



The Guardians of Br'thn Second Chance

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Council

"One more meeting and I will slime as well as ink. All I ever wanted to do was be a simple potter. Teach a few named ones. Live a nice long simple life."

"Yeah, and try to avoid having one of your students poison, cut, salt or dart you before your time. Not to mention the Matriarch herself if you should prove a threat by doing something so horrible as live too long."

"I should be happy with one of the two. Are you?"

He smiles, "Most would chose long life given a choice." That is not an answer.

"About that. Nearly every time I am undercover someone tries to kill me. Without the gifts I would most certainly be fertilizer."

"Fun isn't it? I have died many times myself." I am not good at the fake out yet.

"Stone Long Tail has told me of the many times you have tricked her."

"To save myself you mean. She has tried so many times to be the alpha. Would be a comedy if I was not the one being tested. Ask her if she ever tries these things with any of the others."

"Good to know. I might need to keep a longer distance from you so I am not killed by accident."

"Further distance, not longer. You are getting good though. Those new 'ears' you have made from your mantle have helped a lot. Your voice could be a little more feminine though."

"You mean like this." I raise the pitch. I am not consistent though. "Your method of communication is unnatural to my kind. At least you already had visual means before meeting us. Some of the Chinese characters are remarkably close to some of ours."

"It could be worse, the Blues use ultrasonics and lateral line flashes, besides you have music. Everyone loves that. Sussi's last concert was incredible."

I ignore him, "There is still time for me to make a bubble and get us out of here Silver."

"The Matriarch Rooi must attend. I however . . ."

"You don't and I leave. That was the agreement."

The gathering is well attended when we make our entrance. I choose the servants entrance to not attract attention, but with everyone including the servants filled by students of the gifts, we are noticed quickly.

"About time you two showed. We think we have found a solution."

No one really likes it, but we can all live with it. We think. The ultra-

sonic chips can be painful. The flashes don't show in this light. Redundant, especially with the mind showing. Hard not to think of them as food sometimes. Those same chirps can be used to stun or kill. We all had training on each other's worlds. Part of getting ready for this conference. At least it was a water culture. The green dino world was the worst. So much dust.

"It was Rooi's and Healer's experience on their worlds that really gave us the clue."

Me? What did I do? "What a mess that was. What possible good could come from that?"

"Mandhi, tell her." I didn't know she was here. When did she get here?

Silver is more polite, "It is good to see you Mandhi."

"It is good to be here. I am sorry that I took so long to understand the importance of your cause Roo. Our culture does not take well to change. So many lives were removed. Any one who threatened the status quo. We selected for people who prevented change. Even I, who am enamored with new knowledge, tried to minimize the change and at the same time fill my passion. The conflict nearly undid me."

"As each of us has had to face that fact at some point. Sometimes several times. I still remember my first time so long ago." Long Tail looks up as if he was talking about her. He may have sent her a mental note.

"What is the idea?"

"E1 is to be evacuated. It is the only way we can clean up the mess and attempt to train the beings to be more friendly to other species."

"And each other." Everyone shows amusement.

"That is drastic. Are any of us so much better that we could not use some training ourselves?" A little salt has soaked into my ganglia.

"And what about E0?" Owa asks. Not the only one modified for their means of communicating I see.

"E0 is off limits. We even visit there and we are likely to change something and all of us would disappear from here. You already know that Owa." Long Tail immediately jumps up and hides under a table. She would be affected as well most certainly.

"But why is E1 being evacuated? With less than a tenth of the population remaining, and falling still, surely they can make a comeback and it would be easier to train them in place. You could do it in portions, rotating your way around,"

"Pollution and population have a habit of spreading where you least expect. Also, they are much more likely to accept strangers if they are not on their home ground. Basically we hope to do a better job of it this time." Silver laughs and Healer is at first horrified then laughs as well. E0

and E1 thus duly represented.

"Silver was nice enough to fill us in on how E0's history will unfold. We will use E0 as a control. Being on your own world makes it too easy to relapse into established patterns."

"The idea is to split the population remaining up and distribute it among all those worlds willing to host them."

Mandhi adds, "Our world has agreed to host one million spread out in the interiors of each continent. This will help us learn more about our own world at the same time learn from their experiences."

The Blue worlder, whose name does not translate into anything coherent adds, *You intend to use them. Good idea. We can do the same on our world. We will also take a million.* Only seven hundred and thirty two million to go.

"Come on, surely you can do better than that. They don't breed that rapidly and we can take steps using an E0 Helper V variant to limit it."

"I thought we weren't allowed on E0. How did you gain the information? Besides a million on each of the White or Blue worlds is a lot of people."

"Helper V was tried on E1 as well, but Silver and his group contained it before it spread. It was not hard to obtain a sample to work with. And before you ask, it will not make anyone into a gifted either. We have tweaked it, thanks to your own scientists under Mandhi's supervision."

"What about percent mortality?"

"Should not be a problem with gifted standing by. Most will think of it just as another cold or flu. Those past breeding need not even be exposed. Given how long this will take to accomplish, there really is no reason to even move anyone over forty. They can stay. It will be easier to feed and care for them here." That is half the population at least. They certainly don't live very long.

"The younger ones tend to be more flexible and have better backs for labor."

Five years later.

The population is partitioned. It was like when a person was doted and all their possessions were divided by those who gathered. Some worlds wanted those skilled in tech, others wanted those who could live off the land. The smart ones took both. The interiors in our case were wild. No support structure to begin with. Any tech that we took would likely be lost before anything can be set up to support them. Mandhi insisted on a large number however. Wonder what she intends?

Being the Matriarch of All Worlds meant that I was not allowed to in-

terfere in my own hatching world. Silver and Healer had both warned me, but it still hurt to be left outside. On the other arm, I am free to visit all the worlds to see how the experiment progresses.

Lottery

Seven hundred and thirty four million people. fifty six percent above forty. No one older than seventy. No medical and a very hard life, even while still on E1. Most of the weak died during the rebound plagues after Helper V. Civilization collapses and all the old favorites of the 19th century come back with a vengeance, yellow fever, cholera, typhoid, plague. No modern people have immunity.

Then come the bullies. Not much in the way of minds, but love to “play” with all the people they perceived have put them down their whole lives. Most of the rich died during the Mother crisis, now it was the intellectual's turn to squirm, especially the older ones.

The gifted, as they preferred to be called now, were still low in numbers. Those from the other worlds came to claim their share, but prejudice and fear against anything different runs deep on both sides. The E1s were soon left to wait on their side of the bubbles.

The population has dropped to below five hundred million. The council met again. Something had to be done to speed up the process. It was finally decided to do a simple lottery. Two hundred and sixty worlds means nearly million on each. Some would not make the transition. Change is hard. Host worlds were responsible for setting up initial housing, water, sewage and farm lands.

No time to select by skills, lots were chosen. Families stayed together, but with over a hundred major languages, chances are you would not be able to understand many of your neighbors. The hardest were the families that left their grand parents or parents behind. Those few who were still together. Plagues did much damage to family structures.

They were not allowed to bring anything with them. New clothing was issued. No synthetics, no metals, plant fibers only. At least there were different colors. Some groups chose to label each other to gender and age. Others mixed and matched to make everyone multicolored.

Departure Camp 133

“Runt stay close.” So many people. So few my age. I was born in the camps. There was a lot to do there while we waited. Now it is over and it is boring. There are no streams to play in. No trees even. Just a large flat open area with a large square building in the center. There is only one small opening on one side. It's going to take forever for our turn. I wonder what our new home will be like? Hope it has lots of new creatures to make friends with.

I look around. Some kids a little ways off are playing some kind of game. I wonder over to get a better look. Something with sticks and round rocks. I can't understand what they say. I watch the game instead. Soon I can't hear anything as I carefully watch the positioning of pieces. A pattern emerges. Not that difficult at all. Maybe there are some bugs in the slight patchy grass. Even an ant would do at this point.

An older boy sees me watching and starts to show off. He can move the stones and sticks around real fast against his opponent. Probably been playing a long time. He looks to be maybe nine.

After his show he looks back at me, “Want to learn little one?” I can understand him? How did he know? I am used to being called little one or Runt. It can sometimes be an advantage, I look three when I am really six.

I play dumb, “No thank you. I'm three.” As if that would be enough of an explanation. He turns away from me. Worked.

I am suddenly grabbed from behind. “Runt! What did I tell you about wandering off?” I am not given a chance to explain. A quick swat to my behind reminds me to be quiet. Not hard enough to make me cry. I am picked up and carried back to our temporary shelter. I don't struggle. That would only add to the pain I already feel.

Tonight is vanilla. I like strawberry best, but I am hungry enough to eat vanilla without whining like I usually do. Getting dark. no one goes into the building at dark. I retreat to my hallow. It is were I have slept for many nights.

I wake up. It is still dark. I have to pee. I am old enough to go myself. It is so quiet. I love this time. Sometimes night friends come out.

Once I am away from the shelters I emit my friend call. Only three respond and alight on my arm. I scratch behind their small ears and am greeted. I raise my arm and they fly off, hunting bugs and moths. What few there are around here.

Here the waste place does not smell. At the camps, they smelled bad. Real bad. Food is better here too. Newer tasting. Is this how it will be at

new home?

I finish and turn to leave when I hear something. Probably another person awake. A teenage girl comes in. I leave as fast as I can. Don't like teenagers. They always tease me for being so small. The girls try and smother me with kisses. Yuck.

Pop is snoring. I will not sleep much until he turns over. I know better than wake him. Got a good owie first and last time I tried that, even though mom told me to go ahead. Afterwards she laughed.

I must have fallen asleep when my older brother tickles me hard.

“Hey squirt. Chores. Go get water.” I am barely awake when I grab the water jar and make my way to the one water source. There is a line waiting even this early. Later when it gets hotter the line will even be longer. Several people shove their way in ahead of me. I kick one in the shin and then pretend I know nothing about it. Does not get my place back but it does make me feel better. Hope one does not beat me up later. Happened before. Also glad I have a plastic jar. Probably taken from some pear's home during the plagues.

Another person tries to get ahead of me. I start a coughing fit and people move away from me. I move up several spaces. I've had most of the diseases going around. They say that is why I am so small.

I get the water and head back. I really hope new home is better than this.

When I get back to the shelter no one else is there. I set the water down. They are probably doing waste. They will expect everything to be ready when they get back. I start the small fire to heat water. Once that is boiling I add the sap chow crumbs and stir so it does not burn.

“What are you doing here boy?” I look up to see an older man in a gray robe and a staff. Lots of older people have staffs. Haven't seen an old person here before. Had lots of old people at the camps. When they told us we had to leave the old people went in a different direction.

“Why aren't you with the old people?”

“A smarty huh? Everyone in the B6 group shipped out an hour ago. So, why are you still here?”

“I was getting water to make breakfast like I always do.”

“Everyone was told two days ago what the schedule was and everyone was given food when they arrived at the new place. No need to make breakfast this morning.”

I pour some of the hot cereal into my bowl and start to eat it. “Don't want to waste it. What happens to me now? Are they waiting for me there?”

“First we do a scan and ID check. Three different groups went this

morning. We ran IDs on everyone who left. Won't take long to find out where your parents went."

"How much to not find them?" He looks at me in surprise.

"Bring your bowl with you and leave everything else." I follow him out of the shelter. A group of workers comes in after me and starts to clean up everything. No food goes to waste.

"You made the cereal yourself?" I nod.

"Smells good. Tell me how you did it."

"We save all the crumbs from the sap chow. That is the base. I add ground plants I find near creeks and such."

"Could be dangerous. A lot of plants are poisonous. Deadly in fact. You know what that means?"

"I am actually six, not three."

"Really. Not many twelve year olds know the right plants. Even adults make mistakes."

I reach into my pocket. "The yellow is for dinner dishes, along with this brown green leaf with smooth edges. This brown bark when toasted lightly tastes like cinnamon. I don't really know what cinnamon tastes like. Other people told me that."

"What is the black powder?"

"Beetles. I dry them out and powder them. When we get rice this adds a good smell."

"You collect only food material?"

"Oh no. I had the waste disease and the flowers of this one plant help stop the cramps. Have to drink lots of clean water too. The waste disease kills a lot of people."

"You know a lot for a young man."

"Thanks for not calling me little. Everyone calls me Runt. What is your name?"

"I am called many things, however I don't think Runt is a good name for you. Not at all. We are here. Let me have your bowl. This young lady will help you find out where your parents are."

"See ya. Thanks for helping me." He does a short bow. Oh now, the lady looks too young. If she tosses my hair I am out of here.

"I need to take a blood sample. That's weird. Your chip does not appear to be functioning." She tries the scanner several times.

"Don't have one."

"What? Don't be silly. Everyone gets chipped as soon as they are born. They do it right in the hospital."

"I was born in a field and my parents are too poor to get me chipped." Heard they use this enormous needle and it hurts like a million bees.

"Well we can fix that right here. But first the blood sample. Hold out

your hand. This won't hurt a bit." Right. Seen my own blood a ton of times. No big deal. I hold out my hand and yawn. As soon as she turns with the drop of blood in the cap I sneak out. I am not brave enough to face the bees. They are fine one at a time. Even have uses at times.

I get out of the field where we are staying and make my way back into the woods. Not really much of a woods. I can see buildings in the distance. Not safe near buildings. Lots more mean rats. Not like the forest ones you can make friends with. I have a lens from a camera that I use to make fire. Roots, grubs and fiddle heads make a good soup in an old hub cap I find. Glad it is not winter. Gets cold here with no shelter. I will need to find new clothes to help stay warm. That means the buildings. Best wait until morning.

I sleep in a tree hallow. A lot of friends visit in the night. Glad to be back with my friends. Hard to sleep in the cold. A blue bird greets me in the morning. I give him some of the seeds from my pocket. He eats out of my hand. Must be used to people. Usually takes days to teach them that.

I find a sharp stick. Best to enter buildings prepared. This place looks too clean. Like someone has been here before. Makes sense this close to the field. Probably teenagers. I will need to go further in. Not sure it is worth it.

"Hello Runt. Going somewhere?" Poop. They are still here. I am surrounded by three of them. They expect me to be afraid of them and to try something stupid. I came prepared though. I empty my pockets into the air. Stink bugs. Bright colors and stink worse than waste when disturbed. Used to be used by pears to protect the edges of their properties. They like a particular kind of yellow flower plant. Give them the leaves and they don't stink till you want them too. They are attracted to the colors on the boys. I slide between the legs of one of them and a sock in the balls for good measure. I then run like hell into the nearest building and squeeze into a narrow opening. They run up the stairs. Elevators don't work.

I run out of the building and straight into someone's arms.

"Let me go. I have nothing you want."

"It would seem you are not related to anyone here or who has left. Whoever they were, they were not your parents. As far as we know, your parents are no longer alive. I'm sorry."

"I'm not. That means you won't put me back with them. I am tired of being their sap. Just let me go then. I can make my own way."

"Probably, but everyone must go to a new home. No exceptions."

"Even you?"

"After I help clean up."

"I have a question. What happened to all the other old people?"

“They are fine.”

“Which home will they be going to?”

“They are staying in a special place here where we can take care of them as they get older.”

“You are already old. How can you take care of anyone.”

“There are more than one of us.”

“Of course. So, now what?”

“I have some people I want you to meet. We have these special stations all over the world. They are half way around the world. Not a problem really, just thought you might like to know.”

We walk back to the cube house. No one is about.

He sees me looking around, “Everyone else has gone. Just us left. I'll show you.” He walks up to the wall of the cube. I had never touched it before. Afraid. The surface does not look right.

“What is this made of?” I do not touch it.

“Very perceptive of you.” A door that should not be there opens. “Come this will only take a moment. Same way everyone else went actually.”

“Aren't we going to use a shuttle?” I always wanted to ride in a shuttle.

“This is faster. Come on. Doesn't hurt.” Why would it hurt? I look around the edge into the cube suspiciously. It is completely empty! I come in the rest of the way. The door closes behind me. Only I see nothing move. It just suddenly is not there. Just the smooth surface of the wall of strange material. There is light behind me. I turn around to see an opening to the outside. There are trees!

“What? Where did they come from? There were no trees near the cube when we entered? Is this some kind of trick or is this is a dream?”

“No dream. Please, it is nice outside. We must hurry. It will be night soon.” It was at best noon when we entered the cube. This is strange.

“It should be dark if we are on the other side of the world. Light where we were, dark there.”

“That can be explained, but we will save that for later.”

There are people up ahead. The buildings look strange. Round on top. I can't figure out how big things are, everything is so strange. It is only when we approach the people that I see they are smaller than normal and dark like me.

“Close your mouth and stand up straight.”

The old man, who now looks very tall, talks to the people. I can't understand anything they are saying. I see a few children looking at me and I hide behind the old man. One becomes more bold and comes toward me. He says something to me, but I can't understand. Oh, please I don't

want to cry. I must be strong. Shaking, I come out from behind his leg. The boy motions for me to follow him. I look up at the old man and he nods and waves for me to go. He is smiling.

I catch up to the boy who holds out his hand for me. I take it and we run down the path towards a larger open area. When I see where we are going though I stop suddenly and try and let go to turn and run.

The old man is walking towards me. Are they all trying to feed me to that huge monster? I break free and head towards the tree.

"It is not necessary to run. It will not eat you." I am halfway up the tree when I look down to see the monster looking up at me. I try to climb higher.

The monster turns to face the old man. They hug each other!

"Old friend, it is good to see you again."

"You too my friend."

"You did not prepare him I see."

"There was no time. How are the others doing with your presence?"

"Let's just say it is not time yet to bring in the rest of my clan."

"Give it a few days. Have you any dino mush left to tempt our new arrival?"

"Has he a name?"

"No. What he was called was not dignified. Not chipped either. Parents died in the plagues either before he could be chipped, or could not afford it."

"He looks to be about five or six. Might be the collapse was just before he was born. Mother may have even died in childbirth." A tear falls from my eyes. I will never know them now. I am all alone. I feel someone touch me and startled I fall from the tree to land in the monster's arms.

"I was not expecting him to get over his fear this quickly." A voice from the trees sounds and the monster answers him back in the same way. I think. The old man laughs and holds out his hands. The monster passes me to the old man to hold and he lets me down.

"Not missing any body parts?"

"No sir. What is it? Does it eat only plants? Are there more of them?"

"Slow down. First you need to learn the local language so you can gain answers. Do not be afraid. You will learn quickly. These people are very friendly. They are the closest to your parents that I could find."

Others have gathered. All smiles.

"Who are you?"

"Fear not. We will meet again." He smiles, turns and walks down the path. People wave and shout goodbyes I am guessing.

Luna City

“We have not had a shipment in five years now. How long is it going to be before they get their act together again? It couldn't have been that bad.”

“I heard it was the worst in Africa. China was barely touched. What does the com sat say?”

“They are being tight. Meanwhile we are on rations for everything. Have you seen the farms? We have never had a better crop. Yet, we are eating stale emergency rations. Why?”

“If they knew a new shipment was coming they might use up the old material.”

“Food is not really our problem. But there are things we can't make up here yet. Some medical supplies. Nanos too.”

“We are getting closer to making those. Dr. Ma says any day now she will be able to make them, at least in small quantities. Actually can now, it is the purification step that is the main problem. Too many almosts getting in the way and causing problems.”

“We can make almost anything in small quantities. The problem is what happens when a disaster strikes. Remember the meteor a few years ago that took out the remote station. Three people died from explosive decomp.”

“Better than a slow leak with no chance for help.”

“Like Chung a few months ago. That was creepy. He was a bunny just waiting for a return trip. One of the six diplomat/tourists from Beijing. Never expecting to be here for five years. Not so lucky now.”

“Doesn't look there will be any returns. They will all be official loonies soon. We all stay for good. I can still hear his screaming in my head.”

“We all can. The Brazilian finally cut the lines to the PA where I was.”

“I was out on recon and could not cut com without losing my link. It is so easy to get lost out there. Three hours to die. I remember every minute.”

“Seem to you we are having more deaths recently?”

“I was born here. I have seen almost every kind of death. They seem to bunch up at times, but I don't think there is a pattern.”

“Turn around in five minutes.”

“Check. How is my time and ox?”

“Fine. Might be a new record. No one is faster than you.”

“These long legs help.”

“The skin suits give me the creeps. Never catch me out on the surface in one.”

“Nothing to it as long as you don't sit still. Have to plan your route so you alternate between shadows and sun.”

“Frying and freezing. No thanks. Special report coming in. Do you want to hear it?”

“When I get back maybe.”

“Get back now! We are being ordered underground. A shuttle is coming in hot and off course. Crash landing expected! Please hurry!”

“If I push it my ox will run out. I am turning now. Get below yourself. Just leave the door open. If I don't make it, it won't matter as I should not be out here. Deny all knowledge and you should be fine. Now go!”

“Sighing off. Luck be with you Spider.” I growl. I hate the name, but I am afraid that I am stuck with it on account of my height and build. Now they can compensate of course. The problem with being first. Forever a freak.

We always do things in teams of at least two. Too dangerous otherwise. Still, I am really enjoying the silence. I heard stories of places everyone could go on earth to be alone. Forests, lakes. Even with billions of people before the plagues. So much open space. The reason I am out here now. I need to be in the open once in awhile. You would think someone who was born here would not suffer from cabin fever. I really don't know what I am missing. Must be genetic. We weren't designed to live this way.

“May day! May day! Is anyone there? If I can land this boat, please send help. If I don't make it, come and get what I have brought. I brought supplies. Repeat I have brought supplies. May day! May day!” The com cuts out. I look around and see it soon enough. She must have to concentrate on flying about now. I can see the retros firing as it comes over the ridge. Can't make out what kind of ship it is. Just a spot of light.

She is coming in too fast and will over fly the normal landing pads. Heading straight for me. Definitely not on course. I sight a place behind a small rock outcrop to hide in when it gets closer. Don't want to be fried by the jets. Landing on top of me I won't even feel. I stay in the sun as long as possible, even though I am overheating. I should be continuing my run. Here she comes, it's a freaking shuttle! I get behind the biggest rock I can get to. The blast dust kicked up from the retros nearly gets me. It comes down hard without landing gear a couple of hundred meters away and bounces once. That is not supposed to happen, even here on the moon.

I run to see if she survived. The cargo hold is cracked open but the cabin appears intact.

“I am outside your shuttle. Can you hear me?”

I hear moaning and static, then a long sigh. “I’m still alive I think.”

A crack appears in the forward window. She is going to blow! Without thinking I duck below the side of the shuttle just as the window blows outward. No sound of course, but still spectacular. Kind of pretty actually.

“Whoa! Good thing I had suited up. The cabin door is jammed. Coming out the front. Glad I am not on earth. Long way down. Are you still there?”

“Affirmative. I am coming out in the open so you can see me.”

I take it slow. My ox is running low. Not enough to make it back now.

“Any extra ox in there? I was not expecting to be participating in a rescue.”

“God! What is that? Are the aliens here too? Get away! I am armed!”

“Very funny. Do we really have time for humor? I am called Spider on account of my, ah, condition. You must have heard about me in the casts.”

“Thought that was something made up for the Realities. Doesn’t help you are wearing a skin.”

“Ox please!”

“Right. Be right there.” Her head disappears and I see the end of a cylinder emerge. “Catch!” A cylinder comes flying out. I let it fall and don’t try to catch it. It’s strong enough. People don’t realize that mass and momentum is still the same. Just takes longer for things to fall. It lands twenty meters away. Larger than what I am using now. Should last till we get back easy, even if I have to carry her. Two more come sailing out. I go closer to the shuttle to avoid being hit by any more missiles. Finally she slowly backs out of the broken window. The suit could tear on any sharp glass remaining. Ah, she has cut up a seat to cover the edge. Good girl.

She comes down slowly on some sort of cable and touches down. She turns to face me. Small. We have a few older shuttle pilots, from back when size mattered and she is small even by their standard.

“Surprised they had a suit to fit you.”

“Look who’s talking. You must be over two meters.”

“Two point one five. My parents were short thank goodness.” I turn to face the cargo hold. “Hold is cracked.” Split is more like it.

“No loss. Just two, what do the Americans call them, ah, pears, who were holding me at gun point.” Pigs is what I call them. Not liked in the Middle Kingdom either. “Glad I convinced them it would be safer in the hold in case anything went wrong. Could not find a suit to fit either one of them.” She smiles through her face plate. Right.

"I need to keep moving if I am going to stay warm in this. Back and forth between sun and shade actually. Helps to turn around some too."

"Help me get something out of the hold and we can go."

"Anything in there can wait till retrieval gets here."

"Not this. I want to be holding it when they arrive." She pulls out a laser cutter and cuts the hinges and latch. Together we push open the hatch far enough for her to squeeze in. I make sure nothing gets caught. She only needs to get partway in before she comes out again. She is holding a small cryo cylinder. Not a pretty sight covered in pig blood.

"They will be awhile. Everyone went deep when you came in."

"Makes sense. Sorry I came in hot. Stupid impatient pears and a very old ship. One thing good about the moon. I could not lift this myself on earth." She does not compensate for the momentum and it nearly pulls her off balance when she starts to move away from the shuttle.

"Maybe it would be safer if I hold it. You need to learn the lunar shuffle." I demonstrate. Earth walking or running is too much up and down. That's why we call you new comers bunnies. You end up hopping instead of walking. You have to walk barely taking your feet off the surface and sort of sliding along. Hills are trickier until you get the knack.

