanks. Are you attending the meeting on underground water hydrologies?~

~Yes. All of us level fours are required to attend. We are required to remain blank of course.~

~I will see you afterwards then and you can show me your thoughts then.~

~I am honored. I will endeavor to learn well.~ She bows and leaves. I see Long Tail in the distance. She has her oral pore in the air as she is nearly flat on the ground. Unaware I assume. Her normal state. I have not been so unaware in years. How does she do it?

Pushy Paws comes up to me. That means I am really late and am in trouble. Crab.

I try and distract her, ~Pushy Paws, there is something I still don't understand.~

She looks at me annoyed, then sighs. She can't resist the opportunity to teach me, ~I am surprised. I thought after your second naming this would no longer be necessary.~ I have been given the honorary name of She Who See Truth. I relax my arms, our equivalent of a sigh.

~Why me? I feel I have been manipulated and do not have any true choices.~

~Most don't most of the time.

Healer and the others sought out as many froth worlds as they could. The Froth Index was started by them.~

~Because of the machine sentient.~

~Yes. We had to be sure she was purged. Far too dangerous to allow to rise again. Anyway, when Lyssi noticed that a tech world had found your world she knew time was gone. She had to accelerate her plans. Instead of following her historical method and hiding from us, she did the exact opposite and sought us out. She explained the situation to Silver.~

~And put her complete trust in him? Someone she had never met before?~

~Could anyone deny Silver? She had backup plans. There was more than one Nauti sphere was there not? Only one was the Black 'thn. You have also seen how well they can hide. If she thought it was going badly she would hid again and waited. But then you arrived. Before your encounter with Freng we saw your potential. Then he, on orders from the Coast Matriarch, chased you right into Lyssi's arms. This was at first feared, as you were not ready, but we turned it to our advantage. Freng was rewarded and made a commander over the people of the Bay community. He was the one largely responsible for their destruction.~

~I am happy that I removed him from power.~ One action I do not regret. ~I was trained by the various journeys and brought to meet certain people who could teach me what I needed to know.~

~You did very well Roo. Far better than we ever imagined.~ She bows to me. ~You had a very difficult task. Many have failed before you. Even Lyssi was very much impressed. She considers you to be her successor and superior even after her thirty five million years of experience. That is not an easy showing to make. I doubt Silver will ever name a successor.~

I sign amusement, ~No, I doubt he will. It is not easy being his Matriarch.~

~At least as a Patriarch he does not spend much time with us. Though even I get the feeling he is always plotting some trouble for us to get him out of.~

~Ah, you as well. What about Ah'thn?~

~At level nine the gift you receive is the ability to accurately predict the future. At level nine this is only a few days at most. But at level twelve it is magnitudes greater. Add to that the fact she really was part of the greater whole and you can see where she always knew her path. The 'THN is a very cautious and suspicious creature. She leaves nothing to chance. Ah'th entered your bubble knowing exactly why she was there and what was going to happen. You did not kill her Roo. She accepted

death as part of her responsibility to the whole.~

~That is why we honor her so.~

~Yes.~

~I suspect that the 'THN is more of an inhibition to know the Answer than a help.~

~All that helps us answer the Question. The harder the 'THN try and prevent us from action, the harder we will try to do so anyway."

~Resonance.~

~Precisely.~

~What about all of us?~

~Every species reaches a turning point. We call this a paradigm shift. Before this new understanding the species, though partially sentient, still follows the rules of evolution, namely hoard as many resources as you can and have as many viable offspring as you can.~

~Your people are good at that.~

~And you see the end result. Yours will do the same now that they are liberated from the tech limitations. You are a very curious but stagnant culture. My people were once very similar to yours. They were nearly destroyed when met with a culture of higher tech. Tech is neither good nor bad. Population is neither good nor bad. The essential understanding is to get beyond greed. To go beyond hoarding and reproduction as the primary motivation. Until you take yourself out of evolution's path, you are bound by it.~

~I see and understand. Thank you. This makes sense.~ Our Matriarch culture held us back. Killing our instructors insured that whomever became an instructor would concentrate on survival, not innovation. In fact, she would suppress new thoughts as best she could. How many generations?

~Do you still feel betrayed or used?~ An unexpected and hard question.

I pause and think, I look at the lives I have known, from the crawlies, to the Guardians, the Matriarchs, the tall ones, the 'thn, then I answer, ~No more than anyone.~ I then ask a question in return, ~What level is Silver really?~

~What level are you really?~

~I don't know. I have not been interested in finding out. I always seem to have what I need when I need it.~

~You two are the only ones I have met who can show that. Be careful. No one is infinite.~

~Except Great Spirit or God. Shaman has been instructing me.~

~Be thankful there is something better than the 'thn, 'THN or One Minds watching over us.~

~Great Wisdom in that showing.~ She shows amusement.

~We are too late to enter the Hall now. Better to raid the kitchen ahead of the others.~

~Ah, another great insight.~ I sign amusement. ~But only if we get there before Long Tail and White.~

~True oh wise one!~ We run just as the rain breaks drenching us with cool wonderful water. I rejoice in my life.