"I will hold it. Better get the ox. Didn't you say you were low?"

"Right." I do the shuffle over to the closest bottle. She goes to one of the others and hooks it into her system. I release my nearly dead one and drop it. Retrieval will get it. I fasten the new one on and breath fresh air. Not really any different, but it still feels good.

"What's in the cryo?"

"Something more precious than gold or diamonds. My ticket to air in Luna City."

"Nanos!" She shakes her head.

"Nope. Even better. These babies are the newest quantum nanos."

"Never heard of them."

"You program them with a psi field. Universal. Anything that an old nano can do, these can do and all out of the same bottle."

"How do you make more then? These could be used up on one construction project."

"They self until they are specialized. Then they self destruct when over."

"Any sides?"

"Don't let the stem nanos loose and you have to be dam careful when you program them. They will do exactly what they are programmed to do."

"GIGO"

"Precisely. Can you stop moving around like that?"

“Only if I run ahead. Otherwise the temp gets me one way or the other.”

“We can see the base from here. I can make it. Go ahead. I'll meet you at the lock.”

“Okay, you said it.” I take off at top speed.

“Whoa! That is the weirdest thing I have ever seen.”

Puffing I answer, “Just don't try it in your suit of armor. You'll fall on your face.”

“I can believe it.”

“I'm in the lock. What's your name?”

“Colonel Cheng. You're going to have to wait a bit for me. Where are the retrievals?”

“The shuttle is not going anywhere. Even freeze dried the pigs will keep for recycle. We are not quite so hyper around here.”

“Apparently.” I don't think she was convinced. I like to run. I can't help it. No way I could do that inside. Can't go more than a couple of meters before hitting a wall.

“Spider you monitoring five?” I cut my connection to two so our guest can't hear me.

“Affirmative. Go ahead.” Con uses channel five only occasionally. That was why we were using it for our run. Two is the open channel. Another thing about life here is the total lack of any privacy. Did I mention it is hard to ever be alone?

“Any survivors?”

“One, the pilot. A Colonel Cheng. Two passengers in decomp all over the inside of the cargo hold. The pilot is bringing in something called quantum nanos and seeks asylum.”

“Never heard of them.”

“Something new. Worth checking out from the description. If true they could save us.”

“Bribery is a good start. I want to know more about him before acceptance though.”

“You can speak to her yourself in a moment.” Pig. Actually they may be a perfect match. Both about the same size, though she might be a few years older judging from what I have seen of her face.

She knocks on my face plate. I switch two back on.

“Sorry, boss wanted to know if you survived.” She nods. We enter the lock. I have been going in and out to keep my temp in range. A little blast of mined waste argon to clear the seal and I hit the close button. A moment later and we have pressure. She goes to remove her helmet and I stop her.

“We have to go through decontamination. None of us want what's

been going on down there.”

“I imagine not. I don't have anything that I am aware of, but of course I could be a carrier without knowing. There was a lot of strange diseases going around.” A moment later two jets come on and surround us with disinfectant foam. I start to rub it in to every crevice of my suit and then start on the places she can't reach on hers. She probably practiced this at some point back on earth. She seems to know what to do and even does the outside of the canister well. A rinse takes care of the foam and sends it to recycle. Nothing kills the active ingredient in the foam and it works practically forever.

“I can take off my face plate now. You don't. I will escort you straight to med. You can take the canister with you.”

“There is a limit on how long I can have this on it's internal power supply.” She can't bend down very easily. I check the timer. Nearly two hours left.

“Lots of time. Let's go.” People come out to meet us.

“Too small a fish to keep Spider, better throw her back.” Ha-ha. References to fishing are lost on me.

“This place is a mess. Live in a tin can for twenty five plus years and it gets away from you.”

“I was born here so I have never known any different. Walls are not tin but . . .”

“Silica ceramic composite. I know. Just an expression.” We enter the med lab where Dr. Xian is waiting. He is all suited up in a biohaz suit.

“I will examine our guest.” Without my help. I salute and leave.

I did not get much of a chance to ask questions.

“Spider, front and center!” Shit. He comes up to me as I stand at attention. He makes a fuss of looking at my skin suit. Technically we are not supposed to go out on the surface in these. They are for emergency use only. We each carry ours in a pouch at our belts or if you are really paranoid, under your heavy suit. The canister will last fifteen minutes. That's how long I have for my run. Recharge is easy and no one asks. Each suit fits only one person. If you loose or gain too much you have to have a new one made.

“Explain.” He is still staring at me.

“I would say that a shuttle crash landing on the surface is an emergency. There was not time to get to my hard suit and I was near a lock.”

“You were supposed to be below with everyone else.”

“I was working late because of my duties when the announcement came over the com. I checked the course and saw that I was near the nearest lock. The same one we both came back in.”

“What could you do in a skin suit? A single scratch would have killed

you.”

“By my calculations I am worth more for recycling than being left alive.”

“How do you figure that? Your record is good. At least till now.”

“But I am never going to breed and we both know it. I am a freak. As long as earth was interested it helped us with pub and kept them interested and helping us. Now that they are gone, no one can get home, even if they could survive the heavy gravity, and I am a left over. This shift I have helped bring in an essential. I took a chance and I was lucky.”

“We will see. Dismissed.” I salute and he leaves before I can turn. God I hope that canister is real. I am sludge otherwise. Ravi was right, there is a pattern and deaths are increasing. The last thing we need is a witch hunt. History is a hobby of mine and there have been too many times fear caused more harm when reason would have saved them.

Shift is over. Time to eat.

“That was close. Promise me you won't go skin running again. We could have both ended up in the vat.”

“Hey, it was not you out there with a ship landing on your head while your ox ran out.”

“Would not have mattered if they caught me helping you. Only difference is your death would have been much faster.” True.

“Have the retrievers gone out there yet?”

“Nah, they never do anything fast. Any food is likely sealed or ruined. Anything else can wait.”

“Go get some rest I am going to hang out here and wait for them. I want to be in on that crew.”

“Put on the heavy suit this time please.”

“I will. Go. I'll be fine. Thanks for your help.” Nice enough guy, but I have no interest in him. Hetero can be a death sentence if the female half gets pregger. Abortion has been outlawed for years and we can't have kids without approval. Not retro either. Stick to your own kind and that problem can't happen. Colonel Cheng is old enough to be my mother. Someone that short could have been fun. Oh well.

I find my heavy suit. Not going to get caught twice in one day. Hate these things. I am not going to wait for retrieval either. They could be hours. I cycle and go outside. We are on the south pole to be near the water mines. That gives us hydrogen and oxygen. Carbon we can get from the soil along with most everything else we need. The one thing we are missing the most is nitrogen. Bodies are loaded with nitrogen in solid form, called protein. Those pigs will finally be useful to society.

Can't run in this boat. I take it slow and easy. There is too much to do and not enough. We are all malnourished to some extent because of the

lack of nitrogen. Low muscle mass. Being in the moon we can get away with it. Exposed to earth gravity and we would die in a few minutes. No one would be going home now even if everything was fine back there. At least not without months of rehab on the space station. Poor dogs on Space Station New Hope. We stopped hearing from them only a few months after the plagues hit. Nothing to make air from in a vacuum. We had no way to reach them. Can't believe we could not have made a rocket or something to reach them. Brass said it would have only postponed the same end.

So, now you know why I am out here. There are points to be made for finding anything that can help us. If you get hurt just be sure it is not bad enough for them to write you off instead of trying to get you back. Or hope for a quick one.

There it is. Just the same as I left it. I peek into the cargo hold. People don't look good after decompression, but we have all seen it before. Executions mostly. Hope you never see a friend go that way. There is freeze dried splatter all over. They are still out gassing. Probably will for months if you have equipment sensitive enough to see it.

Some things don't add up. One and a very big one, how did a shuttle get to the moon? High orbit, okay, but never designed for a lunar run. I check more closely. Lots of containers in cargo. I open the hatch further. Can't hear squeaking and I don't know if the hatch will stay where I move it to. That crack has weakened the entire structure. No way to repair her. She will never fly again.

I squeeze myself in. I am tall, but also very thin. I will not be able to stand up inside, but I can wiggle around. I place one hand on the nearest container. Metal from the look of it. I hit it with a wrench from my tool belt with the other hand. Can't hear anything, but I can feel. Dull thud. Full of something, not liquid or gas or I would feel an echo. I look around, there are five more of these canisters. If these had contained fuel that might explain their being here. How else could a shuttle get here? These are not ox or normal fuel containers though. Not heavy enough. Something else, but what? I push one with all my weight. Does not budge, too heavy even here. The cap is larger than any canister I have seen. I try turning on. No go. If there is any pressure inside the pressure on the cap would prevent that. Have to get these back into normal pressure first.

She said that the nanos needed to be programmed with a control unit. That is not standard equip on a shuttle, not that anything on this boat is coming up standard. There is still power here. Most of the systems are still on. On both sides of the split. Redundant power supplies? What is that huge ridge going down the middle? Not split, but pulled out of the

rear. Stronger than the shuttle body itself. Very strange. Not part of any design I know.

I go up to the front push the swollen corpse out of the way and try the cabin door. Opens very easily. She said she could not get through it. I open and close it several times. No problem. Air pressure difference? Certainly not the pig. It would not be that heavy here. She did not want me in the cargo hold when she retrieved the canister either.

“Spider, where are you? Your chip is not showing up anywhere on base?”

“Not on base sir. I am on the shuttle. I would recommend sending a full recon team before retrieval gets here. Something is not right.”

“Get your butt back here Spider!”

“I’m telling you, get someone here first. There is a lot more here than Colonel Cheng told me about.”

“Not that you need to know, but the canister was empty.” Empty?

“How did she react?” Could have always been empty, just an excuse to get inside.

“Did not take it well. Come in through airlock two and get here fast. If those things are loose in the shuttle you may only have minutes before they eat through something vital.”

I look down at my control panel. The backup display is out. My heads up shows fine. I slowly make my way back out of the shuttle. Something I have to know first. I go around to the thruster end of the ship. Those are anything but normal nozzles. Way too small. Wait a minute, this one is plugged. Nothing came out of here. No sign of a burn. The center one is not plugged, but no burn either. No burn?

A warning sounds. Shit. I am losing pressure. I can't run in this thing. Wait, I am still wearing the skin suit. Helmet is attached to it thank goodness. I had to route air through the larger suit though. I can hold my breath long enough I think. I make up my mind. I really don't have a choice. The inner suit is made from a new kind of material. It is possible the nanos will have a harder time with it. I doubt I have much time though.

I undo the ox tank and set it down. Running I will hyper on pure ox, on the other hand I can run with lower suit pressure. Single spark and I will go up like a torch. I am thinking this as I get out of the larger outer suit. I can hold my breath a good long time, but will it be enough high on adrenalin? The main thing is to get over your fear. Your body can hold out longer than you think it can.

Suit is off. I grab the ox cylinder and attach it. Shallow breathing should be enough until the pressure drops, then I will need all the partial I can get. Time to try and beat my own record. I turn off the heads up.

Nothing will matter till I get in the lock. No distractions.

I pass recon coming out. They have foamed their buggy and their suits. Good idea. Takes nanos forever to make their way through that stuff. Wish I had some.

“Run Spider. Your suit is turning silver!” Shit, they have gotten through the first layer. Not a lot of leeway in the design. I am pulling full ox now and ignoring the hot cold jumping. I run full out. Lock two is further away, but that is where they are expecting me. Shit why can't I use lock seven? I don't waste breath talking to them. I just run.

“Wake up Spider.” Someone slaps me on the side of my face gently.

I open my eyes to the inside of the medical ward. The hand is covered in nanoproof.

“Wish my suit had been made of that.”

“Not much left of it. Your skin is going to need to be in regen for some time too.”

“That why you are in the balloon suit?”

“Yep, strong psi bath for you. Vacuum did almost as much damage to your skin as the nanos.”

“How long?”

“A few weeks.”

“That will burn my buffer.” One step to the farms, as plant food.

“You saved the entire base Spider. I would say your buffer is overflowing. If you had not grown suspicious, we would not have. There was a leak in the canister. Probably the result of the crash. Probably all over the surface of the moon. The entire area is off limits. You should see lock seven. It will take them months to repair.”

“You mean years. Nothing happens that fast around here.” He laughs. He knows I am right.

I have to know, “What was in the canisters?”

“Nitrate! Worth more than the nanos, but contaminated until we can process it. Chem is working on it.”

“Freeze it in LHe. Will fracture the nanos, but won't hurt the nitrate.”

“I'll pass that one. Now you need some sleep. I'll wake you when they are done.”

“Thanks.” What else was on that shuttle? Likely we will never know. The nitrate would be worth going after. Not worth it for the rest. They will slag it and then refine the metals.

Boredom

“Slag and slop. I tell you girl I am going to go postal long before this is done. How long can these geezers live anyway?”

“If they were pears, could go to two hundred. No one really knows. Tech still too new. Projections only.”

“God, I hope all the pears got it in the meltdown or the plagues.”

“Plagues would not have got em.”

“Angry people can kill even a pear.”

“True. Hand me another bucket.” I hand her a fresh bucket of sanitizer.

“Why can't we twitch our noses anyway. This is stupid.”

“Scared of cross talk.”

“How, no active gates?”

“Monkeys are creative, they always figure out a way.”

“You've been hanging with Long Tail too much.” But she smiles. She likes her too. Without Long Tail I would have gone postal.

We clean up what seems to be the millionth mess by the “residents”. I know they don't mean it, but they have gotten a little too used to us being servants. I would say something except I know that if they actually did some work they would probably live longer.

“Time for our bike ride Lil.”

“Bikes. I finally learn to fly and I am back to bikes.”

“Exercise feels good. You complain too much.”

“I do? What about at meal time? Bet you wish I could catch us some fresh food instead of the duped sap chow.”

Same argument we have been having for years. And years. How long are we going to have to suffer for one little mistake?

“Shift down Bait, we are not on a boat.” Sigh. I shift. I keep forgetting. I am tempted to cheat, but they have blinking sensors everywhere and we both get punished if one of us messes up. We would be down to walking to this chore from hell instead of bikes. We used to have scooters and before that carts. I have not been on a boat for I don't know how long. I don't even remember what year this is. Two hundred years. I am going to go postal. Wonder where that expression came from? No net left to ask even. At least for us.

The problem with our task is that the better we do the longer it will take each day to get there. Both have to happen before we are free. We have to finish this decontamination assignment and we have to wait for the last resident to die. One needs help and the other help is prevented. I am going to go postal.

No you won't bringer of great tasting food. Long Tail for bait. Interesting that she likes the bait better than the catch.

Delicacies are better than mass consumption. A bit of knowledge you Monkeys could learn. I would not have given you a second chance.

“Seems to me you are under the same sentence we are Long Tail. We are both being given a second chance. You want to go back to being a lap cat?”

No reponse.

“Stop teasing Long Tail, Bait. How are the kittens Long Tail?”

Grrrrrr. I have to laugh inside. She is having no more fun than we are. Only fair, she was there too. We are forbidden to meet, but she must be close by to talk to us.

We reach the structures we are working on this week.

“What do you want to do first?”

“I need to feel we are accomplishing something even if I know this is all pointless. The foundations take the longest. Let topple a few houses to start out.” We are not allowed to use TK, only conventional tools. Of course these will be dissolved eventually. And of course this whole exercise would be done in less than a second by an eight or nine. As I said, pointless.

“Let me try one. I have to believe there is a more efficient way to do this. If we cut in the right places it should go over with minimal application of force in the right place.” I am older than her, but only by a few years. I can tell you anything about the sea you could even think to ask, but on land, I am a crab out of water. I don't mind being high up, if I have water to fall into. Lily on the other hand is a monkey, totally fearless of heights. I have seen too many gulls drop things on the ground on purpose in order to break it up to eat it. Don't want to end up the same way.

Lily goes straight to the roof and walks the crest back and forth. She then jumps to the fence and ground in two leaps, like she was walking down some steps. She darts inside and comes out a few moments later.

“I think I have it. Let me have the laser cutter.”

“Right and I loose a leg in the process. No fives present, no lasers.”

“Fine, the chain saw. same thing, just take longer. The diamond tipped one, I will have to cut through pipe and conduit.”

“Pipe is probably plastic on this house. Looks nineties style.”

“That old? Are you sure? Could be right. They adapted it to sap housing later. Bet it once held pears.”

“All two of them no doubt. In the end it held at least twenty. Such a waste. How much better if they had designed it in the beginning for people instead of hoarders.”

I got out the boronitride chainsaw. Don't know why they call it a

chainsaw, no chain on it. Must be something from the past. Looks closer to a weed eater designed by a committee to me. Doesn't matter, I hand it to her. The throat is a few centimeters longer than the thickness of an outer wall, where I expect her to start. Instead she goes inside and works on the internal walls.

Not directly part of this operation I get to work on how to disperse the refuge. Wood and walls can be burned carefully. There are still asphalt roads. We are near a corner. This will make a good place for the fire. Will help break up the asphalt as well. Summer is not a good time for a fire to get out of hand. Plastic will have to wait for a person allowed to use their gifts. Burning plastics would produce too many toxins. At least we don't have to worry about lead or asbestos on these homes.

Lily comes out and starts on the outside walls.

“Why the inside first?”

“Did not want to be trapped inside if anything went wrong.” Takes her nearly an hour to get around the structure. Outside walls had to be harder to prevent water damage. Brick wall part way up on one side. She goes above that. That means the wall will have to come down by hand. I get the sledge hammers out from the storage cart. No one out here to steal anything at least. Except raccoons!

“My favorite hammer is gone again! Why do they keep taking that?”

“Quit polishing it and it won't be so shiny and tempting.” What use could they have for it? I will scan for it at lunch. The one gift that does not call attention to ourselves, as long as we are not obvious about it.

“I am ready. We just need to push here.”

“Right and what army?”

“Just the two of us.” She leans against the wall carefully. Interesting. I walk over.

“Here?” She nods and we both start to push. Nothing happens at first.

“No go, back to square one Lily.”

“Be patient Bait. Try again.” This time I hear something snap, then suddenly the wall slips away from us and we jump back to avoid following the wall. The entire house pancakes away from us.

“Sweet!” I yell.

“Thank you. It will still take a lot of time to cut the wood out of the structure, but at least it can't fall on us this time.” I still have a bruise on my shoulder from the last time I was struck. Lucky I did not break something. I still favor it a week later. They are watching. They know we get hurt, but no one comes to at least heal us. What is the point of this?

“How long until the next opportunity to question?”

“Two more days, IF they decide we are worthy.” IF, sigh. I grab the sledge hammer and start on the wall as Lily breaks up the larger sections

of wall with the saw. Old plaster board makes a lot of dust.

“We should check out the next house so we know what we are up against.”

“Good idea, we can take a break and eat something at the same time.” I don't remember working this hard before the gifts. We used to stop what we were doing to eat and then sit and chat for a bit. They say there will be more free time once we transfer to one of the worlds for watcher work. Bet the others are already there.

“This house is much older. Bet it has lath work instead of drywall.”

“Where did you learn about housing Lil?”

“I dunno. Just by staying awake and paying attention.” Ouch. “Besides, I know nothing about boats. We each learn what appears to be important to us at the time. I was on my own. I learned about houses so I could break into them and steal stuff to stay alive. You would not have wanted to trade places with me, believe me.” No I would not have.

Inside it is very dusty, but largely not disturbed. Most of the houses were looted and trashed. Out of desperation or spite. Does not matter. Pictures on the wall. Old photographs of relatives or experiences. An event important enough to try and remember. There are actual books on shelves.

“This must have been a pear's house.”

“Not necessarily. Could have just been old. People got in at the right time and because of Prop 13, taxes never went up. Family could inherit at the same rate. This was the sitting room. Rest of the house will tell us. People kept the sitting room up for appearances.” Okay.

“Whoa! Look at the mess in here!” I think I am in the kitchen. Stacked from floor to ceiling with old papers and magazines. A fortune in recycle material. “Look at all the plastic containers! Must have been pears.”

“Nope. Pensioners. Probably on SS till it ran out. Seen it before. Best kind of place to steal from. Take anything that is not sentimental and they never know. Can come back dozens of times before you have to move on. Yeah, I could have lived off of them for months.”

“What made you come to the lab?”

“I heard tales. I wanted in on the adventure. Living off of stealing sucks big time. Just waiting till you're caught and killed. Nobody misses an unnamed sap. No bracelet, no life.”

“This is going to be a long one. We will have to catalog all the images. Downloading a few cubes is so much easier. Will need the scanners and the entire archival storage rig.” What a pain.

Lily comes over and starts massaging my shoulder. I relax into it.

“Do you miss sex?”

“At first no, thought men were slime. The lab people were okay, but they were like brothers and sisters, not the same. Now, I miss the affection.”

“Still have that.”

“Not the same. Without the sexual tension it is different. What about you?”

“The tension is still there, only we don't feel it.”

“Getting late. We need to get back.”

“Stinking like this?”

“Does it matter? Might even keep Mr. Withers off of us.”

“That old geezer gives me the creeps. Looks for any opportunity to touch us.”

“What did you expect? We look twenty. They are all over fifty now. Best meat in town if I say so myself. Besides the way we smell everyone would throw up and we would have an even bigger mess to clean up.” She does a slow turn. Since the gifts I have never looked better either, though I did turn a few heads even before. Dad hated it. I miss him. Never had a thing to worry about of course. I would have gutted anyone who tried.

“Race you to the water plant.” Been closed for decades, but water still catches there. Enough for a bath anyway. The only other cisterns intact are at the farm, the place where the old ones are waiting to die. I get on my bike and pedal as fast as I can. I am no match for Lily, so I need as good of a head start as I can get. She looks around for her bike. I smile. I hid it in the bushes. Not enough to prevent her from finding it, just enough to slow her down to make it a challenge. Boredom is a terrible incentive for mischief.

She still beats me, barely. Will have to hide it better next time. We wash each other's backs.

“Amazing that I can touch and be touched everywhere and not feel a thing, not that I was ever into women, except when I needed to score. Hey anything can be faked. Some ways this is better.”

“You say that every time. Get over it.” What's it been now, nearly ten years since she received the gifts?

“I miss it too, but not enough to give up the gifts.”

“Oh yeah, we are having so much fun aren't we?” I laugh and splash her.

We get dried with the towels in our packs and head back to the farm. Not really a farm of course, we just call it that because the inmates seem to have more in common with plants than people. They sit around all day talking and playing games. What's the point?

Pushy Paws says we will never leave this place unless we learn to lis-

ten to our elders.

“Then why set you up with a batch of kittens?”

Need as many as possible. We are being moved as well and we do not have as many to start with.

“Cat world. Now that would be interesting.”

Of course it would silly monkey.

I hear rustling and a flock of birds suddenly takes flight.

“Did you get one?” No response. Must be out of range. DS certainly would be useful.

When we get back they have turned up the music on that old nineties punk rock shit. Lily gets there first and turns it down to a lot of moaning and complaining. Too bad. They are like kids. Maybe we need to hide the little tech still remaining. No net of course. There are communities like this all over, most be run by the people themselves. I wonder of there are any others like Lily and I.

We get to work in the kitchen. Nothing fancy. We have twenty three at last count. Ms. Davi died a few weeks ago. Second oldest. There is a pool going as to who will be next. Dinner is light. Cat brought in some fish, that is her job. She pulls a cart from the wharf where a gifted one has the days catch waiting. She does not say who. Cat of course hates pulling a cart. We do not watch. Too humiliating.

The people here maintain the garden. Don't know why they won't help in any other way, but they insist on doing the garden. We make a salad and stir fry the fish. Long Tail thinks we are ruining it, but even she will eat any fish we leave out for her. I miss holding her. She is Lily's partner, which is why we got into the mess we are in, in the first place.

“Pay attention or you will burn the fish.”

“Shit.” I look down at what I am doing. Not too bad. I add a little more spice to cover it up. Cajun style now. Some will complain, some will praise it. Nothing ever happens that everyone likes.

I place the fish onto the top of the salad that Lily is finishing up and we serve it. We eat in the kitchen.

“I am tired of being pinched and oogled at. If we were allowed to use our abilities, this would stop.”

“Their ladies would be disappointed. With the men's attention on us, they have been happier.”

“Why can't men just behave. Your father was never a problem.”

“The sea was his mistress. Cliche, but true. If love something or someone that much, pretty much nothing else matters.”

“You miss the sea yourself.” I nod.

“I hope he is okay. I have not been away from him for this long before.”

“He can take care of himself.”

Long Tail walks into the kitchen.

“Sush! Scat cat! Don't know who you are, but you are not welcome here.” We have to pretend we don't know her. Any cat could walk in here.

We are expected at the meeting place. She turns and leaves.

“I thought we had another two days?”

“So did I. Wonder what's up?”

We clean up quickly and start out. Long Tail must be far ahead of us. Not known for her patience.

We make it there just as the sun sets. The one gift we are allowed to use, at least when no norms are around, is our second sight. Anyone higher than a four will know of course, but no one has said anything yet. A four can see about ten kilometers. I scan the surroundings to be sure we are alone. No one else here, but that is not surprising.

“There is a storm coming. Big one too.” I look to where Lily is gazing. Looks real nasty.

“The weather keeps getting stranger and stranger. When are we supposed to sink into the ice age?”

“Silver's earth? Might not happen here depending on what all the eights and nines have been up to.”

“We are in this mess because they accused us of interfering. You really think they are going to change the climate?”

“They have evacuated the reproductives. Sounds like interference to me.”

“Ah, when they do it, it is okay, but when us lowly fours scare a few bullies, we get slammed.”

“It was good though wasn't it? I especially liked when you ran up to them full speed like you were going to take their heads off and then just licked them.”

I always taste my food before eating it. Tasted horrible. The only reason they are still alive.

“That's what I don't get. In all the histories they were always going after bullies. Why punish us?”

“Well apparently we are stuck here until we find out.”

“Getting cold. We should find shelter.”

“We could make it.”

“Don't even think it. Someone will be here any moment. There is no chance we would get away with it. Let's find shelter.”

When did she become boss?

She has always been that way to me. I am the best teacher she could ever have and look at the way she treats me.

“Getting hungry Long Tail? Should have eaten more in the kitchen.”

“We can build a temporary structure out of branches and boughs.”

“In this wind? Getting worse too. We need the side of a hill, away from the wind.”

“We are supposed to stay here for the meeting.”

“You don't think they can't find us? Come on, or do you want to just give up, use TK and get a worse punishment?”

“Lead on.” She can be so dense sometimes.

Long Tail is cleaning herself. Why take a bath now?

Beats listening to you two being typical stupid monkeys.

“Okay which way to shelter?”

She gets up slowly and walks off. We follow, as we always do. The sight lets us avoid most of the flying debris.

It becomes mindless as we slowly march down some trail that only she can see.

Easy trail for stupid monkeys.

“All right, enough with the stupid monkey thing or we will have to start chanting silly kitty.”

Lighting lights the sky nearby. I count slowly. A few kilometers away. At the sound of thunder Long Tail disappears.

“Someone has broken the rules.”

Then both of us chant at once, “Scaredy Cat!”

We are here stupid monkeys.

She comes out of a shallow cave. Good enough. We all cram into the cave just as another flash happens. Long Tail hides behind us at the back of the cave though.

“Were are they?”

“I don't know about you but I am getting bored. I may have to go to sleep for awhile.”

“We can't sleep?”

“Long Tail can, we should be able to.” I start yawning to see if that will help. Doesn't.

“Whoa! What are those?”

“What?” I don't scan anything near by.

“About six kilometers away and heading towards the ranch.” I scan back the way we came. I have never seen anything like it either. Air in a strange density pattern.

“I don't get it.”

“Concentrate on the debris, not the air.”

Stupid monkeys, just the wind.

I ignore her and concentrate. It takes me a moment to see what she is saying. Then the pattern suddenly snaps into place in my mind.

“I remember that pattern from sims, but I don't quite remember. It is like my mind is mush. More tired that I thought. Might have to do some meditation for a bit to clear. Oh wait! Tornadoes!”

“What are those? I never did sims.”

“Casts had pictures of them. Surely you saw those.”

“Did not pay any attention. If it was not local, it did not matter.”

“How did you ever hear about us?”

“I was in San Jose when I first heard. Apparently people in the Regional office talked. Word got out. My life before I came here was shit and getting worse. The life expectancy of a street urchin is fifteen max.”

“But weren't you seventeen?”

She nods, “I beat the odds. Might be one of the reasons that I was taken in. I have noticed that they tend to recruit among the lucky or unusual.”

“Got that right.” I nudge her and she hits back. This wakes up Long Tail who growls. Why couldn't we have a nice affectionate squid instead? I feel a claw dig into a calf. Can't take a joke either.

I don't know when I feel asleep or why I did not pay more attention to the tornadoes.

Nest

We have been holed up in here for nearly five years. I thought I was one of the lucky ones, saved from the plagues and the end of the world and all. Now I am not so sure. Maybe it is better for the officers, but among the enlisted it can only be described as hell. Three have already killed themselves or had themselves killed by acting out totally insane and ending up shot. Same difference.

Someone has to clean the toilets and someone is always found. At first it was more shared, then it became a punishment for trivial random, even made up infractions. Now it is a way of life. I have accepted that they are very comfortable having a permanent janitor and I am it. Oh at first I was very angry, with all the training I have had, but all that got me was more time in the johns.

Not that I am quick about it any longer. If you know you will never see any other duty there is no incentive to hurry. I suppose they could assign me to the composters. Only a slight difference over what I am doing now. After all where do you think they get the 'material' to work with?

Eight bells. My shift is over. I will head straight for the pods. If they ever denied people that it would be much worse than suicides. Much worse.

I put away the mops and order the bots back to the keeper. I am only allowed the lowest level grunt ones. Not much help actually, but better than being here totally alone. Dumb as mushrooms though. I have a new game of putting obstacles in their path and watching to see how they will deal with it. Got caught once. The Sargent's mouth opened to chew me out, but then she realized my assignment and left. I am not so open about it now. Being in the brig would be more boring than what I am doing now, just slightly.

I make my way to the pod room. Not many people here right now. Gets more crowded after meals. Most people choose food over recreation. Not me. Smelling like I do, they don't even want me in the room once they arrive. I rub my pants into the pads.

I call up my personal program. My heaven. Encoded to my DNA, no one but me can open it. I type in the hundred and twenty eight character code in a precise timing sequence. Modulated to variables only I know, no one has cracked it yet. Good thing, considering what's on it.

I am sure other people have fantasies. Fantasies are good. The problem is, is that my particular fantasy is about a certain Commander of a certain underground facility. The hardest part was the time she walked in to use a facility just as I was bringing out the last of my equipment. I am

sure she did not remember me, but oh do I remember her. Every part of her.

I must concentrate to put in the code properly. My erection fades, but only for the moment my dear.

Fortunately condoms are free and available to anyone, no questions asked. Makes it much easier to use a pod without betraying yourself. Can't have kids until after we open up again is why. Well at least most of us can't. Every time someone dies it seems some officer or spouse of an officer gets pregnant. I guess it makes sense. This place is designed to last generations. Do they really expect officer's children to take over my job when I stuff it? I don't think so. No, sooner or later they will mate us as well. It is the middle grades who should be worrying. Don't really need them while in here. Don't need the officers either, but they are in control aren't they?

I get eight off and I was only in the pod for fifteen minutes. People pass me on the hall. I salute everyone half heartedly, but no one pays any attention to me, nor returns a salute. If I don't they slam me against the wall as if in accident. Don't like pain that much. Sometimes though. I want so badly to. Well, you can imagine.

Someone bumps me in the hall. I nearly hit the wall. Must have forgotten to salute or something. I look down at my shoes. They look fine. I check my reflection against a monitor. Tie is not straight. I straighten it. Must have happened in the pod. Speaking of which. As soon as I am in my room, about the size of a sap closet, I dispose of the leftovers, shower and hit my bed. Not that tired, but sleep is nearly as good as the pod. Easier to get off track into the hell realms though. Don't like it there.

I am woken up in the middle of my sleep by pounding on my door.

"Hey Jake, they opened the hatch!" I hear the steps fade down the hall and then more pounding. I unroll a flat and lay it against the side of my cot. Tiny, but enough to see what's all the ruckus about. Even if we had opened up, it could be months before I see daylight. All kinds of recon and testing would have to be done first. Hey, I was not always a janitor, just the one who got picked on enough to fall into the position. I would have been on one of those first teams. Nothing to do about it now.

I raise the volume and press reset.

"Atmospherics has confirmed that the plague has abated. Recon teams are expected to go out within the week." All that means is that they already have gone out and returned. No way they would get everyone's hopes up. Nothing worse than a disappointed mob. It will be hours before any real news reaches us. I turn it off and roll over.

Recon 3

I wish they had not told everyone we were going out. This whole situation is beyond bizarre. Atmospherics had cleared us of the plague weeks ago. That was never really the problem. They are so insanely cautious that they wanted to be free and clear for at least a year before even announcing they were even thinking about it. After three went postal though we have had to speed things up. This is a powder key that will blow if they keep people cooped up too much longer without something to hang onto. There is only so long a pod will work to sooth people. And we still have to carry APDSs with us everywhere we go out here. I glance at mine. Still green. My implant would have told me otherwise.

We have been monitoring people for some time. As if any encryption would matter on a system we installed. It was the only good way to gauge how far we had gotten. Psyc says several have over a fifty percent chance of fragging within the next week. That is cutting it close guys. Announcing this mission may have set that back a bit. Hope springs eternal. The weird thing was that these Armstrong facilities were designed to work a hundred times that long. Would have if we had been allowed to start the drugs. We would have too, except for the real problem.

Hence I am going out on recon instead of the expected team. We can't afford to mess this one up. I would have put that janitor up if I had a say. Get rid of the bad blood first thing. That is one real sicko. What makes someone go that route? Who knows? Just glad it is not me.

"We are all set Captain." I acknowledge and raise my own pack and check my weapon. No idea what we will find out there. And that is the problem. With a collapse of civilization you would expect the chatter to stop and it did about three years ago. It was amazing how long some people kept ham radios and such going, but eventually even they got tired of no one responding and went about the business of trying to stay alive.

What we did not expect was all of the other Armstrongs going blank. Had they been compromised? How could this have happened all at once? One day we had link and then the next nothing. Dark fiber, EMR, and sat all stopped. Even the quantum conduit. We should have checked in more frequently, but we did not want to risk detection. A nano burst is hard to detect if you are not expecting it. Sounds like random noise. What could take out all the sats at once?

We sent out bots of course. Standard protocol. Lots of vegetation near us, but only starting in a ring around us exactly at the edge of our underground perimeter. How did the plants know that? The farthest edge is nearly a kilometer below the ground from here. And how could this have

happened in only five years? We were the most remote Armstrong Unit in a desert for Christ sake. Five years? Some of those trees must be at least fifty years old. What happened? Nuclear? But we never saw any evidence of it. Never any blips on the Geigers or whatever they use now.

No sign of large animals, though some of the lizards looked bigger than I remember. Insects too. But without nuclear how do you explain it? Biowarfare? That could affect so many species in so short of time? A mutagenic virus or maybe even a gas? Could be. Who knows what the desperate would set off at the end, or by accident. A fail safe? If your country is destroyed make sure no one else survives either? Affects anything bigger than a cat.

“We are here Captain.” They are all waiting for me to type in the authorization code. First door of many. It will take us hours to get through all the locks. It will take weeks on the way in. I hate being the guinea pig. Short straw. We had to send an officer out or the others would not have come. It is perfectly safe out there. Right.

I hesitate. Do I really want to do this? What's out there? I can only rest in the knowledge that my gams are frozen in storage. My genes will survive even if I don't. I type in the code and the door unlatches. The corporal and three privates push the massive door open.

“The final door is clear to open Captain. The bots have finished.”

“Thank you Lieutenant.” This time I do not hesitate. I type in the code and the last door swings open on its own. Why the last door is easy and the first one takes four people is one of those mysteries. That's strange. The sun is in the wrong position.

“What time is it Lieutenant?”

“Morning Captain. 0900.”

“Then tell me why the sun is in the west and about to set?”

“It's been five years, is it possible we are in error?”

“And how do you figure that? We were linked until a week ago.”

“I can see how a computer can make a mistake but I can't imagine how the sun could.”

“Good reasoning Lieutenant. Let's camp here tonight. I think it would be good to watch before proceeding.”

He gets the men deployed to setting up tents and facilities. We have three transports with night turrets on top. Troops take up positions on each. We are deployed in a triangular shape with one side against the bluff we came out of. Already robots are working to cover the opening. We are on our own for a month. Finished they fold up and scurry down access tubes which close and seem to disappear. Never ceases to amaze me the number of forms they come in.

“Notice anything Private?” I ask the nearest person.

“Quiet Captain. Too quiet.”

“That’s what I think. Carry on.” She salutes me and I return one. I can see the edge of the green from here easily. No birds are flying. Surely with a forest this size there should be owls or something. Did the plagues get them too? I am not much of a biologist, but I know enough to know that no ecology can work without predators. With no humans about, who has taken our place?

A couple of men are raising their voices. I go over to see what’s going on.

“Attention!”

“At ease. What have you got?”

“The largest mosquito we have ever seen Captain.” He opens his hand to show me one nearly two inches across.

“Looks like a crane fly to me. They eat mosquitoes. Let the next one go Corporal.”

“This one was drinking my blood Captain.” He shows me the welt forming on his lower arm.

“Do what you need to do then.”

“Thank you Captain.”

I hand signal Lieutenant Lee and she comes over, “Lee, issue repellent clips and set traps. I want to see what we bring in. Get our insect specialist on it. Oh and send two to the top of the ridge with scopes. I want to know what it looks like around us. They should be able to see Salt Lake from up there. Have them catch up with us in the morning.”

“Done.” I see her shouting orders and people moving. Ah, my tent has been set up. Tent is a misnomer. It is well hidden against the bluff and bullet proof. I retire to it to write my log. Was not expecting to do that for many hours. Best to get adjusted to local time. We will need to find out what local time really is. Wonder if the date is off as well. Should be able to tell by time of sunset and sunrise and where we are. My GPS is out as expected. No sats means no GPS. But we all know the exact coordinates of our own Armstrong.

I wonder what the other Units are experiencing? Are we the last humans? The new seed as we had all be trained and prepared for? We have to assume that is the case until we learn otherwise. I write notes for the botanist to see if the land is arable. I would hate to decom enough land to grow crops. We could live on what we have inside until we finished, but we really need to get out of the hole ASAP. Work humans can do would help a lot to boost moral. Who knew that cabin fever would be worse than cholera. Even I admit it does feel good to breath real air again.

Far too early to bed. I can hear snoring from those who were expecting to be on the night shift. Will be harder for us out of phase. I decide to

go for a walk. The camp has switched to IR mode as the sun set. I place my seables in and adjust them. The camp lights up in my mind.

We lost contact a week ago, yet already I can see plants starting to come up in cracks in the soil, very bright in IR. Also evidence of rain recently, rivulets. I feel the soil. Moist, soaked it right up. Utah gets about 15 cm of rain a year. Where we are it is closer to five. We have been monitoring and if anything it has gotten worse in the last five years. Something is watering those trees out there though. Have we affected the weather patterns of the entire planet except right here? One of those large mosquitoes lands on my arm. It is drilling right through my shirt. I activate the personal repellent clip and it twitches a few times, but holds fast. I finally gently pull it from my arm and let it go. A flash followed by a crack of thunder announces more rain coming. Why are plants coming up now and not five years ago? They had no idea we were emerging. Two rain storms in rapid succession?

As the rain hits my face I retreat to my tent. The turret people will not be happy. I will have to remember to give them something extra for sticking it out. Though, I have a feeling we have not seen the last of our surprises.

As I enter my tent I see something move under the cot. I squat down to investigate. Two eyes peer back at me. Dark color is great at night but would stand out on desert sand.

“Well little fella. Come on out I'm not going to hurt you.” It does not move. I decide to try a little bribery. I pull a ration strip from my shirt and hold it out. Staring but no movement. I place it on the ground just far enough out that I can see what it is when it comes out to get it. I am patient. Not sleepy yet and nothing else to do. I remain absolutely motionless.

Very slowly I hear movement and hesitation. Finally a nose emerges to grab the strip. Hesitation again. This one is used to being hunted. I get a good look at it's head, but little else. Strangest lizard I have ever seen. Large dark green head with a small mouth. Most lizards are more mouth than anything else. When I don't hear anything for a bit I look under the cot again and see an empty space. Ah, a slight gap in the tent edge. I move the cot and fix the edge. Would not stop a burrower, but maybe I will not have any more visits from this particular species.

I decide to rest even if I can't sleep. I will need it tomorrow.

I don't remember when I actually fell asleep. I had the strangest dreams.

“Captain, breakfast will be served in fifteen.”

“Thanks.” I get up, wash, get dressed and head for the latrine. I may grow to miss that janitor.

“We will have the sunrise readings in a few minutes.” Good.

“Captain, try the eggs. Excellent.”

“Thank you private, I will.” I get in line. Looks like everyone is trying the eggs. When I get to the front however, there appears to be none left. I reach for the pancakes instead. One of the cooks pulls out a plate with eggs and hands it to me.

“Saved you some Captain. We are all thankful to be allowed on the first run outside.”

“This will be no cakewalk Corporal.”

“Better than being in the tin can. Hot sauce?” I wave him off. I am from New York and definitely not used to the New Mexico style of covering everything in fire. What would be the point? You can't possibly taste a thing after covering anything in that.

The eggs are good. Strange meat? We don't have real meat. Only syn and I don't care if it is genetically the same, it's not. This is not syn.

“Good huh?”

“Yes, where did the meat come from?”

“You noticed. Guess.”

“I have only seen two species that have come close to us, bugs and lizards. So, I am guessing lizards.” I set my plate down. I had only had one bite. Hope it was not too much.

I raise my voice, “Attention!” Everyone straightens up and comes to attention.

“We will not be eating ANYTHING more from the outside until it is cleared as safe. Something killed everything higher than a mammal or bird out here. Until we know what and how, assume all edible material is really poison. Do I make myself clear?” Several turn and throw up. Wish I could. “Get ready to clear out in ten.” Everyone hustles. I did not give them much time because I don't want everyone throwing up and ending up weaker than kittens.

I find med, “Doc, put everyone here on the assumed infected list.”

“That will mean three months of decom.”

“I know, but I will not risk infecting everyone inside with what happened outside.”

I find Lee, “I want to make as good of time as possible to Salt Lake. We are a hundred and fifty clicks outside the city limits as the crow flies. I want to be there by sunset. We may not have much time to figure this out.”

“Before we all come down with whatever killed them.” I don't even acknowledge. We have all be handed a death sentence because of the need of a few to impress. I thought they were all briefed. Just because it looks healthy does not mean it is not a carrier. I hope my friend did not

end up in the eggs. I don't eat my friends. Stupid. So stupid.

We are north west of Salt Lake. Highway eighty is south of us. We were hiding after all. We could have come out closer, but I wanted to see the edge of the forest.

It takes them twenty. I was expecting thirty. Good enough.

"I am taking point. Lieutenant, I want you in the last trans. Keep your eyes out for what every comes out after we pass to see what we are."

"You got it."

"Stop right at the edge Sargent. I want to see it more closely."

"Something wrong?"

"This entire situation is wrong Sargent. Did you see the lizards they used in the eggs? I mean before they were cooked."

"There was one in our tent. Scooted out fast. Smart. It had gotten in by operating the latch. I feel bad about them being caught."

"How did they do it?"

"Stun field. They set out bait and when enough went for it, they set it off. Never knew what hit em."

"Any get away?"

"A few."

"You won't be able to use that trick again." They will learn to avoid us.

We stop at the edge. I get out.

"Oh this is very strange. Look at this tree. It is cut in half right at the edge. and it is at least a meter above the surface of the desert here. And over there, the desert is higher. Looks like there was a stream there." A few trees have actually fallen into our circle.

Several more people are looking at the edge.

"We need to find a way south. Look for a route." Eventually we should run into the remnants of highway eighty. Surely something as solid as that could not disappear too.

"Lee, ever seen anything like this?"

"Not on this scale. The diameter is three kilometers. Sensors would have picked up seismic from earth movers that big. Cut is too clean. I know nothing that can slice wood this cleanly. Notice all the sap too. Recent, still very sticky."

"I am guessing it must have happened at night, but why didn't the sensors report the change in time?" Because they were all cut at the same time.

"Unless they knew higher up but aren't telling." Exactly what I was thinking. Can't believe so much got past them.

"Captain, we have walked a quarter of the perimeter but all we have found is one deer trail going south about a half click east of here."

“Vehicles?”

“Crawlers could make it part way, but too narrow to get the entire way there.”

“Sounds like we are walking and we won't get there tonight.” There goes my nice comfortable tent too. Running in the gym is not the same. Better go easy to start.

“Lee, I want two to scout ahead of us and two behind to be sure no one is watching us. Have one crawler take water and food as far in as it can and still turn around. Park it facing back this way. Let's move out ASAP.”

“Check.” I get my own gear ready. Bedding, weapons and a weeks worth of food. Water does not look to be a problem, but we each carry a gallon just in case. Everyone is in good shape, the General made sure of that. I key in a nanopulse to alert HQ what we are going to do. I am in command here and won't hear from them in return. Not reassuring in this case. Once we enter the forest we will be sitting ducks in these desert fatigues.

“Tell the troops not to forget to switch to green when we are in the forest.” The camoes are the newest tech. Creepy the way they will blend in given a chance. Newest tech as of five plus years ago that is. No new tech we don't do ourselves from here on out. Not that all in the hole is high tech. There will be a lot of grunt to get things started again. A lot.

I fall in behind a few people in the front. We will trade off as the day proceeds. The trail is a little wider than any deer I have ever seen, but not wide enough for transport. The crawler does not use wheels and looks more insect and truck. It can go almost anywhere it can fit. Well, not up a cliff, but nearly. Normally I would put the crawler in front, as it is armored, but we have not seen any indication of any human existence. I want to see what's coming.

We walk for an hour through pine and spruce and a few that I don't recognize. Lots of ferns. Lots of bugs. Still no birds. No sign of even mice. Lizards of all kinds. Most of them you don't see so much as hear. We are veering to the north. We will end up on the north side of Salt Lake, never mind the city. Really not much more than a puddle by New York standards. The Great Lakes, now those are lakes.

We veer to the south east and walk for another couple of hours before I call a halt.

“Where are those scouts?” They should have caught up with us by now.

“Water up ahead. We were just starting to see it through the trees.” Impossible. We are well south of the Great Salt Lake and there should be no trees within kilometers of the shore. Too much salt. Could be a

smaller lake I suppose. No sign of anyone. Not even ruins. Strange.

“Let's eat here. Ration bars and water only. I don't want to waste time with camp yet.” We each take care of ourselves. It has gotten to the point where I don't even pay any attention to what flavor I am eating any more. We are being watched. I can feel it. I look around me. There seems to be a lizard under every bush and even some up the trees themselves. Lizards climbing trees? Little ones okay, but these are not so little. Some must weigh in at five kilos at least.

I toss a piece of ration bar on the ground and no one reaches for it. No way they could have communicated this far from our nest. Must be the number of people and the noise.

“Okay, let's fall out.” I fall back to watch the lizards after we leave. As soon as we leave they descend on the scraps left behind. We are messy eaters.

A half hour later everyone has stopped up ahead. I can see a clearing in the trees. I make my way through the others to see what they are looking at.

“Whoa!” Even I am impressed. This is no small lake. This is huge. I can't see the shore on the other side. I test the water. Not salty, but not exactly fresh either. Not sure we can drink it safely even if the sensor says we can.

“This has to be Salt Lake, but what happened?”

“I don't know. I don't know.”

“Captain, the ridge crew is back.” Good, about time.

“Captain, Corporal Spires reporting.”

“Go ahead Corporal.”

“Captain, ah, I am not sure how to say this.”

“Spit it out Corporal. My job to interpret.”

“Yes ah, Captain.” Hard for them to get used to the gender neutral directive. “You remember the salt flats west of us? Well, they're gone. There is a lake there now. Huge one, bigger than the Great Salt Lake.” I picture the area in my mind and a more detailed map comes up on my display. The salt flats merge with the Great Salt Lake to the north. That also means the water we saw is likely connected.

“What about Salt Lake City?” Likely under water. I sent them up at night to see if there were any lights, camp fires at least.

“Nothing Captain. Nothing visible at all. Not even a road. No sats either. At least not where they would be expected.” Was worried about that. We are on our own. I don't know how it happened. A new kind of weapon maybe. It will take us a week to get to what should be Salt Lake City, but I am not sure it is worth it. I doubt there is anything there. Under water and gone.

“Lieutenant, how far are we away from Highway Eighty?”

“We should have crossed it an hour ago according to my readings. With the sats out it is hard to be certain.”

“Corporal Spires said he saw no evidence of any roads. We both know they should have been easily visible from the ridge even with the trees.”

“I agree. What do you want to do?”

“Call this farce off and let the sci ops in. The wildlife and plants do not match anything I have seen before. We are here. It would be better if we learn as much as possible as soon as possible. Have you seen any indication of sentients?”

“You should like you don't believe we are on earth?”

“We are on earth, but it has changed since we cocooned. I don't know how or why. The fact we have not seen the cause troubles me. I want to be prepared.”

“And not trapped in a rabbit hole.”

“Not our call to make.” But I certainly agree. Everything but this conversation has been reported back to HQ. “Let's go home. We need a reptile expert. Do you know who on staff is qualified.”

The Lieutenant laughs, “You are not going to believe this. We certainly did not need his help inside, so he was put to a more useful task.”

I look at her questioningly.

She finally responds, “The Janitor in green sector.”

“Do me a favor and keep him a private.”

“Normally sci ops are given the courtesy of at least junior lieutenant and he is old enough to be a colonel at least.”

“We will only need him for a few weeks. Make him a master Sargent. We stay outside to supervise. I don't want this going to his head. We will also need to keep the insect person out along with the botanist. Have them all report to us when we reach base.” At least I get my tent again.

Meeting

“How many worlds did your group find starting from E0?”

“Only a handful fortunately. Not really into it. They decided it was better to let the other earths develop on their own. We went outwards instead.”

“Was that safe without a full understanding of the froth and the 'thn?”

“We didn't know any better. Seems really foolish now, but no great harm came of it.”

“The 'thn probably made sure of it.”

“I suspect. You realize the enormity of the task?”

“We have close to a million worlds within the multicellular time span alone. We have already found a line that never went beyond a few thousand cells. Lots of species, just none larger. Go to the beginning of life and it goes way up from there. Bacteria still outnumber us by orders of orders of magnitude, even in base ten. This is assuming that approximately every thirty five million years there is a froth on all worlds. We know from my world that sometimes things do go wrong. Even accounting for all that we are looking at millions of worlds that will support our life forms at least. Many with no sentients.” Expansion room or space for more experiments.

“How far back does pink go?”

“We don't know yet. At least three billion, maybe more. Hard to tell without intervening worlds to align with. Still makes no sense why I found that one first.”

“Alignment is a problem. Interesting how we always end up on an earth even though it is likely they are all in different positions around the sun. Minor variations all add up over time. We can cross the universe in a single jump, but here on our own world it is confusing still.”

“Except for maybe the most recent frothing.” I nod. It is good to be among sentients again. For too long I was with OM. Of course OM knew about the froth, but OM does not give information so much as use it. She is perfectly willing to discuss what you already know of course. Time with OM is too expensive right now as well. A minute with her can be days with us or even years if you get in deep enough. There are too many questions.

“Lily, Long Tail and Bait are okay at least. The storm did a lot of damage, but we got them out of the way in time.”

“If you would let them use their gifts they would have been safe.”

“Not against a tornado. You have never experienced one of them. Even you and I could not take one on directly. Using a little creativity we

could, but they are neither powerful enough nor experienced enough yet to even try.”

“Bubble it in the right place and it would fall apart.”

“But humans don't gain that gift until level six. And I doubt a level four ceph could do more than annoy it.”

“It is sentient? I detected nothing alive.”

“Not sentient, but very tricky. Never underestimate one Rooi.”

“We need to get to the moon city soon. They should be getting desperate enough soon to agree to help us.” Maybe not. Humans are different than ceph.

“Did you want to come along on this one?” A carrot, er, a fish for my friend.

“Very much. You may be used to space travel, but the most I have experienced was in orbit around the dead earth.”

“The others are more experienced than I am, especially Mei.”

“Going to the edge the hard way. Amazing that she survived.” True. “Will we use a TK ship to go to the moon?”

“No idea. You know we only pretend to be in charge.” She tries to laugh, gives up and signs it instead. I return the sign.

“What do you think of Mandhi's idea of a joint scientific station to help investigate the worlds.”

“I think it is a good one. She has come a long way in automating the gate. It will not be without danger however. What if they find another dead world?”

“Safe guards need to be built in obviously.”

“We should be able to work something out in a few thousand years.”

“Humans have peaked and their civilization will not be tech competent for many thousands of years, especially if we do it slower this time. We lose a lot of time if we wait until then. We have the expertise now. Let them know the risks. Humans are amazingly creative. They are good at solving problems.”

“I will insist that the base is on a dead world to start from.”

“Would you settle for one that at least has air and oxygen? Maybe a lichen world?”

“Cold, but it will be far from the known sentient worlds at least. Very little chance of finding a super sentient.”

“Except a super sentient would most likely hide in such a place to avoid having to deal with us lower life forms. It is interesting that we have not found a world with one yet.”

“Like you said, they probably want their privacy. Not sure we should go looking for them either.”

“Probably not. The other possibility is that we are the supers. All that

this froth has produced.”

“Unlikely with the mushrooms, the magma and the sun all sentient. Oh and the collective life forms.”

“OM is on every world with life. Just not always successful at bringing the sentients to spawning level.”

“Any idea what she is doing on E1 yet?”

“I am sure she is upset with our evacuation effort. She brings them up to near spawning level and we take them away. She will have to start over with some other species. Likely to take ten million years at least.”

“We will allow them back eventually.”

“Right, only much more intelligent and wary. You realize that the pollution was her doing? It was the only way to force us to produce the tech she wanted.”

“Also explains why she was never able to spawn on my world. Did the Nauti know?”

“Likely. They were hiding the black 'thn after all. Probably could not afford to have the world spawn and expose the gifted to their part in the plot. As long as it looked like they were shepherding the cephs they looked normal. They extended that out as long as necessary for you to be formed.”

“Why did the 'thn not just look for the black 'thn themselves? Surely they did not need us.”

“They did. They were not allowed to repro themselves. They had to pretend at least to be needing help from others.”

“And we took it to the end of time so as to not to let them mess with any other worlds with the strength of a gamete form.”

“Probably barely had enough time to sporulate before the compression hit them.”

“Think the spores survived the push through?”

“It is what they were designed to do. Only this time they did not have enough time to pack them with knowledge ahead of time. The next universe will at least have an equal chance starting out.”

“There is that. Should be interesting.” She signals amusement.

“The question is what exactly are we doing then?”

“We will think of something to make the current 'thn nervous.”

“Would not have it any other way. To think we used to be called the Guardians of Br'thn.”

“We are protecting them from themselves.”

“Maybe.”

Paradise

I am no longer called Runt! I have a real name now. I am called Ozi. A real name. We follow the Guardians Rule and do not receive names until we reach the age of reason. I have today reached the age of reason. I passed all my tests. I can com in Standard, Dino, Ceph and Bluefin. I know my numbers in base eight, ten, three and two. I know the rules of sentients: Do not pollute, do not repro beyond the allotment, do not kill any sentient other than your own. Oh and always do what a Gifted says even if it makes no sense as long as it does not go against the other rules.

My adoptive parents are great. They treat me with respect. I still have to do chores, but I am not a slave any longer. Everyone works, not just me. I am being taught the knowledge of the wise. A mixed group of people that all had past experience in the desert in common. Before my naming I had to go on Walk-About to learn the wisdom of life. That was easy for me. I have been studying life since before we came to New Home. The Guardians approve of our community and have blessed it with recognition and the privilege of learning with other communities in the ways of Truth and Life. Wally says that I will be a teacher for sure one day.

Our Healer has asked me to get some herbs for her. I like collecting herbs and bugs for her. I like anything that gets me outside away from the community. I like everyone well enough, just I need to be alone a lot. I don't understand this need, but our Wise Ones say this is a special gift that I will grow to understand and appreciate with time. All I know is that I am teased by others near my age for it. It makes me want to come outside even more. Too bad that most of the chores that need to be done need to be done with others.

I am free today, that is all that matters. Our year is shorter on New Home, but our day is longer. We all get an extra hour of sleep at night which suits me fine. Dream Time is very important. This is one of the Truths that I am certain of. There are times when I think I would rather spend my life in Dream Time rather than in waking time.

I follow my usual route. People are so used to routine that at least withing sight of others it is best that they think they know where I am going. My true intention is to circle around though and investigate a new area upstream from a branch of Clay Root Creek that Healer wants to keep quiet for the moment. She says that there might be some slippery sleep plant there. It helps when people get stressed out. Also makes a good soap and axle grease.

Problem is, is that when mixed with ada bark, fermented and distilled it becomes a powerful hallucinogen. Used by the Adept it is safe, but

used by thrill seekers and it can ruin a community fast. Highly addictive. Too many people have figured out how to make it. I suspect the neighboring community. There are some bad people there. They especially hate me for some reason. Maybe because I have thwarted too many of their plans, any one of which would have gotten us in trouble with the Guardians. Any fool can see that.

Ada bark is ubiquitous but slippery sleep is not. Healer would rather destroy it all than let it ruin us. Anyone follows me and I am under orders to destroy this patch as well. Headaches, dirty clothes and sleds are better than destruction. Actually there are alternatives for everything but the headaches. I can live with that.

Best to come to the creek from above. No one goes into the haunted hills of Dead Man's Bones. Named that because of the resemblance to a pile of bones. Rocks of course. People have heard howling sounds attributed to ghosts. I doubt there are ghosts, but even I won't come out here on a full moon at night. Bullies might take advantage of someone alone out there. They have been warned not to touch me, but accidents do happen. They hope.

It is hot today. It is near noon now. I am nearly to Dead Man's Bones, which are clearly visible. I try and stay to the shadow side of the rocks as I climb higher. Near the top I see a dark cave underneath some large boulders. Had not noticed it before. Maybe some shifting opened it up. Good time to rest. I squeeze inside. I can hear water dripping. Must be a spring. Too high up to be runoff. Water is life here. Some would see the existence of this small source of water as more precious than the slipper sleep plant. So many secrets. We always knew there must be water up here. Otherwise there would be no plants or small trees. Just until now, no one had actually seen it. Trees can put roots down to the water.

The Wise Ones do not need to remember where water is, they understand how things are. They would have known of this spring before they had ever been here.

I dip my hands into the water and give thanks and ask for blessing on all. Only then do I carefully sip enough to quench my thirst and not a drop more. The water tastes sweet. Pure water with a taste of the rocks around us. The pool is too small for much more than a drink.

I awaken to a sound. People are up here with me. I peer out of my hidden place and see no one. I keep motionless and quiet. A moment later I hear voices. I recognize them. The bullies from Far Meadows. I shudder from fear. I would not stand a chance up here alone with them, even in daylight. I remain as quiet as I can, though I am sure that my pounding heart will give me away.

When I calm down enough to realize that they don't know I am here I

hear a growl. A low plaintiff cry actually. An animal, not fully grown and surrounded by them. I want to growl myself. How can I help it without sacrificing myself though. I look around my cave. Besides the small pool of water there is gravel and some rocks about hand size. I could maybe hurt one, but stop no one. After they finished with me they would finish the creature.

A scream pierces the cave and reverberates. Only a mountain cat can make that sound. They are sacred and untouchable, a recognized sentient. They could all be hanged for doing what they are doing! I have to survive to tell others. No, I have to do something to save it, even if I die.

I look around me again. I spot some stink beetles near a small entrance. They have come inside to escape the sun as well and will go forth as soon as the sun sets. Do I have that long? If what they say is amplified then it is possible the return is true. I will have to be very careful.

It is quiet. They must be tired and resting in the shade themselves. I hope the cat is not in the noon sun. If my plan is to work, I would have a better chance once the sun goes down. I need to get the beetles before they leave. I get out the pouch I intended to put the slippery sleep leaves in. It should work. I gently gather one beetle at a time and place it in the pouch. If I disturb them too much they will let their stink go. So far, so good. I place them in the coolest part of the cave to keep them quiet and not escape. I add a few drops of water to one corner of the pouch. They will drink the water and then they will rest to let it absorb into their bodies.

It is actually cold in here. My body has accustomed itself to the summer weather outside. I am shivering slightly. I won't be able to move when the time comes. It would be best to rest as well. I curl up to keep warm, with my pack protecting my back. It is hard, but I fall asleep with my face towards the light.

I wake with a start.

“I think it's dead. Sun was too much for poor kitty kitty.” Laughter.

“One less stupid cat eating our stock.” Cats don't eat keras. A local creature that is sort of a cross between goat and an iguana.

“We need to bury it. A dead cat brings questions.”

“Good, you make sure it's dead then. A wounded cat can take an eye out.”

“Just throw a few rocks at it. If it moves just add more rocks till it doesn't.”

I have to act now or never. I grab a few large rocks and drag them across the walls and start to moan. My shivering actually enhances my voice by adding a vibrato to it. I try and keep it as low as possible.

“What's that!?”

I moan then remember the beetles. I step on the pouch and scatter them. The cave fills with the most awful smell. I hope it gets outside before I vomit.

“You have committed a crime most heinous against all rule of sentient beings. You will be hunted, hanged, and slowly and cruelly gutted after being fed your own manhood. You worms of death worth less than lizard dung.” They are silent at their end.

“What's that smell?” I strike the rocks in a slow pattern imitating steps and repeat my chant. I try to get louder each time.

“Let's get out of here before the ghost gets us!”

As they leave I continue my stomping and cursing until I can't hear them any longer. I can no longer smell the beetles, but I am sure I reek of them. I hunt through my pack for something that will hold water and finally decide on the pack itself. I fill it full of the precious water and carry it as fast as I can outside. It is loosing water rapidly. I have to hurry.

I get outside and there is only a little light remaining. The sun sets fast over the desert. The bullies will have retreated back to their oasis and green zone, if they don't stumble in the dark. Probably planned to stay up here somewhere for the night. Boy were they pissed when we were praised having only a patch of desert when they had everything but were placed on probation.

“Where are you Cat?” They had to be fairly close for us to have heard each other. Finally, as nearly all the water is gone, I see it. It is tied to several stakes. They had looped ropes around three paws and then staked the ropes down well out of reach of the teeth and the last paw. I am not sure it is alive. I bring the pack to its mouth and set it down. Then I go to each stake and remove it. A wounded animal may not know my purpose is just.

I see a tongue reach out to the water pooled near it. It is far too weak to be a threat to me. I move the pack closer, wringing the remaining water out. I then cut each of the three lines from its legs. I see it is a she. Even more of a crime, even if she looks like only a yearling. I massage her paws to bring the blood back. She will be hungry and need more water.

I wring the rest of the water out that I can and go back to the cave to get my rations and more water.

When I return she has gotten onto her front paws, but her rear ones are still splayed out sideways.

“Here try these. Dried stone lizard. Not too bad if you are hungry. We don't raise creatures ourselves.” I break it up a bit to make it bite size. I add a little water to moisten it. A tongue reaches out and snags a few to disappear into her mouth. Mostly she wants water.

A few more runs and I have depleted the pool until it can refill.

“That's all there is for now.”

You stink monkey.

“What?” I look around to see where the words have come from. If the bullies have found us, we are all dead. “We had better get you in the cave so they don't find us.” How am I going to see in the dark? If I did not memorize where the cave was I would already be lost.

I can see fine. I will guide you. Who said that? I am weak from fear.

As you should be in the presence of a glorious one. I look at my patient.

I know I am crazy, but if it works does it matter? We had rumors of Cats being able to mind read, but thought that is was just stories to scare us away from them.

“Which way from here?”

Nothing.

“I'm sorry your highness. Forgive my manners. I am inexperienced in the ways of the Glorious Ones. With you as my teacher I am sure I will learn quickly.”

So, you wish to eat me as they did my mother? I warn you, you will suffer greatly if you try. A growl accompanies the thoughts.

I am so shocked that I throw up what little is in my stomach and back away from her.

“I would rather die than dishonor you in that way.” I try and remember classes we had on Cats. I rise up and remove my shirt to expose my belly. “Take me now if you don't believe me. May my sustenance assist you in your healing.” I wait for the pain that will surely follow. At least it will be quick. She is too weak to play with me.

Do you have any more lizards? Not my favorite, but they will do. I quickly get the rest of them out and place them before her. She slowly consumes them. My own stomach growls, but I don't comment.

They will not return until morning to see if I am dead. Your kind is afraid of the dark. She says this last with obvious contempt.

“Then we can rest here safely. If you will allow me I would move us closer to the rocks to stay warmer. If you like I can make us a fire.

Fire would bring attention. Fire is not expected in this area. You may move me. She does not fear fire as most cats would. Good.

She is too heavy to lift. I will have to drag her. She has been injured in so many places. “This will hurt, but so would freezing to death, which would be very easy in your condition. When it gets light I can find herbs to help.”

Proceed.

When I move her, she yowls, but I continue until we are against the

wall. I push her against the wall and then I curl up around her to form a second wall. I fall asleep wrapped around her. We keep each other warm. I am glad it is summer. We would both be dead in the winter from the winds.

My dreams are filled with visions of what happened to her. I see the bullies clearly. The same ones who always tried to get me. I see what they did to her mother. A mother who hid her child to no avail. What could be worth so much to them to destroy so much of an intelligent life?

I awaken before dawn. Cat still sleeps. The oasis where the bullies live is someways away, assuming they went all the way back. I quickly make my way to the edge of the forest below. Not really a forest, just an area of more trees than the sparse ones in the desert proper. I gather the slippery sleep and a few other herbs I see. I also gather enough branches and vines to make a sling sled. I hurry back. I have still not eaten and my stomach reminds me. Others will start to worry soon that I have not returned.

You could have taken a bath while you were down there.

“Good morning to you too Cat. Do you have a name?”

Nothing that you would understand.

“Fine, Cat it is. I am making something to help relieve the pain.”

There is honor in pain.

“Now that is foolishness. In pain we can't defend ourselves if they return. In pain it will take longer for you to heal.”

I make a tea and offer this to Cat. She reluctantly drinks it and falls asleep. I leave to set some traps. Without food both of us will be in trouble soon enough. We also need some protection. I am not one who enjoys hurting anyone, even bullies, but I will not sacrifice Cat to them.

They will have to come this way to get us, unless they can climb the steep side of the rocks. I am very intense when I work and quickly loose track of time.

I think you have done enough claw deprived monkey.

“I do have a name honored one. I am called Ozi.” Good to see her up.

Names have to be earned Stink.

“I saved you butt lizard breath.”

A good start.

“I need to check the traps. Try not to set this one off or I will be one facing the gallows for kittycide.” Fortunately there are unlikely to be any other cats in the area. They tend to be pretty spread out. I hope.

She sniffs the ties on the people trap.

Monkey puzzles, not good.

“We will see.” I make my way carefully round the trap and take off. She stays where she is. Not that strong yet. I make good time. Mostly

small rodents. Not enough to get fat on, but enough for a meal. Oh, and look at this. I cautiously approach it. A large grunter. We call them that because the sound they sometime make when they charge. Very short legs, but very strong. They can dig out a burrow amazingly fast. This one is still alive and dangerous. The long tail is also a weapon.

My knife is sharp, but way too short to provide much use. I need to immobilize its head and the tail. Right now, the snare only has one back leg securely. I find a tree branch with a Y in the right place. After a couple of attempts I manage to pin the neck. Now the tail is whipping around at me. Trying to anticipate the pattern I lunge when I think I can do it and stab the grunter in the heart. The tail wapps me good on the side and it is me who grunts. Hurts good. I will have a bruise for sure.

Gradually the tail becomes less and less active. I wait for it to stop completely. The front is very dead, blood coming out the mouth. The tail has a mind of its own. Finally I grow impatient and jump on the tail and while holding it down cut it off. It still wiggles, but with no body to work against it can no longer harm me.

I grab the tail by the small end and the head by a front leg. We have enough for days now. I am also leaving a blood trail. I decide to take a long route back to discourage a searching bully. I cross back and forth over my path several times to confuse them even more.

By the time I get back, Cat is watching from the cave. I carefully negotiate my maze and almost drop my prize in the process.

You actually eat those things? Disgusting.

“Wait till I am finished. We will need a fire for this unfortunately.”

Smoke will bring company.

“Maybe. I am ready in that way too. I seeded the stakes in shit. Even if they kill us they won't live long.”

“And what if they are already here?” Who? What? “You need to watch the signs better son. I did not hide my approach. Did not want to offend your friend with your lack of abilities.”

Not sure Stink is a friend yet. Maybe. The man laughs and comes out.

“Father? What are you doing here? How did you know?”

“Simple Ozi, you were not hiding your path on the way out. No reason. Healer told me where you were going. I was not worried until you did not show up this morning. From this point I would have expected you to be more careful. Then I found all the traps. Good job, I have taught you well. I doubt they would have seen them before they walked into one in their rage.” I can't help but look towards Cat.

“Has she told you what happened?”

“I did not need her story to know it. Those three have been causing problems for some time, as you well know. I can see the cuts healing on

her paws and her dehydrated and famished frame. Her paws are rough, she has been running for some time. There are several broken claws, she had to defend herself, but was over powered. There is blood on the back of her head. It was how they finally got her. The story is all here.

Including what happened next. The air still smells of stink bugs. The two of you survived the night by being with each other. There is fur on your coverlet and pack. There are the snares and rather lethal stakes set out. That means you fear for your lives. You expect them to return. That means you are not sure you scared them off for good. Also means you have not done anything to hurt them yet.

Let me help you tear this down. It will not be needed now. We will all leave before they arrive.”

I am still holding the grunter. I make to set it down.

“We will bring it with us and use it as an excuse for our activity so as not to alarm the others.”

“What about Cat? I can't leave her. Not now.”

“She will always be welcome with us. Besides, we have an understanding. Charges will need to be made for her mother's death.” He frowns when he says the latter.

“It grows late. We need to hurry.” I carefully trip the traps and then work rapidly to scatter the pieces. I look down to see a pool of blood from the grunter.

My father sees it too. “I think we will leave that here. They won't know it is not her blood.” Good idea I think. It was awfully close.

“What about the missing body?”

We often hide our passing. No one wants their enemy to know for sure. Better they think you are still plotting their deaths.

Nasty. She definitely has a dark side. Not that I can blame her after what has happened.

My father, Cat and I go back to our settlement. We are in our summer place right now. In the fall we will move to our winter place south west from here and further from the Far Meadows group who do not move. In fact we rarely stay in one place even from year to year. making new shelters each time. The Far Meadows group has permanent cabins. Must be hot in the summer and damp in the winter. No thank you. Besides, cooped up inside has got to make you crazy. Might explain their behavior?

We don't think of a shelter as home. The entire world is New Home, there are no other homes. History class taught us that humans used to settle like the Far Meadow group in large accumulations of shelters with each shelter designated as a home for one family. Very strange. We mix and match where we stay depending on where we are when we are tired

enough to sleep.

I think Cat is going to like living with us. She has been treated like a Queen since she arrived. Everyone likes to give her treats and groom her. Her strength has come back, her wounds healed.

It will be fall soon. People are starting to get anxious about moving soon. It will take us a moon to make the trek. If we go too slowly we will deplete the wildlife in the sparse areas. Something we don't want to do or there would be nothing to eat when we come back.

My father, who is our leader this year, returns from the regional center. We have not heard anything more from the bullies or the Far Meadows group since the incident.

He goes directly to Cat, "You are well enough to travel now?" Cat nods. Didn't know she knew that expression.

She looks at me confused by my thought, *I have been among your kind too long Ozi, I am becoming a monkey.* She does not appear pleased by this.

"Then our timing is good. Ozi will learn how to become more Cat." Huh?

He then leaves us to converse with the other elders. No decision is ever made alone that affects others. A leader is a coordinator not a dictator.

"What do you think this means Cat?"

I have heard stories about the center. We will need to go there for the trial.

"What's a trial like? I remember from history class that the victims and the accused did not speak, only people hired by them. This meant the people with more power always won."

I have not been to one myself. If the charges are serious enough, then a Ceph or other Gifted will be present. Killing another sentient not in self defense is a capital offense. That is serious.

"How long will it take?"

Each who needs to com will do so. Then the Ceph will decide. Rarely takes longer than a small portion of a day. It is best to prepare by carefully thinking on what has happened and what it will mean.

"When do we need to be there?"

In less than one moon. Not fair to either victim or accused to take longer. It took time for your father to return. We have less than one moon to return. It would be best is we left as soon as the elders are done.

"I will go get my pack and belongings. Oh and a few days food and water. I think there is still some jumper with faga root spice." I know she likes that combination.

I remain to wait for them.

When I return they are all around Cat explaining things I hope.

“Cat told you. Good. Safe journey. We will meet you at the winter place if all goes well.” He smiles, then turns and leaves to go about his tasks. Once named I am expected to take care of myself, with help when needed.

It would be better if I lead the way. We want to avoid the Far Meadows group. They are likely to be antagonistic. My kind knows paths they don't know about. We will travel primarily at night to avoid detection and conserve water. I nod I understand.

We start at a slow run in the late afternoon. The ground is still hot. Once we reach a few shade trees we stop. Cat smells all around the trees.

We will rest here until night. There is a moon tonight to help you see. Implying that she does not need it. I am not convinced it will be enough. I have not been far in this direction since we came to New Home ten years ago. I rest more than sleep. Too much on my mind. Interestingly I feel nothing from Cat. She hides her thoughts. That does not make me feel better.

We go.

I can't see that well, so I follow her lighter color as a guide. I trip many times. I am going to be quite sore before this journey is done.

Or you will learn to run like a Cat.

At the moment I feel that is a slim possibility.

I did not think Cats ran long distances.

We do when running towards prey.

“Or away from a predator.”

Only three dare hunt us and they will pay.

I am puffing when I speak. I wish I could mind speak as she does.

I can see your thoughts. You need not speak, just think as if you were speaking. I will understand.

That will make it easier. Why not just go after them yourself. Surely they would not catch you a second time.

They have taken one of ours. If I take the three who did this, then they will take more of my friends and relatives. Soon a war will be formed and many on both sides will die for no reason. We are not stupid monkeys as you own past has shown. We will try the official way first. There is always time for war, only we will leave none to seek revenge.

That is a scary thought. Good thing we are on good relations with you.

Yes, a good thing.

And I thought I was just doing the right thing.

We are not so hung up on morals. We rest here for water.

What water? I am exhausted when I stumble into it and almost trip

over Cat.

Do not stir up the mud stupid monkey.

I am too tired to complain and just drink as much water as I can.

Slowly. We still have long to run and full of water you will be slow.

I stop and lie on my back instead. I don't care I am in the water. I should be cool, but with all the running I am not.

Up, we go.

I am going to regret saving you.

Maybe.

I don't even remember when we finally stop near sunrise. I am asleep under a rock overhang when the sun comes up. At noon I wake enough to eat and pee. It is too hot to run thank goodness. I sleep again.

Time to go. Eat some for strength.

I never see you eat.

I find food while you sleep.

By the third day I am less tired and better able to keep up. We make good progress. I start to notice the world around me. We went into the desert a ways. The Far Meadows group avoid the desert unless they are after something, like a Cat. Unless somehow they see us, they will not come after us here. I can see the silhouette of the arid region to the right of us. More trees. They will keep to at least the arid region and more likely in pockets of wetter areas. Negotiating trees is slower, if they are following us. Their population is greater. They have been warned many times.

Cat suddenly stops and smells a tree with interest.

Fresh. We wait here.

But we have barely begun tonight. We will lose much time.

This is important and will not take long.

I slowly stretch so as not to lock up my legs.

A moment later a large Cat emerges from the brush so quietly I am startled.

If I had wanted to eat you, you would not have known.

His tail turned to me I see he is a large male. The most dangerous. The two of us would be no threat to him and there would be little evidence remaining.

He turns to me and snarls, *I did not start this snack. Don't tempt me.*

I try and keep my thoughts quiet and body motionless.

A moment later and with another snarl, he leaves as slowly as he came.

Good thing you stink so bad. We go.

What did he have to say?

Others flank us. Cats on our left and monkeys on our right.

How do they travel so fast?

They communicate by sound and light to more distant locations. It is not the same people who follow the entire way.

What about the three accused.

Guilty! They have had much time to gain the distance. They went straight there and have been there for some time. Your father saw them at the center. All are waiting for us now.

And if we don't make it then the charges will be dropped?

Maybe. We don't want to take the chance. That is why others watch out for us.

I did not know Cats did this.

Not a normal practice, but a war would be worse than loss of dignity and some hunting time. Many will fast for our benefit. Don't abuse it.

I try and run faster.

Occasionally I see flashes in the thin forest. I know what to look for once told. By what means do they do this?

Others will investigate and learn, we run.

I pick up my pace again and try to concentrate solely on running.

Suddenly Cat veers hard left. I don't see any large rocks or other obstructions. I look behind me when I think it might be safe and see several flashes behind us. Too far away to catch us, but Cat does run faster. I have to work hard to keep up with her. I finally stumble and hit my hand hard when I land. Cat comes to me and nudges me to get up then changes her mind and holds me down hard. I keep as still as an assassin beetle.

What is going on?

Several are making an attempt. Just a test really. I doubt they expected it to work. Would have been too easy by our standards. Even without being told I would have sensed them in time.

Suddenly I hear horrendous snarls and yowls, then quiet. I carefully look back and there are no more lights.

We did not kill them. We want no war. But they will not try again either. They know now we are not alone and none will tolerate interference.

We slow our pace, for which I am grateful. I had not even realized that I should have been worried. Now I don't have to?

If they figure out our path, they could lay traps or lie in wait. We will not be safe until we are before the Ceph.

We will meet a real Ceph then?

Not likely. Whomever sits on the honored dais is called the Ceph. Could be Dino, Blue, Pink even.

A Pink could mean years of waiting. Any species but Cat or monkey, I mean human is the only requirement. Each would be swayed by a dif-

ferent argument. No wonder they wanted to be there first. Knowing what culture the judge was from would give them an advantage.

Can Cats laugh? I suspect that my slip has amused her.

Knowing will not prevent their deaths. We both know the truth.

It takes four more days before we reach the center. There is not much to show for it. Looks no different than the surrounding area. The difference is, is that we had to go through the forest to get closer to the ocean. Only the Ceph themselves are allowed on the coast without permission and that is never granted for settlement. An honor guard of eight males, four on each side accompany us through the forest itself. No one comes near us. We take this last part slowly and are well rested by the time we arrive. Once at the center the eight leave. Or at least they are out of sight. What about on the way home?

“I am cold.”

Lack of fur can be a problem for an obviously inferior species.

The put downs would be funny if they were not so continuous.

Not meant to be funny.

“Look a Dino!”

Show offs. Look how he tries to gain attention.

“Oh like you don't.”

We earned it. We do not need to use false means.

I laugh, “Sorry, Cats are so full of themselves.”

And monkeys stink and talk too much.

A Ceph. I drop to the ground and raise my hands in the proper manner.

Cat sniffs me and asks, *What are you doing?*

“Get down stupid. They can dart you for rudeness for not honoring them. Didn't you study their culture in class?”

We spend little time studying inferior species unless they are good to eat. Since they are forbidden, there was no point.

“Humans have been in space and created great technologies.”

None of which are good to eat. No point. Monkeys waste too much time. Better to take a nap.

“Hmm, you might be right there. A nap would be good.”

Something touches my ankle. I look down to see a small Ceph. Before the age of naming I do not need to honor them. Instead I crouch down to get a closer look and am greeted with a squirt of water in the face. It signs to me to follow and not notice it. An unseen. Wow, an unseen.

I believe we are allowed to eat these?

“No, only the smallest ones and then only if you know the color of the day. Best not to though. Being darted is supposed to be very painful.”

That would thwart our purpose for being here. I hope they feed us.

Does not look like we will be able to hunt here.

“At least it won't be sand worms, stone nuts and babar leaves. I am really tired of those.”

We were allowed a part of a kill.

“Right, after ten others had all the good parts. We were left with the intestines. Raw. Rather have sand worms than raw cold intestines still full of their contents. Your people may want us to get there alive or maybe they don't. Maybe war is really what they want.”

She growls at me but sends nothing.

“But we are here alive. Let's do our task and hope for the best. It is clear to me that the Far Meadows clan will protect their own as well.”

My pride does not believe they will abide by the judgment. Therefore only a minimum effort was done to get us here. The fact that it was enough does not say much about monkeys.

“If the judgment goes your way. We could still lose. We really only have your word against three others.”

My honor is at stake! They could not disbelieve me! I will fight to the death to preserve it. I expect the same of you. She looks at me with the coldest stare I have ever seen her do. I swallow with fear and nod that I will. I hope I can live up to that promise.

We are taken to a large dome shaped structure. The Far Meadows clan does rectangular structures made from wood. I can't tell what these are made of, though we learned in class that it is a baked earth of high tech. I place my hand on it when we get near. Feels very smooth. I can see patterns raised on the surface. Ceph! I can read a few of the patterns.

“I think it tells the story of the builders of this structure. I am not sure of the dates they show. If I remember right, this structure could be several thousand years old.”

Ceph are even more crazy than you monkeys. What is the point of a permanent structure. If you have fur and claw, you have all you need.

“Maybe. Maybe there is something more. Have you noticed the stars at night. Class said we reach them in another earth. Would you not want to see all that is out there? I have seen two earths now. I want to see more.”

A monkey in the desert is not going to be chosen for that purpose. What do you have to offer them? I am too young. I am before naming. Her tail is hidden between her legs in shame.

“I'm sorry. I did not know. I thought your kind was named very early, two years I thought.”

It is nothing I wish to share. I massage her neck with sympathy. This is not good for our case. The witness of an unnamed is not given much credence.

Inside there are many people of several species waiting. We are led to the front and told to wait on a blue circle. There are bowls of water present in our circle.

“We are allowed to bathe if we wish. Considered an honor. Since there are two bowls, it would appear they are going to accept your words.”

There are three bowls in the red circle. Are they also honored? Outrage!

Just then the three come in like they are the Ceph themselves. They make a show of washing their hands and even splashing some in our direction. A shameful act for Cats.

We wait some time. No indication of what is to happen. The three are playing some game with each other and laughing. We sit quietly. This is making me nervous. I hope I don't forget something.

Don't think of anything else. Visualize the scene in your mind and simply describe it. Nothing else exists but the image in your mind. Just describe.

“Something is happening. Everyone is getting down on the floor. This time please do the same.” I get down and assume the honor giving gesture. Cat does her best, but she is not designed well for this move.

I glance over to the red circle out of the corner of my eye. They are doing the gesture properly. Not stupid then.

An interpreter says, “You may sit.” We sit on the floor to be as low as possible. The Ceph don't like species who are taller than they are. The dais is higher than we are for this reason also. Looks like it was raised just for this trial. There are assistants on each side of her. Guardians, both armed well. Honor guard I hope. They would not carry out a darting right here would they?

The Ceph rises slightly and signs that Cat is to show first.

~You testify first.~

Thanks. Do I send to just you or to everyone?

~Everyone would be best.~ I wonder if that is more difficult or easier. Easier would be my guess.

Cat gives her telling, just like the dream she sent to me. It is very detailed and exactly like I remember it. The smells are amazing. I am sensing the world through a Cat's nose so to speak. She probably knows the three better by smell than by sight. For me sight and sound. I know their voices really well. These guys actually enjoy torturing others. The small one is the leader, the tallest is not as smart as the other two. He is the muscle.

I did not know that Cats can talk in other's minds. When did they find out? They seem comfortable with Cat giving her showing in this manner.

How did they ever catch Cat's mother. If she could see their minds, she must have known about the danger. Unless she was protecting her kit. Why would Cat not show anything about this?

Because it is personal and does not involve the three. Keep quiet so I can do this with honor.

Oops.

She finishes and sits still.

The Ceph signs to me, ~You understand what I am showing?~

~Yes your honor,~ I sign back.

~You show well. I am honored that you put in this much effort. I am told you are capable in other com.~

~I also com in Green, Blue and some in Pink. Pink is the hardest because of the time needed.~

~I want you to do something for me. Without looking at anyone but me I want you to answer some questions. Important that you only look at me. You will be darted if you stray.~ I want to ask why, but dare not. I sign an affirmative.

~What species is the third sentient from the second pillar from the entrance door you came through and what are they covering themselves with?~

There is a slight urge to look, but fear of death is a real motivator.

I sign, ~Green sentient, E65C, male, judging from the shade of blue green on the crest feathers. An elder, judging from the size and condition of the scales on the hands. He is wearing a human cap made of cotton or other natural plant fiber. Must have traded for it. Bright red color matches an extract made from bark of the yarick tree. The insignia is of the Far Meadows clan. The medicine pouch around his neck is made of grunter leather, specifically the gonads of a large male. Because of the bead work it looks like the work of Leab, a respected craftswoman of the New Home clan. This suggests it is his first visit and he is collecting artifacts to bring home. Otherwise, he wears a standard tool belt. Level three or four tech. I don't know much about tech so I can't be sure. The second item on the left side does not fit with the rest. Too well made. If he traded for this it is beyond the tech of his world. I'm sorry, it might be in violation of code.~

~You may stop thank you. The reason I asked you was to demonstrate to the others your ability to notice your surroundings and your accuracy in recall. Damon Greggy you may give back the sampler to the Gifted who let you borrow it for this purpose.~ I hear commotion behind me. I still don't dare turn.

~Ozi, have you ever met the Cat beside you before the alleged crime took place.~

~I had never seen or met any Cat up close before that day.~

~Does your clan have close relations with the Cat pride in this area?~

~We were aware of each other, but had no need to interact. We hunt different game and respect each other's needs. For instance, we don't hunt at night. They don't hunt during the day, unless in extreme need. Sometimes a hunter will report having seen a Cat, but contact is limited. I did not even know before this that they could see minds. This was not mentioned in classes on the Cat sentients.~

~What of your relations with the Far Meadows clan?~ Why did they not ask these questions of you Cat?

Because they already knew the answers. I think she already knows my answers as well. Interesting. This means these answers are for others. Do the three look nervous?

They smell very nervous, but are trying to hide it.

~I have had some difficulty with the three in the red circle before today, but only during the summer when we are closer to their clan. The rest of the year we are too far apart for any interaction. We do not go into the arid areas and they rarely come into the desert unless they are looking for something they need. It would not be right for me to speak of other's feelings towards the Far Meadows clan. I have had no difficulty with anyone else in the clan.~

~You may give your story now.~

I relate all that had happened, including how I tricked them into leaving the Dead Man's Bones area and the condition Cat was in when I found her.

~Thank you.~ She turns to the red circle. ~You may show your version now.~

“We have been having a lot of trouble with stock disappearing, so we are naturally suspicious of the Cat prides. It is said that they don't eat kerra if they can avoid it, but the desert is a hard place to live. We have evidence of claw and bite marks that could have been made by a Cat. However, we don't have the necessary tech to be sure and have to give them the benefit of doubt.

When we were patrolling the edges of the Far Meadows clan area we noticed an injured Cat with her kit, the same kit as in the white circle. The fur patterns are distinctive enough. We attempted assistance, as is required of all sentients, but were unable to save her. The kit was so despondent that she lashed out at us in fear and grief. We had to tie her to save ourselves and prevent her from injuring herself. We were all set to let her go after she tired and make our own way back home when the New Home clan youngster intervened. Since we felt that our obligation to provide assistance had ended, we left them and returned home. We had to

run to make it before nightfall. As the New Home youngster has said, that is the agreed upon time for the Cat pride to hunt and we did not want to upset their hunt.”

They do not show! Rude. And total lies. An amazing fabrication. They seemed pleased with themselves. They never acknowledged that I am of age. They referred to me as if I was unnamed. When all you can do is lie, best to make your adversaries look worse. I whisper, “We are not going to win this one Cat.”

They will only save themselves for a short time. Their decision to lie and not return honor will have far reaching consequences.

~I will return my verdict in an eighth.~ She goes back behind the wall behind the white dais. We are free to roam about the room apparently. Food is brought in and set out. Sentients go to the low table and take what interests them. I am still too nervous to eat. Cat is taking a bath where she sits.

I stand and look around. The honor guard for Cat are all near the entrances. No one will get out they won't want to. That's strange, the three have not left the green circle. Some of the other Far Meadow's clan people have brought a basket of food from the table over to them. Flowers? I look around, there are no flowers anywhere else in the room. I look more closely. I know that flower. Shit, it is death angel! The look on their faces shows they know what it is also. It would seem that they are not so certain this will go in their favor.

What's that? I follow the one that attracted my attention. There it is again. Obsidian knife. Must be. Are the other's armed too? Why are the Guardians allowing this? Are they a threat to the Ceph? The one with the knife is slowly making their way to the others.

I smell fear. They are planning something stupid. Blood will flow.

“The Guardians are starting to get nervous as well. They sense something wrong.”

This may work to our advantage. Prepare to put ourselves between them and the Ceph. Even if we die, honor will be served by saving her. They will know then what we already know.

“True. What about the other Cats?” I am not that anxious to die just yet.

They will allow us the position of honor but will prevent the assassins from escaping. With two more bodies and an attempt on the Ceph's life the whole clan will be banished.

“I am unarmed. What can I do?”

I look around. Not exactly the kind of place one would find a weapon. Sand? On Ceph skin? That's got to hurt, but against humans it would not do much, even if I was lucky enough to get it into their eyes. I reach into

my pocket without thinking. I close my hands around something and bring it out. Egji needles. Kind of an evergreen. Strange shape to the leaves, triangular. I remember pine trees on Home. Not like these. The sand pots have incense sticks in them and a lot of ash. I crumble the leaves and mix them with the ash. The mixture is very irritating to the eyes, even the tiniest amount will blind you. Much better than sand. Nothing permanent, but blind they will be much easier to avoid and disable.

“I am ready.” I get my cloak ready to protect against a knife. Obsidian is very sharp, but shatters easily. My best chance is to catch it moving.

Her she comes. Cat gets ready to spring. Her claws come out.

“The Guardians are preceding her. They have tech weapons. Don't get into the way of those. I remember the demonstration.”

Understood.

“I can't read her and watch them at the same time.”

I will watch them. You watch her. Be prepared.

“Got it.” I turn to see her watching us. The Guardians are watching us as well. I would imagine that we look pretty silly. I have to unroll my cloak to answer her if she asks anything, which she almost certainly will. Shit, we are supposed to be sitting. I clumsily get down. More of a plop. A loud one.

~If we may proceed.~ Sorry.

~The Guardians have informed me of the desires of certain sentients in the room. This will not be allowed to happen. Understood?~ She takes her place on the white dais.

~Ozi and company. You may calm down. Thank you for your concern. Had my Guardians not been watching you, they would not have known what others were thinking.~ She signs so beautifully.

~The question is, how do we solve this situation without starting a war?~

She rises slightly as if to get a better look around the room. The Far Meadows clan and the Cats in the back, but try to make themselves smaller. So does Cat next to me.

~Ozi, do you have any ideas?~ Huh? Me? Shit! I'm just a kid, not a diplomat or negotiator.

I look around at the groups. I think of all the times that the three have bullied me and others. I suspect they did not just pick on New Home clan members. They would not have been given death angel as a reward for good behavior.

Far Meadows wants them to take the honorable way out and save them the indignity of performing the deed. They would be required to do so as no sentient can kill one of another species. Only a human could do

the deed and New Home has taken a vow of peace. On record. If one of us is accused, the entire clan will suffer. We believe in each other that much.

At the same time, Far Meadows clan is not without fault. They almost certainly knew what the three were doing. They need to be watched more carefully. They also need to be far away from the Cats to avoid the inevitable. One spark and the entire desert goes up.

~I have an answer.~

~Please rise so all can see your solution.~ That is an honor I am not worthy of. I am about to make a total fool of myself.

Your logic is sound. Rise with honor, even if they do laugh at you.

Thanks for the confidence. I rise, barely. I take a few deep breaths.

~This is just a proposal. I do not show with the authority of the Ceph.~ Duh! That was obvious.

Okay, start again, ~The Far Meadows clan is to be rewarded for bringing the three to justice. They could have hid them or dishonored the court by killing them before sentence had been passed. Therefore, the Far Meadows clan will be allowed to move to the area at the edge of the forest adjacent to the arid region. The game is good and the trees many, though not as such a forest. In the manner of their living, this will be an optimum area to live.~

I hear murmuring. They were not expecting me to say this.

~The Cat clan would do better in the forest itself, but have shown great stamina in their ability to adapt. However in the forest, they would grow fat and lazy. There is much honor in accepting a place of hardship and doing well. Cat clan would choose honor over pleasure.~ I hear a reassuring yowl from the back. Tails are erect and proud.

~I have learned much from being with Cat beside me. I am a better monkey for it.~ Snickers from that one. ~My own clan has honor and knows the desert well, but sometimes are too, how to say it, we bend too easily to other's demands. I am not suggesting we learn violence, there are other ways. Just more backbone, ah, no offense to the Ceph. I'm so sorry.~

~No offense taken. I am aware of your cliches. Please continue.~

~Therefore I propose that the New Home clan and the Cat clan be removed to the desert and only the desert. They will work together to rule. In this way the arid zone will also provide a buffer. The Guardians can patrol the arid reason, they need more practice in ah, less wet regions. Anyone of the human or cat sentients who ventures into the arid zone may be hunted at will.~

~What about contact with the capital?~

~Notes can be passed to Guardians at the edges. Or, runs through the

arid zone may be attempted by any brave enough. But, this must be done by one and only one pair of human or cat at a time. If one is killed, then the other may still succeed and return to tell of the adventure. Once they reach the forest edge, they are safe to continue to the coast. Being only two, they would be no threat to the Far Meadows clan. However being under the seal of the Ceph, once they reach the edge, they are under her protection.~ I glare at them, ~Understand?~ It is not a question.

~What of the three?~

~Ah.~ The cats are now paying more attention, the three look nervous.

~Honor would be served by their deaths. But is it fair to make the entire Far Meadows clan suffer the indignity of having to slaughter a few moldy slugs? I think there is another solution. Let the three be removed to a place where they will fit in. Surely among all the worlds there is a place just perfect for them, if you understand my meaning.~ I see smiles even on the Cats. I sit.

~My, that is some answer. Very similar to what I was about to propose, only I like yours better. So be it. Cats and New Home clan, you are allowed safe passage for the last time to the desert. May you prosper. Far Meadows, you are to leave the coast and retire to the forest region. The Guardians will help define the limits. I still don't want humans too close to the coast. Maybe in time you will earn my respect. Court is dismissed. Guardians, please remove the three humans to a suitable holding facility.~ They are looking carefully at the death angel trying to decide which would be the easier path. The rest of us carefully show respect with the Nauti salute.

No honor at all.

“How true.” I am shaking myself.

~You two please remain after the others leave.~ What have I done now? I review how many protocols I have messed up.

She comes down off the dais and goes to the food table.

~You two did not eat with the others. Please join me. The fish is from E1. Lots of wasabe too.~ She takes a lot of that. Too strong for me. I go for the nuts and sweet fruits. Cat goes straight for the tuna. No doubt in her mind.

~You two appear to be trouble. We nearly had a war start in this very room. What am I going to do with you? There is an old human saying. Keep your friends close, keep your enemies closer. Your proposal to place them at the edge of the forest was brilliant. They will not even be able to evacuate waste without me knowing.~

She continues, ~However, I am afraid you may have made some enemies of your own. The alpha Cat is not too pleased with your being part

of a team that showed him up.~

But does show the advantage of the Cat, ah, human team.

~True. And you Ozi, it is time you continued your studies.~

~I don't want to leave Cat. We have got to get you a name. This is ridiculous to keep calling you Cat. Not that you don't always call me monkey. Hmm.~

~I agree. From this point on, you are hereby to be called Sikyangpu. The two of you are going some place special to study. I want you both on my side, on my team.~

I look to Sikyangpu. At least she is not cleaning herself. ~We are deeply honored. But, what about my father and the rest of the clan?~

~What do you think your father was here about? He showed me you two would figure it out. That I would do well to see what you had to show.~ His Ceph is not that good, so this had to have gone through an interpreter.

~The entire time you knew the three were responsible?~

~Of course. Nothing comes to this level without my knowing most if not all of it. Those three have been a problem for some time. Rarely does some one do evil only once. It is a pattern or habit that is hard to turn on and off.~

~Why did it take so long? Why did Sikyangpu's mother have to die?~

~Your two species are learning how to behave. You do not discipline a young one with constant pain. You have to relax between sessions to see if they have actually learned. Otherwise you are simply controlling them and the first time you are not there they will rebel and do even worse.~

~We failed then. We did not prevent our own from misbehaving.~

~That is why Far Meadows clan has to be watched more closely and New Home clan less.~

And why the Cat clan is being watched by the New Home clan.

Ceph shows amusement, ~I knew you would understand. You had me worried for a small time. The Cat clan needs training on how to get along with others. Your clan has been solitary for far too long. The small size of the groups in the desert clans will make this easier. Not too much at once.~

"Are they ready to go Sussi?"

An old male speaking Standard. She understands Standard? Wait, he looks familiar. It has been a long time, but I know him. He was the one who brought me to the New Home clan. I owe him everything. I drop to my knees and salute him in the Ceph way.

"Thank you honored one."

"What has Sussi been telling you about me?"

“Nothing honored one. I remember you from my arrival.”

“Yes, that has worked out well. Are you ready for the next journey?”

Ceph said we are to serve her. Are you our instructor? Sikyangpu sniffs him when she says this. She tells me, *Does not stink like a monkey, but he looks like one.* The old man laughs at this.

“Come along you two rascals.” He bows to Ceph. I would never presume to use her name, even if I knew it. Who is he that he calls a Ceph by her name?

“Are we going to another earth? Are we going to a transfer station then? Do I have time to say goodbye to my clan?”

“So many questions.”

Luna City

Stem Nanos can't eat flesh or I would be slag on the surface by now. Freezing works to shatter them, but salt water works as well and the inside of any mammal is salt water. At least enough to corrode them. Once they are changed to med nanos the protective cover and intel they receive protects them long enough for the task they are assigned to. They then corrode just like the stem ones. No one wants those things inside of them any longer than necessary.

So, what did they use to repair my skin? Nanos of course. I will itch forever imagining them inside me now.

“Have you looked at your new hands yet?”

“What do you mean? They are still covered in gauze. How could I see them?”

“You can take it off any time you want. They just did that to hide their work until they were out of range. They told me to scram too, but I figured you would realize that I had nothing to do with it.”

I slowly unravel the gauze. I am already a freak. What more could happen? I see the back of my hands first. “Looks normal. Good as new.” I flex them a couple of times and turn them over. That is when I see it. They have nano tatted my palms with a red hourglass figure on each. Spider with black widow signs. Cute.

“What else have they done?”

“I don't know. They just said that and then left. Guess you are free to go now Spider.” Ravi suppresses a smile.

“Where are my clothes. I look scary enough with them, don't need to walk around naked.” We have all seen each other so I think nothing of shucking the gown for my clothes with Ravi present. No one lusts after me. I look like a stick figure a five year old would draw. I turn around slowly.

“See anything else?”

“Nope, all clear. You could afford to gain some weight, but we all suffer from that one. You can hide the tats with gloves. Anything more and they would likely get in trouble with higher ups. As it is, it is just a prank. Though I suppose you could get them for harassment.”

“Or another round of nanos to remove them. Likely use up any credit I have left.”

“Oh, I almost forgot. This is yours I guess.” He hands me a bag with a strange object inside.

“What is it?” I turn it over. No more patience for surprises right now.

“No idea. No one else could figure it out either. But you were holding

it so tight when you came in that they have to pry it from your unconscious hand when they put you under the first time. I figure it is yours until you decide to give it up. Not even pretty. A keep sake from a shuttle crash is all.”

I take it out of the bag and turn it over a couple of times then put it in my pocket and leave the bag on the counter. We recycle everything of course and plastic is especially valuable.

“You must be hungry, unfortunately the food is better here than in the mess hall.” I smile. It is the same food, but there is always hope.

“Hey, I have shift in five. Glad to see you up again. I checked the duty roster for you. You are expected in construction in an hour. That's how I figured you were ready for release.” The problem with nanos is that they do too good of a job sometimes. No time off. Wake up and get to work. I guess they reason you have been resting enough.

I am not really hungry and there is no one else in here except the Colonel and she is no fun in a coma. Why is she here? She made it through the lock fine, so they certainly would have gotten any residual nanos off before she got into trouble. Not my problem.

I decide to look at the object a little more closely with the microscopes in here. Technically only for the med staff, but I service them, so I can always say I was checking up on a gear giving trouble or something.

The end caps spec out as gold super conductor. Common enough and not enough here to be worth much. The body, about a hundred and twenty millimeters long and ten wide. A cylinder with gold ends. The body is the interesting part. Mostly black, but with very fine gold lines with something translucent interweaved into the whole thing. Under the microscope the pattern just gets finer and more complex. Never seen anything like it.

Certainly nothing expected on a shuttle or any other ship. So, why was it there and why did I grab it? I look to the Colonel. She is not going to be telling me any time soon. Wonder if it was hers? I don't remember going into the forward cabin, but then I don't remember it at all. I suppose it could have belonged to one of the pigs. Guess it's mine unless she says different when she wakes up.

I rush to make shift on time, though it is probably the one day I would not be reprimanded. I get in just before the alarm goes off in the implant in my head. All spacers are implanted. We consider it a badge of honor. No hair anywhere on my body, but a hell of a nice looking implant terminal block. My implant checks me in. No work means no food. No exceptions. Even the Commander puts in time. Right, not as much, but at least a token amount. We all know how it works.

Me, barely twenty and at the bottom of those old enough to work a

full day means I get all the really important tasks.

“Spider, up the con. Need you to check out the wiring in B5Z. Reports of erratic behavior.” Hey this place is going on forty if you count the early settlements. Nothing was wasted from them either. Surprised any thing works at all.

I start up the indicated conduit when I hear, “Hold on there Spider. Take this with you.” He hands me a simple spray bottle.” I shake it. Looks like water.

“We can afford to waste water now?” Things have changed.

“Nano stop. No body goes into a tight spot without a bottle.”

“They have gotten inside too?” I nervously look around me for signs of damage.

“Thanks to you they haven't. But they are sneaky little bastards and no one is taking any chances. You see anything weird up there, you spray first. I would rather short a few connections that risk letting them dupe a second longer.” I agree and start up the con. Why is everyone giving me credit for preventing the nanos? It was not me who noticed the empty canister. I elect to hold the bottle in my mouth so I have both hands free, but still have ready access to the bottle. I find myself checking every crevice. Of course, they are so small that by the time you see them or evidence of their having been somewhere, it really is academic. Nanos are only one very remote reason for erratic behavior in old lines.

Most of this stuff is fiber. I feel the jacket of a large bundle. Feels secure and smooth. Old stuff starts to crack and degrade leaving powder on your hand. Nope, everything looks good so far. I continue up. It is not until I get to the actual B5Z intersection that I see the obvious. Someone has left a cover off of a cross connect. A nest of roaches in there. They scatter as my light hits them. Try as we might, we never seem to be able to get rid of every arthropod.

Their excrement has soaked down into some of the connections. Going to take hours to redo all these connections. Not my job yet. All I need to do is report it. Salt water will do nothing here, so I make my way back down.

“Found the problem. Roaches.”

“German?” I nod. Smaller than other species, but still a problem. We have three related species at the moment. One a mutant. The problem with fumigation is that we are in the same air space. No place for it to go without getting to us too. Even vacuum will not kill them. The eggs can last for years under the right conditions. Bait and gels are the safest methods. I hear Far Side got lice somehow. At least these only lick your lips at nights and don't try to eat you.

“I am transferring a list of five more conduits to check. After that you

can knock off. Light duty until you are spec for full time.” Not as good as it sounds. Means light rations. The idea is, if you did not work hard, you don't need as many calories. Recovering from vacuum burns and reconstruction does not count.

No more roaches thank goodness. Couple of loose fibers. No real moon quakes, but machinery does vibrate some and given enough time some things come loose. Some of these I am able to repair myself. Save someone else time later. No one likes conduit duty, though because of how thin I am it is fairly easy for me.

Off shift I go towards the common area to see who is hanging, then change my mind. I just have to know what this thing is in my pocket. During work I remembered that I was looking for the power source on the shuttle. Both sides of the split were showing lights. There were not enough fuel tanks to power a shuttle to the moon and the contents of the canisters appear to be nitrates. A good thing to bring, but she thought the nanos what were really worth saving. Must have thought we would find the nitrate easy enough.

I was futzing around looking inside panels, following the super conductor further and further astern. I can see it in my mind. I even see my hand reaching out and into the open panel. A brief glimpse of something shiny when I also notice the nanos are getting to my suit after they told me about them. I must have grabbed whatever was in there without thinking when I got out of my heavy suit.

I hold it in my hand now. What are you little thing that I would want to rescue from the nanos at whatever cost?

The microscope did not tell me much. Just more questions. What about a probe? I don't know what I am doing. I am sure they tried everything in the shop. Spectral for sure.

I am sure the tats itch. They have a psiotic scope in the med center. I can check on the Colonel at the same time. If it is hers, she can at least tell me what it is.

The place seems more empty. Now I am being paranoid.

I make it to the med center. Colonel is still out. A bot is attending her. No doc? I know where the psiotic microscope is. We all learned how to use it. Most people diagnose small stuff themselves. Doc Xian only helps with the big stuff you can't do to yourself with the help of a bot. Like skin regen. I am curious about Cheng, but we have so little privacy I can allow her that much.

I set up the scope and decide to look closely at the tats first. Nanos show up not as life of course, but part way. Have to use the highest settings. Hard to do when on living skin. I narrow the field. The upper layer of skin is dead, or nearly so. Being on the moon that has some advan-

tages. Confocal Psiotics. Would you believe it? No sign of nanos. I reach for the cylinder to place it under the scope. Inanimate, so I keep the settings the same. I don't expect to see anything, but I or they have tried everything else, so why not?

As soon as I get it under the scope though I get the shock of my life, drop the cylinder and land on my butt. The sound of it hitting the metal cabinet gets a moan out of Cheng. I ignore the cylinder for the moment and go over. Her readings show she is coming out of it. An alarm sounds near her pod and Doc Xian rushes in.

“Spider, time to leave.”

I turn to find my cylinder and also to turn off the scope. I was electrocuted! Where did it get to?

“Spider now!”

I see it and grab it, “Got it. Sorry.” I scoot out the door just as two more come in. Hope she is going to be okay.

I have tell Ravi. I inquire the shift table and it tells me Ravi is still on duty for another twenty minutes. I leave a message that I am looking for him. A programmer and chef. Not much call for either at the moment. We don't cook ration bars, just swallow them as fast as we can to avoid tasting them. I heard that the poor in America lived on them their whole lives. Sap chow is what they called them. Bet a dog wouldn't eat them.

I find the nearest port facing the earth and look out. It is beautiful. No chance of my every seeing it close up now.

“Announcement! Announcement! All personnel report to the main hanger. The pilot is going to address us.” That is exciting news. Must be she really was waking up. I am near on the other side of Luna City from the main hanger. Ravi will be much closer. I will see him there. Transport is off line to save energy. For what, I don't know. We have less people and more food than we can eat and they ration both. Maybe they are worried it will wear out and we won't be able to fix it. Maybe it already is broken for good. Bet the Colonel got to ride it. I am too exhausted myself to run. Guess the med did not fix me up completely yet. Body still has to do its part.

When I get there I must be the last one. The room is crowded and I am at the back near the door. They close the door as per regulation. That never made sense to me, seeing as how everyone was in here. You would think that we would leave the doors open under these conditions so people might be able to escape. Regs say door stay closed. The rest of the station will be full of air when they find our desiccated corpses all in this room together.

I am taller than everyone else so I can see above them easily. Does not seem like this is everyone. Maybe some essentials are still on duty.

Computers run most things. Most of the people here are scientists anyway. Can't do anything on their own. Or at least couldn't. They all learned new skills when earth went quiet. No work, no food. Reality has a way of waking people up.

"Spider. You do make it easy to find you. What did you want?"

"Huh?" I am watching the front and all the other people.

"Spider to moon, come in Spider. Down here you idiot." I look down to see Ravi staring up.

"Sorry. Something weird happened in med."

"Yeah, the Colonel woke up."

"No, this." I hold out the cylinder. "I was looking at my tats under the psiotic scope and when I brought the cylinder into view to get a peek at it I was shocked bad. Knocked on my butt bad. Must have been five hundred volts at least."

"Low amperage then. Lucky for you. Something that small could not carry much charge. Probably a back up battery for something."

"Never seen any battery like this."

"I'm sure they looked at it with psiotic sensors. They tried everything. I watched for awhile while I was checking on you."

"You mean bored to death watching me in a coma."

"Yeah, well they were not much better. Took them forever to make any decision or observation."

"Probably the first science they've been able to do in a year. Give them a break."

"You're right. Anyway, they tried everything. Hey, let me have a look at it again. They wouldn't let me touch it." I hand it over.

He holds it carefully.

"Only shocked me while it was under the scope. Hasn't done anything since."

"Can't be a battery then. Nor a capacitor. They would have noticed either actually." He pulls out a pocket scope. Uses it to check for circuit breaks and loose fibers.

"Whoa! What are those patterns? Reminds me of something I read a few years ago."

"They are starting. She is in a wheel chair of all things. Didn't even know we had one here." I had seen them in history class, but never one close up.

"Yeah, with one sixth gravity, why bother? Anyone can carry you wherever you need to go."

"Maybe it is to confine her. She could probably over power anyone here."

"Shush! I want to hear."

“I will now turn the podium over to Colonel Cheung.” Polite applause. She was the one who brought the fear of nanos to the station. I am sure everyone is curious though. I am and I was there.

“Thank you Commander Dai.

“First I want to apologize for the mix up with the stem nanos. It was never my intention to hurt anyone, least of all myself. I am afraid I got the worst of it, next to one you call Spider.” She waves to me. “Sorry Spider.” I am not hard to find in a crowd as I said. I wave back to be polite.

She drinks some water.

“Let me start at the beginning. As you know about eight years ago the plagues started. We believe it started on the east coast of the United States. They are pretty backward there, no offense to anyone here from the US.”

“None taken, that is why we are here instead.” Someone shouts. The Commander stands up and no one else offers any comments.

She continues, “It got out of hand before anyone realized it. When it reached New York, the international traffic carried it to the rest of the world. Africa was the next worst hit, followed by India. The last to be affected was China, but by then a vaccine had been worked out. Only there was not enough doses.

This entire thing happened in months. Fastest plague to have ever affected the human race. And that was only the beginning. Within months of the first pass all kinds of secondary plagues started and rampaged. Cholera, yellow fever, typhoid and dozens of others. With the collapse of the infrastructure people did not know how to survive 'in the wild' any longer. Interestingly it was the US that had the most survivors in the end. We think. By then the com systems had all gone down. I think that was about five years ago. You may have noticed it even up here. Lights went out soon after.

I was attending a conference in Bangalore when the first plague hit. Took me three years just to make it back to the launch port near Shanghai. I won't go into details. I am not proud of what had to be done to survive. You may have to face the same decisions here at some point. All I can say is do whatever you have to do and don't look back.

You may wonder why I bothered to come here. This seems like a dead end too. There are many reasons. The primary reason in my heart is that this is where science can still happen. There is no intellectual pursuit on earth any more. Maybe not ever again.

The main reason though is because humans are no longer the dominant species on earth. Aliens have taken over. They herded the survivors together then cooked them in huge ovens. Anyone who went in did not

come out again. Maybe they just all went underground. I don't think so. I waited for days and saw thousands go in. Never did anyone come out. Except the aliens and their human helpers. Without the human traitors no one would have gone in willingly.

I only saw the aliens a couple of times myself. Some looked sort of like dinosaurs with big heads and lots of feathers. Others sort of like giant cats. The worst, the most ghastly were the octosquids. I heard a rumor that they eat their own young even.

I decided real quick that I needed to get away. Well, being an astronaut and engineer I knew how to fly. It would not be too hard to find a plane and fly it to Shanghai. Or so I thought. The aliens were dissolving all evidence of human existence. Our buildings, roads, museums, art, everything. It may be done by now. For some reason they left the spaceport alone till the end.

When I got there, there was only some new half completed experimental ship and the old engineer who designed her. He was willing to work with me to complete the ship if I promised to take her here. Did not want to come himself. Said he was too old to make the trip. Bad heart or something. He had concentrated so much on his work that he had neglected his renewal treatments. Such a waste. He would have been worth more than anything else I could have brought.

Be careful when you dismantle the ship. There is a lot of tech in there I can't explain. Maybe Spider you can help. I know you got a good look after I went to the med center. Sorry again about the trouble.

The controls were standard, so I knew I could fly her, but the propulsion system was entirely new. I don't know how it worked, it just did. Maybe you can use it? We loaded the hull with nitrates as he told me that is what you would need most. It was my idea to bring the nanos. He said they were too dangerous, but it was my call. I should have listened.

Ah, the pears. They broke in just as we were about to launch. He held them off as long as he could so I could get to the ship and launch, but they killed him. Shot him. Must have been American pears. I hear they were always armed and well experienced. These were. Fatter than cows too. Couldn't even tell you their gender. Biggest breasts I have ever seen. Ugly. Hey, they are nitrogen now. Best contribution they could make.

They got to the shuttle before I could lift. Threatened to blow her up with me in it if I did not take them. Said they had friends on New Hope. No way anyone could still be alive. Ox must have run out years earlier. I had no choice. Made up a story about a launch window and they had better hurry.

There are no space suits in China that would have fit them before or after the fall. I put them into the hold. Had to leave two nitrate cylinders

behind to accommodate them. Sorry.

Anyway. We launched. They complained. Thought I was their servant or something. Nearly ate everything I had food wise the first day out. We got to New Hope easy enough. No lights on. No sign of life. I had to go in alone, as they had no suits.

The weirdest thing was that there was actually plenty of air and supplies in the intact sections. The blown section was something else. Bodies still floating around. One was holding a gun. What is it with guns people? Some kind of argument and this joker blew the main port. Most of the bodies are probably still in orbit or burned up on re-entry. I found three pears in another section. It was intact, but they suffocated. Pears. Did not know how to get to the next section. Total idiots. Not that it would have held them long enough.

I filled up with as much as I could. Was not sure I would make it with the extra breathers. I strapped on everything I could find to the outside of the ship. Later on I would use it as reaction mass or let it go if I could not get it into the reactor. As it was I took some chances to try and bring you as much as I could. I needed to land with as much intact as possible. It was not necessary for me to survive. Was actually surprised when I did.

Of course, what is the first thing I see when I get out? Another alien waiting for me. At least I thought it was one. Good thing she reminded me of the vidcasts. Don't worry. I was not armed. Never held a gun or used one.

This is important. If they could take over earth, may have even set off the plagues for all I know. Or maybe, they just took advantage of them. Anyway, if they could make it to earth, they can certainly make it here. Be prepared. Don't be caught unawares. It is my best guess that this is it folks. You are the last of humanity in the universe. I am too old to breed, but some of the younger ones here can. They are the most precious thing you have right now. Take care of them.

Do the best you can to make this home. You will be here a long time. Preserve as much knowledge as you can. You will need it to survive. It is important that you remember from where you came. Remember all that died. Our history, our art, our beauty.

Thank you. I should rest now. Thank you."

They quickly take her away. No one says a word. It was one thing to think you knew what happened. Totally another thing to know. We are alone. We are orphaned. We are doomed. If more women have kids, how many more will have to have "accidents" so the next generation has a chance?

"Honest Spider, you have to read these journals. I will send them to you. Promise me. Could be very important. I am going to reread them

tonight." He leaves. Single males and females are in different sections. He clearly wants to be near me. I am not sure I want that kind of attention right now. I am a virgin when it comes to males and intend to keep it that way. I wonder if Lai Ling is free tonight. Not sure I want to be alone either.

I com, but she refuses to answer my call. Not available. Guess the journals will have to do. Six volumes! I will have to sublim them to get through in one night. I hate that. Always gives me a headache and bad dreams. Another thing we will soon share. Is it easier the second time through the same material. Probably been too long for an easy pass.

Wisdom

"Lily, we have light. We might as well go back. They never came."

I wake up slowly. Have not slept like that since the change. A sudden thought frightens me. "I can't scan Bait!" I turn to Long Tail, "Say something to me Long Tail, please!" Have to say please or she will ignore you.

"Meow!"

"I can't scan either Lily. They've finally done it. I can't feel a limiter though." I see her feeling about her stomach. I do the same.

"I don't feel anything either. Maybe with the new knowledge Silver and Rooi have they can make them a lot smaller."

"Maybe. We best get back. There are worse things they can do to us if they are willing to do this." True. What I can't figure out is why.

The trail, such as it was, is gone in the storm. It takes us most of the day to make it back.

"What a mess. Where is the main house?"

"I don't know Bait. I thought we were going in the right direction. It is much harder without scanning abilities. I used to orient to the docks and the labs."

"We could climb a tree and see further."

"Not too many of those left standing either. These tornado things must be something else. Would have been fun to have seen it."

"Lil, I think this is home or what's left of it." I look around carefully. Lots of broken wood, but the foundation is still there along with some pipes and such.

"If this is the home, there would be bodies." I turn to see Long Tail sniffing the ruins. She certainly understands us even if she can't tell us her thoughts.

She gives up and starts a bath. What is it with cats and baths? One advantage of this predicament is Long Tail can't read my mind.

I try prying up some of the larger pieces to look under them. Long Tail watches me, then goes back to her bath. She knows and does not need confirmation. I think that if there were bodies here she would be helping us to try to find them.

"Bait, I don't think they are here. Maybe they got them out in time."

"Maybe. Don't trust them."

"I assure you that they are safe." A strange voice makes me jump! Shit! Never would have happened if I could still scan.

An old withered male. The wrinkles on him are incredible. He must be at least eighty or ninety.

"Come." He turns and walks away.

"Guess we had better follow. Hope he knows where there is some food. I can't make it out of thin air now. My stomach says even sap chow would taste good right now."

"Water would be nice too." Yes it would. I lick my lips. Very dry. Long Tail says nothing, just pretends not to be obeying by looking in every direction but ahead.

My legs are tired and sore before we stop.

"We sit."

"Finally." Long Tail plops. Not used to exercise that does not have a food pay off.

"Who are you?" Three kittens come running up and start to nurse on Long Tail. This only wakes her momentarily. They must be hungry. It's been at least fifteen hours. Though they will be weaned soon enough I suppose judging from their size and her lack of interest in them. Glad I don't have to do that.

"Who I am is of no consequence. Now I have a question for you. Why are you here?"

"Because you asked us to follow you." Bait says with a snip. I'm tired too. Tired of all the run around. All the extra boring labor. The lack of TK fun and instruction.

"I mean in this situation." He just sits there with that dumb smile on his face. He knows why.

"You know why."

"That is not in question. I need to know if you know why you are here."

"Look, we scared some bullies. Small time thugs and rapists. They won't bother anyone again. Case closed. Except for some reason the others think this is a horrible crime when they have done far more themselves many times."

"Who is this they of whom you speak."

"If you don't know, we are not permitted to tell you. If you are playing us to gain information, you are wasting your time and should leave now."

"And where will you go?" He has us there. The last remaining buildings are gone in the tornado. Even the one with all the artifacts. Blown to the wind. The people we here to serve are gone. Who knows where. Without our TK we are like everyone else. Maybe even the last people on the planet. No tech left, no shelter left. Maybe Bait can figure out how to get something to eat out of the sea. Without boats, fishing gear and whatever it will be much harder. Back to being Native Americans.

"From appearances, we have a better chance of surviving here that you do."

“Maybe, maybe not. Street cunning and ship knowledge will be of little use now.” He knows us, at least our non TK cover.

“Where are the others? Did they die in the tornado?”

“They are safe.” Not much to go on. We are not going to gain information from him either. The kittens are done and sleeping together in a cat ball. Cute when they are young.

“I will tell you a story.”

“We really don't have time for stories. We need to devise shelter and gather food and water. You are free to stay with us if you wish, but you will have to work. No freeloaders.”

He sighs, “You are . . .” He stops what he was about to say. He thinks for a moment.

“Okay, I will make it easy even for a kitten to understand.” Long Tail flicks her ears. She is getting pissed. Not wise to insult her.

“Look around you. Do you know this place?” We have not walked that far. All uphill, but not that far. Only a few hours really. However with the devastation of the tornado, not much is recognizable. All the trees are gone or at least piled up in strange configurations. Most of the building were already gone. I examine the ground. Scrubbed clean.

“Lil, look over there.” I look to where she has pointed. We are high enough to see out over the shore line. The wharfs are long gone of course. The lab is underwater anyway, though they probably dissolved it just to be thorough. The coastline is the same. We are where I thought we would be, up on top of the hill.

“There used to be a small village here after the fall and before the evacuations.” He must know about the evacuations. If he is not TK, and I don't recognize him, he would have been included. Could be one of the TKs in disguise. A six or above can take different forms. I try to imagine a few as old. Easiest to work from your own form.

“There was a fire at some point I was told. Happens. The water system was already out and doubt they could have pumped enough water fast enough from the cisterns. A lot of bad things happened during the plague times. You should know that.”

“The women who were hurt by the bullies. Where were they from?”

“Who knows. We met them after the fact in lower former San Jose. They were in pretty bad shape. We did the best we could to take care of them. In the process we learned the identity of the three who raped them.”

“They were from here. This village.”

“They never told us.”

“Did they tell you why they left?”

“They did not say anything about their pasts.”

“For good reason.” He gives a nasty look. What could they have done.

“Look, I lived on the streets. I know a con. They were not bad.” None of the mannerisms that I remember.

“No one is all good or all evil. People did what they had to do to survive after the fall.” And what did you have to do? What are your secrets?

“Doesn't matter. Whatever they did does not justify what was done to them.”

“They were suspected carriers. The bullies knew they would die soon from contact with them. Or at least believed they would.”

“We did not see any signs of illness on either the women or the men.”

“Cut the games you two. I know you were TK and I know what that means. You scanned them and they scanned clean. Ever wonder why? I mean who could be clean in this world? No one got through without catching something. And would you know if they were carriers? Probably did not spend enough time with them to find out. Made up your mind and reacted.”

“So oh master. What really happened? What did we do so wrong that justified us spending years in servitude?”

“To be TK is to serve, in whatever capacity is required. You have nothing to complain about there. In fact, did a lousy job with even this simple task.”

“Lousy! No way! We did everything that was asked of us. We cleaned up vomit so many times I will never get it out of my system. Poop everywhere but the toilet. Food fights, dementia, leering, pinching, whatever.”

“All of the other TKs have spent far longer in far worse situations.”

“We are not twenty five million years old. It is not fair to compare us to them.”

“I'm not. Take Doc. He spent months in a hole in the ground with creatures trying to eat him. No light, cold, little food and that rotten, when he could get some. And, he could not openly use TK either. The cephs are very sensitive, especially Rooi and her clan. Others have had similar experiences. Pushy Paws in the sandstone prison.”

“Are you going to tell us the rest or just put us down for being stupid the entire time?” I hate know it alls.

“The story is simple to tell. They were carriers. They were responsible for killing the entire 'bullies' families and friends. They knew they were carriers. They would go into a new village, wait for everyone to die around them all the while pretending to be helpful and then live off the supplies until they ran out. They would then move on to the next village to do the same. Six communities they did this to before they were

stopped. And then only because there were none within range of their wanderings any more. When they were gathered they showed up like OLEDs.

This village, where they came to next, where you stand now, had to be burned down to prevent anyone from picking up contagion from the surfaces. By saving them from the 'bullies' who were only acting out of their own grief, you condemned twenty seven people here on this spot, who need not have died. Their blood is in this ground.

So yes, you did wrong. Stopping the bullies was not in and of itself bad. They could have used better methods to stop the ladies, even by what they had available. Even just killing them outright would have been more just. What you did not recognize was the pain they were feeling and why. You just reacted. Not all males are bad, and not all females are good. Not all humans are bad and not all cephs are good. What you failed to do was to check things out thoroughly before acting. What you did wrong was not watch afterwards to see what the consequences of your actions were.

When you act, you have to be prepared to follow it all the way. Most often this is only a few days or a few weeks. Sometimes it will be decades or even centuries. Silver waited millions of years to see what became of his changes.”

I am dizzy from the revelation. The kittens have scattered behind trees to watch us. Long Tail is squatting down and growling low. Her eyes downcast.

Bait asks, “Why tell us now? Will you leave us now to live out our last days lone with our sin in an empty world?” There are tears in her eyes. I realize I am crying too.

“It is only because you honestly believed you were doing the right thing that you are here. We could easily have left you to the chances of the gathering. Lost to us forever.” He said us.

His face changes. I knew it! He slowly changes to the much younger face of Bait's father, Fish. He holds out his arms to us to be hugged. Bait is happy to see him. So am I.

“Let's go. We have a new assignment.”

“I'm so happy father that you decided to join us. I was worried you were dead.”

“Who else will look after you two rascals? Someone had to step forward to take the worst task that could have been asked of any living TK.”

“Hey!” I feel my TK returning.

Silly kitty.

“Stupid monkeys!” Bait and I both chorus.

Armstrong Utah

A summons wakes me up in the middle of my sleep. I want to kill whoever did this. Not that I would, but it is pleasant to think about it. Commander Dai in leather. Oh yeah. Not her though. Some mid level jerk. Don't even remember who or their rank. I used to be a scientist. Rank means nothing to me. At the bottom I even have to salute the toilets. Makes it easier in a lot of ways. Don't have to think about rank. Don't have to think about anything.

I get back into my uniform. If this is some kind of inspection I am in trouble. After four hours of sleep after a sixteen hour shift, they get what they get. I don't care any more.

I make my way to the sector specified in the orders. I have no idea where I am.

"Sargent Porter." It comes from a wall speaker. Not even the dignity of a human. Wrong rank too, but I am the only person in the room and Porter is my last name, not "Potty" as many call me.

"Gather the supplies in front of you and precede to gate Brown 11B." It clicks off. I look at the pile in front of me. All in numbered army beige camo boxes. No idea of the contents. Well, still the grunt. This I understand at least. Not clear why they had to get me up in the middle of my sleep. There are bots that could do this kind of thing. Better than toilets I guess. These only smell of non use and desert dust.

Seems to take forever to get through the gates and the load is not light or easy to balance. Just when I give up and set it all down the gate opens and I have to gather it all up again. Almost makes me think that someone is watching just for this thing. What I really want is to fall asleep somewhere. Sterile brown empty rooms with bright white lights above me and old carbon fiber cases. Not a bedroom.

The lights go out, a gate opens. I smell outside air and am blinded by the bright light. Does not smell dusty at all. The ground is not red desert dust but covered with small plants. I was not expecting to be sent outside. I certainly was not expecting this. Have they already started agriculture? Why would then need me here? No toilets, just holes in the ground. None of these cases look like they hold shovels. Maybe I am just being used as transport. Bot would have been easier. More patient and doesn't need sleep. Though I guess recharge is pretty much the same thing.

Several people come in. I immediately stand at attention and salute them. They ignore me completely and grab the cases. In a moment I am alone in the room again. I stare out at the blue partly cloudy sky. In the distance I see hills covered with trees and further off an enormous lake.

Great Salt Lake? Sensors never reported a huge increase in rain. If anything they said it was less. There was growing concern that we would not be able to survive outside until we got out of the desert region.

A new person approaches. Short. The light blinds me to see more than a silhouette. The door, er, gate, closes and the lights come back on. When my eyes adjust I see it is a Captain and I salute again. It is not returned. Instead I am scrutinized carefully. I feel I am under a microscope. I cannot tell gender in these army uniforms, but I doubt there are many Captains this short who are male. Captain and above usually means wealthy parents at least. That means gene therapy.

She takes out her gun and surprisingly holds it against my head. I have no idea why. I haven't even been here long enough to have done anything wrong. Is this how they get rid of people they don't want? Send them on an errand to deliver supplies and they never return.

"Potty, listen carefully." I am listening.

"I don't like your kind." What kind am I that warrants attention?

"You have problems with female authority." I have problems with all authority with clay for brains. Nothing personal.

"The ONLY reason you are here is because we have a task for you. If I had a say, you would be shot here and buried before you could blink, just like any vermin." What is this all about?

"You got that Potty?" I nod slowly.

"I said, have you got that Potty?"

"Yes Captain."

"You have anything to add?" It would be better if she just shot me and got it over with. Knowing that she will sooner or later is not a motivation for me. I remain silent though.

She puts the gun away. I relax a bit.

"I have transferred orders to your bracelet." That was really a shock. I thought only saps wore them. When I was fitted I thought I would die of the embarrassment. Then I noticed that everyone wore one, even the Commander. These aren't your sap ones either. Much more advanced than anything I ever saw a servant wear.

"But understand me. I will be watching. You stay in the circle or we will hunt you down. Another incentive. We will only find remnants of your corpse if we have to hunt you down. There are creatures out there that would love your nice soft body for a snack. Stay inside the circle and you might, might just survive." She turns, the door opens and she leaves. Gee, being eaten alive or shot. What a choice. Why couldn't they have left me inside cleaning toilets.

I wait a moment to be sure I will not be interrupted again. The door starts to close and I dart out as fast as I can. No reason to start trouble.

Let the sin of my death be on their souls. I look behind me and the door disappears into the rock wall. Nice effect. I look for the emitters. They are hidden under a couple of screen rocks. Good job. Most people would not see them. When you are a janitor and bored out of your skull you learn to look for anything to amuse you. Okay trained as a scientist helps. That seems a life time ago though.

Outside in the sun I activate my bracelet. I first call up a map of the 'circle' to understand my range. I overlay it on my heads up as I look at the world around me. Matches the tree line more or less. Easy enough. I call up my orders. It congratulates me on making Master Sargent. I came in as a Lieutenant, but there will be no mention of that. A Ph.D from Northwestern and ended up a private cleaning latrines. Better than dead I guess.

I follow the trail superimposed on the heads up to a tent two clicks away. You would think that they would have kept everything closer to the entrance. Of course there must be more than one. I look up at the cliff wall. Not really a cliff or a wall. Too short. No more gates come up, but that could be because I am not allowed to know.

As I walk I look down at the plants under my feet. At first they appear to be common weeds, grasses and the sort you would expect on any prairie. I reach down and pull one up to examine more closely. No, I am not familiar with this species, but then plants are not my specialty. Must have been a rain recently. The ground is still moist. All these weeds are just opportunists. Grow as fast as you can, reproduce and cast your seeds before it all dries down again. The seeds wait till the next rain, which may not be for years. Though these seem to be a little too thin for desert plants. Would not hold water for long. Mutations? Were we nuked? I check my bracelet. Only a hundred microrads. Background.

I reach the tent I was ordered to and see the cases I had brought all stacked up outside. So, they did have something to do with my mission. I lift one up to carry it inside and notice that it weighs a whole lot less. I put it back. When I go inside there are several other people already in there working at equipment. Nice stuff, autoseqs of the latest design. I stand at attention and wait for one of the lieutenants to notice and tell me what they want cleaned.

Everyone ignores me. I watch for awhile. One is adding plant samples to a sequencer. I remember the old days when you had to run it through a kit first to purify the DNA. Wow, that is a real nice portable psiotic microscope. Looks like insect samples she is doing. There are racks of plants on a table and animals in enclosures against the wall. Birds of some sort.

Wait, those aren't birds. Beaks don't have teeth. I can't help myself. I

walk over to them to get a better look. My mouth falls open. These are reptiles with feathers! Those are not scales like any I have ever seen. It notices me watching it and looks up at me. Right in the eye. Most will not give you the time of day unless you threaten to eat them. They will track food after learning what it is, but not people. Someone is home here. I hold up a hand to wave. It does the same. Mirror image of my action.

Someone says, "Doctor Porter." I am busy watching this creature.

"Excuse me. Are you Doctor Porter?" I feel a tap on my shoulder.

"Huh?" I take myself away from the creature and look up at this tall thin young male.

"Doctor Porter?" He checks my bracelet and confirms my identity. Doctor? Not Private Potty?

"I am Emmanuel Rodriguez. I am sort of the tech here. If you need anything let me know and I will try and get it for you." I nod and he leaves to help someone else. Everyone else has ignored that I am here. They are all working intensely on their subjects.

I decide it would be best to see what they want of me. I open a display and sync my bracelet to it. The usual military blah, blah, then finally near the bottom the meat of the order. I am to characterize and place these creatures, images of the ones I have been looking at appear, as to species, origin and classification. Explains the equipment here.

I sit in the nearest chair. Emmanuel comes up to me, "Is everything all right sir?" Sir?

"What planet am I on?" No one calls me sir. Emmanuel looks at me nervously.

He bends down and whispers, "The other scientists had the same reaction as you did sir. Just between us, we don't know. It is not the earth we cocooned on for sure. Something very strange has happened. Prelim says DNA is similar. Same encoding for the same amino acids, that sort of thing. The others have a week on you. Best if you get started."

He stands up, "I see you have met Bernice. Sad to see her in a cage, but she kept getting in everyone's way. We tried to get her to go back into the forest, but she kept coming back. Would be a shame if we had to put her down. This way she can still watch us at least. We let her out when our shift is over and the door to the lab is locked. Outside she follows us around like a puppy dog.

"Locked? Are we having problems with thieves?"

"Bernice and company can open any door not encoded. Also any cabinet, drawer, box, whatever." Her head does look out of proportion for either a chicken or a lizard. She looks more like a dinosaur to me in fact. An escaped genetics experiment?

“Has anyone run her DNA?”

“You just brought the equipment Doc. You run it. I have to go to HQ to rec some more supplies. With everything going full speed we will need it pronto.” Emmanuel leaves. There is a line of other scientists waiting to use the sequencers. I am also totally exhausted. I spy a cot in the back corner and lay down. Maybe after a short nap the seqs will be freer.

“Hey Doc, I brought you some chow. I know you were expecting maybe breakfast but all they were serving is super.”

I wake up and look around. The others have all gone. Only one of the seqs shows a green ready light waiting for more samples though.

“I want to get a run on that thing before I start to eat. How long do they take?”

“These field models take thirty minutes for a run of sixteen samples. Kinda slow, but being portable limits us some.”

“That will do. Has anything already been collected?”

“Top drawer over there. Most are dried, but everything is labeled and numbered. Everything was scanned and cataloged. If you call it up by specimen number you will see what we already have on behavior, etc. I've been on for twelve hours now. Had to get the place set up for the arrival of the equipment you brought. See you in the morning. Don't forget to let Bernice out the back and lock up. Be careful. She is quick and can get around the tent before you can get to the door. Have to shoo her away to get out.”

I open the drawer pointed to. I don't think I will be leaving just yet. Sooner or later someone will tell someone and it will get back to the others what I have been doing these last few years. If I minimize contact then I can get some work down without the greater amounts of humiliation people like to inflict on others.

I get the first run loaded and then set down to eat the food brought. I hear a ticking sound and look up to see Bernice rapping on the plastic of her enclosure. She points to the food I am eating. I bring the plate over. There is a small opening I can unlatch from the outside. The hole revealed is not enough for her to squeeze through, but is large enough for her to reach through. I am curious as to what she eats.

I hold up a string bean. She shakes her head as if saying no. I hold up a carrot. Again no. Might not mean anything. I hold up some water melon and she emphatically signs yes. I hand it to her and she quickly maneuvers it inside. She has to adjust the shape by holding it against the side of the cage and pushing in just the right way with her 'hands'. I am impressed. Likes fruit then. Might be thirsty if she went for the item with the highest water content.

I set the plate down with remnants of other items on it. I then hand her

a piece of a stringy leaf from a plant sample found in the trash. I back off to check the samples I have already loaded. The first is just coming off. None of them match anything in the database. Interesting. Most genetic experiments are recons from two or more species. The live database would pick this up quickly and show me the sub species used. Nothing matches. I widen the scope to allow for more error. It is not until I am at maximum that I start to get a hit. Closest living relative is the chicken.

I look back over to Bernice. She has retreated to the back of her cage. It is not until I look down at my plate that I see most of it is gone. She did it! I go over to see how and I see a variety of tools she has made out of the strands of the leaf. Some are quite intricate knots. This is too much. I find a pencil and a piece of paper. Still the best way to take rapid notes in the field. Paper is syn and the pencil is more of a crayon, but it works. I squeeze these through the hole into her cage. She is watching me intensely.

She is no chicken. Definitely not. Too much change has occurred. I decide to run a phylo and see just where she would land in the tree. It has to churn on it for quite a bit. I am surprised. Most come up before you can blink. The tree that comes up looks like nothing I have seen before. Does not make sense. Bernice is always the outlier. I keep choosing roots more and more primitive until I finally succeed.

“Shit Bernice. You diverged from everything I know about sixty five million years ago.” I remember some old data I saw once on getting DNA frags from fossilized T. rex bones. Later controversy pretty much killed the project, but their results should still be in the database. When I run these in the mix I still get a divergence of sixty five million years. So, you are not a dinosaur at least. It would just be like someone to try and do a Jurassic Park.

I turn to look at her again and she is holding a piece of paper against the plastic. She has drawn an image on the paper. I go to get a closer look. It is a fairly accurate image of me sitting at the console.

“Shit.” No animal this size should be able to do this short of maybe a small child. Even good for that. Where did she learn to use pencil and paper?

Then it hits me. She is not a dinosaur. She is a descendant of one. She is the result of sixty five million years of evolution along a parallel line from us. We are on earth, just not our earth. I think. Or someone has gone to a great deal of trouble to fool us. The Chinese? Only they would have the computing power to do something like this. What a grand experiment. We cocoon and they sneak in and change everything around us. Probably been working on it for decades. Just waiting for the right time to try it. How far did the grunts go in their surveys of our new home? I bet the

Chinese are watching us right now. Probably dying of laughter. Look at the silly Americans. Report I heard said they were the least affected by the plagues. That has to be it.

Another rapping on the glass. I turn to see a new drawing. A slightly larger version of Bernice with a group of smaller ones around it. She has a line pointing to one of the small ones with a symbol next to it. I look carefully at the small one. The patterns match hers. None of the other ones do. She sees that I see and quickly adds symbols, different ones to each of the other figures.

“God. You have writing too. And families.” My mind is going crazy with all the thoughts. Without thinking I pull the escape door on the back of her cage and she immediately exits to the outside, taking her drawings and pencil with her. This is totally crazy. She could not weigh more than thirty-forty kilos. A lot of women are that size, so maybe it is possible. Birds are really smart for their size too. Imagine how smart a thirty kilo crow would be.

I encrypt the results to my DNA, copy it to my bracelet and delete the copies on the consoles. Hastily I write a note on the eboard saying I have gone to collect more samples. It is still dark outside, but will be light soon enough. Not that it would matter. The perimeter defenses have to be pretty good to keep the Bernices out. What else is out there? I am totally defenseless. Who would trust me with a weapon even if I was not a registered noncom? Not the Captain, that's for sure.

Bernice is waiting for me outside the door. She does not attempt to get inside, but tugs at my pants to follow her. She is too fast for me and I soon lose sight of her. I hear a chirp and see her up ahead. She is waiting. My head is reeling. Too smart for her size.

We go to a tent near the perimeter. No one is about. She scratches at something along the edge. A flap is pulled up and she ducks under it. Only it is not an entrance into the tent, but a carefully disguised tunnel entrance. I am much smaller than she is and am frightened that I will get stuck. I have to wiggle and squirm to get through. Good thing I have been on short rations these last five years. She keeps chirping to assure me that she is just up ahead. It seems like hours, but I am sure it is only minutes when I emerge. I am on the other side of the perimeter fence. I remember the Captain's words saying that she will shoot me if I leave the compound. I still have time to get back before they notice where I am.

Bernice tugs at me and shakes her head up and down. She is very quiet. She is wearing a tool belt! I nearly faint. She nudges my chin with her head and tugs again. I have to go. No way I am going to miss this. I have to know. I just have to!

As quietly as I can I follow her into the forest.

Armstrong HQ

“Report Captain.”

“We have a successful insertion Commander.”

“And the results of the assays and analysis he ran?”

“He tried to encrypt and delete. Pointless as multiply redundant storage covers everything done in the room. It confirms what the others found. Though he did it about a hundred times faster. I suspect he has figured it out and knew where to look.”

There is a pause.

“Locators operating?”

“As well as they can without sats. Should be good for up to a hundred clicks at least. Further if there were not so many trees.”

“Hopefully that will be enough. Looks like we have the right person on the job.”

“Hopefully Commander. I am sorry about the killing of the other indigenous.”

“Could not be helped. We did not know. Carry on Captain and keep me informed.”

“Yes Commander.”

Boot Camp

How does someone so old walk so fast and so far? We have been trying to catch up for hours and he only seems to be getting further away. Doesn't he stop to rest or eat or even pee?

Monkey think too much. Just walk. When we track prey, we don't talk.

"Wasn't that meal last night special? I don't think I have ever eaten that much. I could not sleep at all last night. I thought we would leave right away, but I am glad I got to taste all those new things."

We pay now with your slowness.

"Yeah, like you don't want to take a nap right now, right here. Admit it." I give her a hug and she presses into me.

"Besides, I did not see you turning your nose up at any of the meat dishes. Didn't you have the Ceph feeding you at one point?"

She smelled almost good enough to eat herself.

"That's a dangerous thought. She could just as easily eat you remember."

It is a cat weakness to always want what we can't have.

"Monkeys suffer from that one too. He probably walks so far ahead of us so we can't ask questions."

Maybe. The wind has shifted. I smell monkeys ahead.

"I smell smoke. Maybe they have something to eat for us."

It takes us another eighth to reach what appears to be one of those cube transport stations. Might have even been the one I came in on. Too long ago to remember precisely. Besides I was only six when I arrived here. Even harder to remember much from before then. Sikyangpu was born here so she does not know what it is. She sniffs it carefully and then sprays it as hers.

"Hope someone bigger does not show up." I pretend to be big and she hisses at me then licks a spot on her flank.

The old man is not immediately visible. There is a village near by, but I am sure this is where we need to be. I decide to walk around the perimeter to see if he on another side. Sikyangpu decides that a nap is finally in order and plops down where she is.

It only takes me a few minutes to come back around. She has moved to a shady spot. I curl up next to her and am soon out as well.

"Ah there you are. Took you long enough. Ready to go?"

"Where?"

"A special place we take special beings like you two."

"We sort of like it here."

"So, you have no interest in seeing other cultures, worlds and crea-

tures?”

Are they good to eat?

He laughs, “Some of them are. I remember that Owa especially likes fire roasted rat on a stick.”

You have met Owa!? What's a rat?

“Yes. A rat is creature similar to the pumpom you have here only much bigger.”

Sounds tasty. I will go.

“Well I guess that means I am going as well. She gets into too much trouble without me.”

“Hmm, I heard about your antics at the Ceph court. Who would think two could get into so much trouble in two days. Sussi was glad when I said you were ready to begin your instruction.”

“What are we going to learn?”

“How to see.” Pu (short for Sikyangpu) perks up and stops with a snort that blows the wind seeds off a red saker. She then inhales a seed and sneezes several times. The old man and I both laugh. She is not amused and pretends not to notice us.

“But I already know how to see. Anyone can.”

“Oh, you have made a good start, but there is much, much more to learn.”

“How long will this take?” Grownups have a way of making things take forever.

“I am still learning. I will let you know.” Oh God, he looks ancient.

We are doomed.

“Don't be so sad, it will be fun along the way.”

I look to the building, “How do we get in?”

“What for? There is nothing in there.”

“Nothing? Then how do we get to where we are going?”

We have to walk again.

He laughs, “Relax kitty. I'll take us. The building is a left over from when we moved everyone here. There was never anything in the building. It just made people less nervous to think that it was a machine.”

What's a machine? Sikyangpu looks around to see if there is one nearby.

“I remember those. Usually made of metal and an organic called plastic. They moved without muscles of living things. Made a lot of noise and stunk.”

Most monkey mischief does.

The old man laughs again. He sure laughs a lot. Then he just stands there looking at us.

“What do we do then?”

“Right, of course. Ready?”

I blink and the world around me has changed.

“Neat trick huh?”

Sikyangu is totally freaked. She has crouched down and growling low. I look around. We are no longer in a thin forest above the coast. No ocean in the near distance anyway. I am not sure how far away we were after the walk though. Too many trees. There does not seem to be anything alive here. Just rock and stone. Not even dirt.

“In the beginning we like to make it hard for you to hurt anything other than yourself. Rock is hard though. Try not to fall. Come.”

More walking. I told you.

“Oh please, TKs don't walk. At least when there are no norms around. You will be more comfortable if you assume a sitting position.”

We sit. Pu is crouched next to me. I have my arm around her.

What's a TK? No idea.

Suddenly we are rising into the air and moving much faster than I have ever experienced.

“Oh, forgot. Wind or no wind?” He looks back at the total look of terror on our faces. “That will be a no wind I think. Relax. You can't fall with me flying.”

“I think TK is what some used to call a wizard.”

“We are also called Guardians, not to be confused with the Guardians in the Ceph culture.”

I am not a tree climber. Can we go lower to the ground?

“Certainly kitty.” We swoop down just like a bird. I miss birds. There were none on the Ceph world. I liked the blue ones the best. They would quickly learn how to eat out of your hand if you were gentle. Never thought I would get to experience what one feels when flying. I like it. I like it a lot.

I eat things I don't become them. These birds of which you think sound interesting. Are they good to eat?

“I remember small house cats loved to eat them. People would put small metal objects around their necks that made a loud sound so they could not sneak up the birds.”

Pu looks horrified. The old man just laughs. Again.

“We're here. I admit I could have taken you directly, but I do love flying as well.” He grins. Only where is here? It looks the same as the where we arrived. Nothing but rock, sand and now wind as well.

“Wind picks up in the afternoon. Actually, it gets windy enough to be impossible to stand up. Don't have to worry about anyone escaping for that reason. That and there is no where to go.”

Escape? Pu looks around to see where the danger is. No place to hide

here.

"Shall we meet the others?"

"Where?"

"Right this way." He walks up to the nearest sandstone hillside and disappears into it!

A hand appears coming out of the side of the hill and waves us towards it.

"Optical illusion. Come on in." The hand disappears.

We go up to the rock. Sikyangpu sniffs it. Her nose disappears a bit in to the hill. I push a finger through and remove it immediately.

"Looks safe enough, but why hide the entrance?"

"That will become obvious later. Are you hungry kitty?"

That is enough to convince her. She disappears. I close my eyes when going through. Hate dust in my eyes. When I open them I am in a tunnel. We don't get many tunnels in the desert, though some of our structures are underground to keep cooler. Pu is howling.

"It's okay kitty. Nothing down here to eat you. Nothing to be afraid of." The old man is not so reassuring.

We enter a larger space and she calms down some, but still wary. There are others here.

"Fresh meat!" One yells. Not a thing to say to a scared cat this size. She freaks and looks around for an escape.

"Did the kitty get all scardy catty?" The old man looks at the young male who said this carefully.

"You must be a first year and don't know who I am. Let me introduce myself." The young male disappears. Just gone. This must be how it looked when we transferred to this world.

"Let me know when you are ready to apologize." Not sure who he is talking to now.

"Uncle!" I hear coming from nowhere. The young male reappears shaking uncontrollably. There is a look of terror on his face.

"Please listen carefully. If you do not want to spend the last few minutes of your life where you just were, you will leave these two alone. Am I clear?" He nods.

Pu looks at the old man with new respect. I am shocked and nearly as terrified as the male. I have to know. I have to know where he was sent. If I say something wrong will I be sent there as well?

Trembling I ask, "Where did you send him?" I have heard stories of Hell.

He laughs, "I sent him to your world. Just out past Sand Snake ridge. Middle of the day there. A bit warm."

I straighten up, "What's so scary about that? There is almost nothing

out there. Well, except for a few poisonous sand snakes and tars. But once you understand them they are easy to avoid."

The old man nods, "Understanding is key. Tell me what happens if you get bit by a sand snake."

"I would not recommend it." Not at all.

"Tell me anyway. I want your young classmate to learn."

"The pain is very intense of course. An eighth of an eighth later your leg swells up something awful and turns all black. Doesn't really matter though, because by that time you are screaming your head off and the scavenger crabs will have heard you. They seem to know just where to attack you to tear bits of flesh off of you without actually getting hurt themselves. Immune to the poison too. The sand snakes share in all the pieces dropped by the messy crabs. Works out quite well for all concerned actually."

"And tell me, Ozi, why is it that you know about sand snakes and raker crabs?"

"Oh, they are good to eat. Pu here especially likes the crabs. Thin shell crunches where you bite into them. Have to avoid the poison in the stomach of course. Makes your tongue numb, ah, before you swell up and .."

"Turn all black. Are they best cooked or raw?"

"Raw. Never tried cooked. No wood to cook them with." My classmate looks at the three of us horrified and terribly white.

"Is he alright? He looks white even for a white person."

"You can close your mouth now Simji." The others have witnessed this exchange and have kept quiet.

"Old Man, about time you got here." A woman not quite as old looking as he does arrives. She is dressed in a thick cloth blanket with a simple pattern on it over a simpler long dress. She takes one look at Simji and laughs, "What did he do this time?"

"Insulted our new students. Called them cowards."

She goes up to Simji, "He sent you to the nicer part of Ozi's world no doubt. Much worse places he could have sent you." Simji faints.

"Well I hope the lesson sticks this time. Would hate to send him back."

Where did he come from? Pu is interested in why he would be afraid of a few sand snakes I suspect. Neither of us will question anyone courage though.

"Ozi, give it a try. What have you learned about Simji since we met?"

I am caught off guard. I look back and forth between Simji and the old man, then concentrate on Simji.

"May I ask how long you have been here?"

"Two years and I am not answering any more questions. See what you make of that." Attitude.

"A lot can change in two years. Some things don't."

I begin, "Big city on the east coast of the United States. Tough area. Lots of gangs and weapons. A survivor. A very lucky survivor. Mixed parents of Ital and Rish ancestry. Did I say that right?"

"Close enough, go on."

"He is not much older than me, so back then he was a runner for the gang. The Spider Monkeys I think. He is still wearing their colors. Never been in the country or not long enough to learn its ways. Knows the ins and outs of city life. Caught the pox, but escaped the rest. Used to carry a gun. Left handed."

"Why is he here?"

"Yes. He would not be here unless he was special. He had a trial of thought, just like I did. Something where he had to make a choice and he chose to do the right thing. He saved people from the plagues by stealing food and bringing it to them. Medicines too. He still has a limp, so he was shot or knifed at some point in his right thigh. He is TK! Yes, definitely."

I open my eyes and look at the old man, "Someone changed him. This place makes TKs. That is why Pu and I are here!"

The old woman rushes up to me and exclaims, "You touched him didn't you?"

"Who? The old man? Of course, both Pu and I did. He brought us here. Is that bad? Did I do something wrong?"

He interrupts, "He never touched Simji and I am protected."

"He is 'lan.'"

"Maybe. We will see as he rides the wave. Could be he is just observant. Everything he said has an explanation. He will tell you why he said those things if you want." What does that mean? Pu has gone asleep at my feet.

"A lot of help you are." I nudge her. She yawns and stretches, then licks her front paw ignoring me.

He turns to me and asks, "What did you learn from this lesson Ozi." Pu is not included in this? Why is he picking on me?

I take a deep breath, "Everyone here has seen the dark side of life and maybe some of the good. We have all had to make choices. Courage is relative to experiences. Judge no one. Observe and learn."

"Simji, you can close your mouth now." The old man laughs.

The lady dismisses him and he quickly leaves with the others. I hear them mention the word lan, whatever that is. Guess I will find out soon enough.

"I don't think you will have any more problems. Best to get your position straight from the beginning."

"If you will allow me to take back my duties and my new student I believe you have other tasks to attend to."

"Yes dear." He says this with a smile on his face. She scowls at him and leads me off. Pu remembers we are supposed to be together and catches up.

She sees Sikyangpu at my side and shakes her head. We follow her down a few passage ways. It has been a long time since I was inside a building.

I try and reassure Pu, "Nothing to worry about here. We are safe."

If I don't die of boredom. All you monkeys do is talk. No action. Boring.

The lady laughs, but says nothing. How can she think we have seen no action. We have visited another world, flown a long distance and met real TKs. This is the best day of my life!

We stop.

"Kitty, it is time for you to leave us and begin your own instruction. Please proceed through that opening." An opening appears before us. As soon as she cautiously enters it, sniffing the edges, another cat pounces her and they tussle on the ground before running off with Sikyangpu chasing the other cat."

"Each species has specific training requirements."

"When does it happen? When do I become TK too?"

"You already are. You just have not realized it yet."

"When? How? I did not feel anything." I look at my hands. Still the same I think.

"When you were asleep probably."

"The last time we were asleep was before we met the old man. No, wait, in front of the gray stone house waiting for him to find us."

"He did not need to find you. He always knew where you were."

"Who is he?"

"A mangy old man with a sick sense of humor. Oh, and my father."

"Wow! He must be very old then." Oops. Some people are sensitive about their age. "Sorry."

"You have no idea how old he is. Don't be sorry. The difference in our ages is insignificant at this point. Don't know why I got talked into doing this all over again. Well, come on." I catch up. Hope Pu is okay.

We enter a larger room with an open roof. Is that the right term? No, not a roof. It is clear. Glass. The Ceph are really good at glass. We could only make small amounts in the desert and even then we needed the cooking glass the Ceph gave us to make the sand hot enough.

"This is where you will stay for the time being. There is water over here. Waste goes here. Food will be brought to you as needed and will be placed here." There is already something in a bowl on the raised platform.

"Now please remove your clothing, wash yourself and use the new clothing provided." I immediately remove my thin cover and proceed to remove the rest.

"You are not shy."

"Why should I be? Is there something wrong with the way I look?"

"Some are shy at first about being without clothes in front of others."

"Why? Everyone is the same with little variation. Nothing special. Just a body. You are not shy are you?"

"No." She removes her blanket and other pieces. We wash each other in the small pool of water. I have seen many old people before. She looks no different. Good muscle tone. She will live many more years yet. I remember how the old looked on Mother Earth. Some were very sick. I have seen death many times. Death is better on New Home.

"Ozi, do you know what it means to be 'lan?"

"I do not know that word, though I have heard you and the others use it now. What does it mean? Am I one?"

"I am 'lan. Remember me. If you have any questions, please ask for me and I will help." She dresses and starts to leave. Does not mean male then if she is one too.

"Wait. I do not know your name!"

"Everyone knows me. Just ask. I have not used a name in many, many years. Not very useful really." Huh? Her father does not appear to need one either. Strange place.

I check out the food. Some kind of prepared grain and strange looking colored plant material. I bite into one. Sweet. Too sweet for me. I set it down and try another. Warmth spreads over my mouth and lips. These I like. Soon I have had enough.

I use the waste area and then look for a place to rest. I miss Pu terribly already. I curl up as best I can and try and sleep some. It is the afternoon, the hottest time of day, yet it is not hot here. Strange. I hear the wind, but don't feel it. Nice sound.

Move over warmth thief! Huh? Pu?

"How did you get here? I missed you so much!" I give her a big squeeze. She pretends to hate it, but I know otherwise. Sometimes her dreams come to me. Of course, the purring gives her true feelings away too.

Time to sleep. Talk later. I snuggle up to her and am quickly asleep. Interesting. Pu could go anywhere. I really expected her to go out-

side, she seemed so upset about being confined.

Yet, she chooses to be with him, not even her own kind. It would appear that I have won the bet.

What was it you had? Latrine or kitchen duty?

Kitchen. You have some luck at least. He did save her life after all.

Cats don't give a hairball and you know it.

How did she react to the fact that she always had the ability and could have escaped without his help?

She licked her butt.

Ah, so she really was upset. Yet here she is.

You don't think, they ah, you know?

She has not come into heat yet.

What will they call the children?

Catmen of course.

Cute.

When I wake it is dark. I think. I look around and I can see everything in the room in shades of gray. Strange that the color should go away, even on my hands, my palms are gray. Have they poisoned me? There seems to be no direction to the light. There are stars in the ceiling. I remember glass from before and I suspect something similar here. Otherwise we would most certainly feel the wind. I can here it easy enough.

They have given you a gift. The gift of no light seeing. Cats have always had that gift. Now maybe you will be able to run at night. They have also given me a gift.

"So it would appear. You certainly did not come in the same way I did. Can you take us to other worlds, other earths?"

The rage is limited until I progress.

"So is my gift. I cannot see beyond these walls, yet I know from the stories that they were able to see more."

Patience in the hunt.

"What was it like with the other cats?"

They talk too much. Always about hunting or sexual conquest. Almost as bad as a group of monkeys.

"Strange we never talk about those things. What is it like to have sexual feelings? I heard other humans talk about it often, but have had no feelings myself. I wonder why not?"

Once level two, humans no longer have the feelings. Too bad. It is glorious. Or, so I have heard.

"I don't believe I was born level two."

Apparently we are now anyway. How's the food here?

"A lot of sweet plants and bread like things."

No raw meat?

"Afraid not. Sorry."

Then we must hunt. We are suddenly outside. The wind is horrendous!

Game always gathers near water. We must find a water hole.

"Take me back inside. This is too much. Nothing will be out in this wind."

Local game will be used to the wind.

"And will be hiding in a cave somewhere until it stops. Besides the old man said there were no sentients here."

I would be happy with a rat.

"You have rat on the brain. Why can't we just go to the cat side and get something?"

They insist on fighting over every morsel. I am not exactly a large cat.

"Inside the room now! I am freezing out here."

I'm hungry! But we return anyway.

"Thank you." I grab as many blankets as I can and wrap them around myself.

The stories say that at your level you should be able to warm yourself. Too bad you don't have fur like all of the superior species do.

I have heard this one before, so I ignore her. Then I have an idea,

"Why don't you just pop in and grab something and then pop out again."

They have already thought of that. There is none left when they are done.

"They can't expect you to starve to death. We are here to learn, not die."

They have as much dry crunchie stuff as you want. No one guards that.

"And you ate some I assume?"

I am not stupid. I knew the food you would get would taste even worse, but my dignity is hurt.

"Ah poor kitty. Well, now that is settled. What are we to do?"

The wind has stopped. We hunt. And we are back outside. She is running away from me faster than I can run.

I run in her direction. I have no chance of catching up with her. She will circle back eventually. I enjoy being outside as much as she does actually. On earth being inside meant being with them and being abused. On New Home we rarely needed to be inside. Mostly we used half shelters to protect from the sun. Rarely rained and then it was more important to get to high ground. The bath did not hurt either.

The night is cool. I use the new sight to see around me. Not the same as daylight, but more than that. It seems that I can see through hillsides, or rather into them. That's interesting. This one is hollow. Reminds me of

the cave near where I met Sikyangpu. I slowly go around the small hill, or rather more a large rock. It is large enough that it takes me awhile.

I can't find anything alive, but I smell water somewhere near here.

I didn't realize I had been that long. "There is a hollow in this hill. Protected from the sun and wind might help something survive. I am trying to find an opening." She starts sniffing at the ground, moves rapidly back and forth, then takes off bounding to the right. I follow. She stops and starts digging.

I scan the area where she is digging. "More to the left and a little higher. It is softer there and no rocks in the way. Must be where the wind collected sand to fill the opening. It will be a tight fit." She looks up at me. "Sorry I forgot. Just don't put us into solid rock please. You are new to this." She goes back to digging. I help by moving the sand and dirt out of her way.

We need to get part way in so I can move us to a large enough area. I was given much instruction. They have good healers present. Ah, not what I wanted to hear.

She backs out, *You need to go in first.*

I scan. It will be very tight. Maybe I ate too much at the feast. I smell water and life. Being in the desert you learn to use your senses. So many humans ignore what they have. It has a musty smell and a hint of sulfur. I hope not too much. I squeeze in. I have to twist and turn to fit. If I did not have the sight I would be screaming right now. Frequently I have to remember to relax so I can move easily move muscles past rocks.

"Pu, pop some of the rock away from us here. Look at my mind." The rock disappears. I hear a splash. Hope nothing was hurt. I scan the pool ahead. Something moves. Not large. Another one.

"This is as far as I can go unless you want to spend several eights moving rock." Suddenly I am in the pool with a splash with a cat next to me.

She immediately bats at everything that moves. She is missing wildly and the creatures are not that fast. Strange things. I scoop one up and hold it in my hand.

"Ow! They sting."

Remove from my tongue now! This is followed by a howl.

"Hold still and stick out your tongue." After fussing for a bit she finally complies. Using the sight I see the creature attached to her tongue and gently remove it. I had already dropped the one I was holding. Looking closely at it I can see there is a 'dangerous' end and a safe one. I drop it into the water.

Still hurts. She paws at her mouth to no affect.

"I agree." I rub my palm. "We need to be careful. We know nothing

about these creatures. There might be permanent damage or worse. We are far away from the school and no one knows where we are."

There is no honor in succumbing to a lesser creature.

"You learn that in class? A microscope bacteria can kill you with or without honor. It won't care. We have no idea what these things injected into us. May not be intentional. I'm sure they have never seen one of us before. I see no evidence of others having been here."

Air is good. Therefore there is another entrance. How far can you see?

"About ten meters. Level two. Level three would be very useful right now." Ten meters is only enough to get me into trouble, but not enough to see a way out.

I cannot see in light this low, but I can feel. Follow me and warn of obstructions.

We slowly make our way following a path that makes no sense to me. She stops frequently to feel the air. I can feel her mind as it leaks some information to me. I also have to warn of many rocks and pits. We do seem to be gradually rising.

"I can feel fresh air!"

The air gradually gets fresher and fresher until we are suddenly out. We are well above the pools where the creatures are. The entrance is actually large enough to stand in. The sun is showing a glow in the east. I look around me. There is evidence that during a rain event the water makes its way down to here and into the caves. Further up the slopes I see patches of colored lumpy material. I go up to one outcrop and touch it. Soft. The purplish green could be a plant like material. It could gather energy from sunlight. This is at least part of the reason for oxygen present. Up here they are partially protected from the high winds. Their shape of being close to the ground would also help. No leafy outgrowths. They would be easily torn off.

Sikyangpu sniffs them and then looks back at the cave.

They provide food for the cave system.

"Who are too delicate to withstand the wind and sun."

A meal will be served soon.

"We need to know where we are. Up to the top of that notch." We make our way up the fairly steep slope. I am not used to this much elevation differences. We have rocks and hills, but nothing this large. We get to the top we look out over a vast landscape of rock outcrops and wind swept stone. The school is not visible.

"Now what?"

We track our own tracks back to the source.

The light is getting stronger. I am not sure, but I think I can see our

steps. Once the wind picks up again they will be gone.

"We must hurry." I make my way over the edge and run down the slope as fast as I can. Sikyangpu races ahead of me. Further on she stops and turns to the right.

Sharp drop. Must find another way.

The winds seems to pick up in the afternoon, so maybe we will succeed.

They also blow at dawn. If we are caught out in the sun at midday we will be in trouble as well. No one goes out then. Great.

"Too steep for me."

Sit down. I have seen others use this method.

"I am not wearing much." This is going to hurt. She bounds down the slope stirring up rock as she goes. I dodge as many as I can, but make the bottom with many new bruises. I am glad they don't show as much on my skin as on others. The robe will offer some protection from the sun and make it hotter. At least the robe is light colored.

We find our tracks, or what is left of them. Little more than a series of dents in occasional patches of dust and sand. I am not convinced. She stops and sniffs at seemingly random intervals. I look at the spots with both visual and new gift vision and can see nothing. I trust her, so I follow.

Running as fast as I can in the daylight is faster than the speed I was comfortable with last night using the gift or my sense of time is very different. Probably both.

She stops at an outcrop of rock and waits for me to arrive.

"Why did you stop? The sun is getting pretty warm, even by desert standards."

Only because you have been running. We have arrived. Please scan interior for a safe place to arrive. I had forgotten she does not have the ability to see inside structures. I had just assumed it came with her gift. I realize now, it was easy to get out. Nothing out here to worry about.

I show her a safe corridor and we are suddenly there. Only a few people about.

"Do you know the way back to the Cat area from here? I was never given a tour and have no idea where I am."

Others will be going towards food. We just follow where most of the people are going.

Sounds good. We make a few false follows all the same. I finally give up and ask the next person I see.

"Excuse me. I am afraid I am lost. Could you please point me to the food area?"

"New recruit? Follow the green line on the wall. Won't be the fastest

way, but you will get there."

I have the scent.

"You said that to be last time."

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry. Sikyangpu told me something." He nods to me and lets us go. At least I don't have to explain her to him.

We start to follow the green line on the wall when she bounds ahead of me again. I run to catch up. Not dignified at all. What a pain. I just glimpse her entering a room. The opening closes. Door. They are called doors. Been a long time. I am more used to the circular ones of the Ceph. New Home did not need them. I am trying to remember how to get through when it opens and her head peers out at me.

Come. I have found food. Good food. I need your help. She needs me for something. This probably means trouble.

I enter the room. It is in chaos. There are people going every which way. Lots of noise. But I do smell food.

An older woman arrives to greet us.

"You are with Sikyangpu?" I nod.

"She said you will approve of her receiving food here instead of in the Cat compound. Is this correct?" I did not know I was her leader. I nod again.

"Cat got your tongue?" But she turns away. What did she mean? I check my tongue. Definitely intact.

She returns with a bowl of raw meat and places it on the floor off to one side. Sikyangpu goes for it, purring so loudly I thought everyone would turn to see what the noise was.

"I suppose you would like some as well?" She turns again and comes back with another bowl. I expect her to place it on the floor next to Sikyangpu's. She hands it to me instead. She goes. I look in the bowl expecting raw meat. Instead it is more of the same that I had last night. The bread like material and vegetation again. I sit down on the floor next to Pu and eat in silence.

"Ah, there you two are. Please come with me." I am not sure what to do with the bowl, so I set it on the ground next to Sikyangpu's. The old woman is at least someone I know, though I have a feeling that we are in trouble.

I will never be able to figure out how to find my way in this structure. We go right, left and straight, seemingly at random. I can memorize the pattern, but it does not help me know where I am. I need to see a map of the entire structure if this is to make sense to me.

We arrive at a hall with a lot of people present. Designed for people apparently as they are all in chairs. I have only seen those a few times

since I left earth and never in this number. There must be over a hundred people here. We move along the back. I overhear someone talking. "I can't believe he did it. A raw recruit." "And such a tiny one too. How did he do it?"

At least I know who to watch for. We are led to seats up near the front and motioned to sit. The room becomes silent. In front of us I see many other species. Mostly Cat, all sitting at attention, but a few Ceph, Dino and one I don't recognize. Very large ears, small eyes and covered in dark fur. One of these yawns. Sharp teeth. Eats meat, though not large game. None of them are anywhere near the Cats. Only the Dinosaurs appear to be comfortable mixed with all species. I am beginning to really like them, even if they can be violent at times. Quick to fight and quick to forgive.

The old man appears between us. He raises his hands and addresses us mentally. Makes sense given all the different species present.

Greetings Sentients. I am happy to be able to announce a winner in the life contest with the fastest time on record. It will be hard to beat this time. What is most interesting is that it was accomplished by a two species team. The individuals having been born on two different earths and having only met a short time ago.

I look around to see who it is. Everyone else seems to be doing the same. I wonder who it is? What is the contest? Record time could mean anything.

Of course the single finder of a new species contest is still open. Now I would like to introduce you to two new members of our exclusive school.

Ozi and Sikyangpu, would you please stand.

Pu yawns and slowly looks around. I notice the other Cats are not paying any particular attention. I slowly stand up self consciously.

Simji, please come forward with your report. Simji, he was the one who teased us in the first place.

Sikyangpu emits a barely audible growl. I glance back at the other Cats. They are all paying attention now. This is crazy. I look towards the back to see Simji walking towards us.

He struts towards us like he owns the world. Apparently his experience did not teach him anything. Others are reacting to him. He has a rep. They are pushing their hands up and down in a repeated pattern. Some kind of symbol of respect.

They think he is the winner of the contest.

Apparently. Who knows, he could be. We don't know anyone here yet.

If he is their symbol of good, then I want to go home.

You want to go home no matter what.

Since Simji is a level three translation will be provided for those who do not understand spoken standard.

Why can't he use visual cues when he speaks? That would cover most people here.

Not the sentients from E105C. Pay attention. I have to remember where I am. Nothing private.

"I am here to return the favor granted to me this morning by TKs Ozi and Sikyangpu." Oh great. Some sort of embarrassing initiation. I doubt I could outrun the old man though. Even walking he is fast. Wonder what level TK he is.

"Ozi was born on E1 sixteen years ago. His parents both died in the plagues and violence of the time of turmoil. Many here can sympathize." He pauses. This is not bad so far.

"When he was five or six, after having been passed from group to group, he found himself a virtual slave to one group. This was at the time of exodus. The group went to one world and Ozi went to E35A. Here he excelled, free for the first time in his life to grow. The people on E35A were good to him. He was accepted. After a life of suffering, of terror, of brutality, he had found peace. Granted, he world is not my idea of heaven, as recent experiences have taught me." He shudders. There is laughter from the audience. Even I find myself smiling.

"So, who is Ozi? He speaks Standard, Outback, English, Dino and shows Ceph. He will no doubt be conversing with our newest sentients gathered any day now. With nothing else to do in the desert I can understand why he has done so well. So, please keep him entertained so I can get through my own studies with some dignity." Another laugh.

"Sikyangpu, on the other hand, was born on E35A to the Desert Pride. Her mother was a courageous leader and second in command of the pride. She was ambushed and tortured to death by members of the Far Meadows clan. The same people then went after her kits. They killed two of them and were about to torture and kill the third, the one we know as Sikyangpu. The name means yellow cat in an E0/1 language." I did not know that. Makes sense, though she looks more like sand from a Triple Ridge rock garden than pure yellow. Pu growls again, but this time it is not at Simji.

"It is Ozi who tricks the Far Meadows clan and saves Sikyangpu. The perpetrators are sent to an enforcer camp. The Far Meadows clan in now under strict surveillance by the Ceph." The strangest thing happens. They all start whooping and moving their arms and hands in a circle.

I am understanding that they approve of this action. Thanks.

"It was Ozi who proposed the solution. The Ceph Rooi approved."

This time there is a hush and murmurs. Strange group.

"They were both then recruited by Hu Silver." The old man bows towards us. Simji sits in an empty front seat.

"Ozi and Sikyangpu, please describe your actions of the previous night."

Sikyangpu starts with a glorious interpretation of our actually quite boring trip. Nothing but wind and sand for eighths and eighths. I then tell of our trip into the center of the hillside. Together we describe what we found and our theory about how it all works.

"We suspect that the species we found are probably quite widespread."

"May I interrupt? You said species, as in more than one."

"Yes. With the sight you gave me I was able to see several different morphologies."

"Could these be merely alternate generations?"

"You mean like rain pond mollusks? Possible, but how does an ecology maintain itself by eating its own kind exclusively? Wait, I see what you are saying. The algae washes or is blown down into the caves. The first generation are vegetarian and detritus feeders. There are many of these and they rapidly reproduce when food becomes available. The next generation eats the first. The bottom form is for recycling anything that falls into the depths and is the final form. No wait. When conditions are right they encyst. These rise to the surface and explode when the wind is high. This carries the spores to new locations. The plants must do something similar, though we did not see any reproductive structures at the time we were there."

"What do you know of the plantimal worlds?"

"Only what we have been taught."

He is saying that the algae and the animals are the same species. There is only one species on this world. A highly adaptable one that fills in the few niches available.

"You did pay attention in class. And I thought you were a real kitty." I am smiling and hugging her at the same time. I am very proud of you Sikyangpu.

Of course you are. You should be.

I laugh, "Now that is very Cat."

"Sentients, I present you with the newest recruits to have solved the species puzzle."

"Excuse me Hu Silver. We did not solve the puzzle. You helped, especially with the last few hints. All of you did. If we had not been separated for 'instruction' we would never have thought to leave the compound for the night to go hunting. Without our own experience in deserts

and caves we would not have known what to look for. Even Simji played a part by making us feel unwelcome. His punishment meant we had to be fearful of every misstep. Sand snakes are not something you want the unaware to have to face."

Everyone gets up and starts talking to each other. A few come up to us and welcome us.

"Well, that let the air out of the balloon."

The old woman rolls her eyes, "Balloon is his new old word. Don't listen to him. You both did fine. It is obvious that the two of you will have to go through instruction as a pair. It happens. It will mean more work for both of you. Both of you will have to attend each other's classes."

Like Owa Moosa and Silver.

"Oh those two. You really don't want me to get started on them."

"They aren't the same Silver are they?" No one is paying attention to us anymore and no answer to my question. This has all seemed too easy. In one day we are heroes? I don't think so. They are playing games with us.

Preparation

"So, what's this new assignment? Something fun or are we still in purgatory?"

"What do you think you deserve?"

"Oh God. Not more shit."

"Watch your mouth young lady."

I keep forgetting that he hangs out with Jesus and the others. That was weird meeting him for the first time. Well, any time really.

"We are going up. There is nothing left for us here. The older people have been returned to families or have been recruited."

"Returned?"

"Recruited?"

"The younger ones have set up new homes successfully and have been asking for their parents and other relatives. We agreed to return them. They will probably regret their decision, but no going back this time. As to the recruits, you will see in a moment. We were very selective. All part of a plan."

"Which we have been left out of, of course."

"You are part of it now. Stay out of the way until you get the feel for what is going on. Ready?"

We look at each other.

Will they be coming as well? If not, then I stay. Referring to her kittens.

"All of us are going. Gather closer, I am still not all that used to this yet and would not want to miss."

"Where are we going?"

The problem with DS is that there is not much of a warning. One moment you are on good solid ground and the next you are where?

Weightless! "Holy Cow! We are in space! Thanks Uncle Fish! Oh, I have been begging forever to get to come up here. When is the tour? I want to see the entire space station. How much have you changed it? How many people lived up here? What did they eat?" Okay, I admit, I get excited over some things.

Bait's reaction was more subdued, "Cats in space!" The kittens are floating in midair totally disoriented. Long Tail is more dignified and being TK can hold her own.

"Take care of your kits please Long Tail."

They need to learn if they are to going to be strong Cats. I will watch them.

"They had better hurry. Once the tap is denied so is the instruction."

"Then we have to clean up the mess in Cat school. Welcome. You are all just in time. We are going over the final check out before launch. Let me show you to your cabins. I hope you don't mind sharing. We are tight for this run."

"I think I would rather share. Doing all of this alone would be too much."

"You are not going to lock me in a room with these monsters are you?"

"Of course not Fish. For you we have the VIP cabin set aside."

"Not the head again." We all laugh. With TKs, there will be no head on board, but there might be a room small enough to be one.

"How come we are weightless. Didn't the station rotate or something?"

"Easier to keep the station from moving than to sync up the ship."

We go through a few rooms and hatches and travel down a long tube pulling at handles on the walls. Fun really. Amazing that they could actually live this way.

"Why don't we DS over? This tube seems so reactionary." I think Bait is turning green. How could a fisher person be motion sick?

"Part of the whole ambiance. Also, there are norms present. Be on your best behavior." Or go back to limiter state. I get it. Long Tail tries dog paddling through the air. Just looks silly and accomplishes nothing. The kittens emulate her though to the same effect. I finally grab two of them and Bait gets the other one.

Thanks.

"A Cat said thanks! I am going to die in a state of total ecstasy."

That can be arranged.

"Mew!" My two squirm picking up on their mother's emotions.

"Cool it you two or you can swim the whole way or stay in the station until we return."

"That's not a bad idea actually." Fish adds.

They come or no one goes.

"Oh, and you are going to stop a dozen eights and nines. I don't think so." She ignores me and pretends that she never said a thing.

"Have they been named yet?"

"Not until weening Uncle. The honor goes to Long Tail since the Cat Freedom Charter was signed. It will be the last impact she will officially have."

"Gee, too bad it is not that easy with Hu." People have taken to using the shortened form which is easier for non humans to use. Just never expected Uncle to pick it up. Being older and all.

Be careful squirt. Shit he has reached level seven.

We enter a large room with lots of small groups gathered. I see a few Ceph.

Bait asks, "Is Rooi here? I always liked her."

"Yep, right over there next to the Yu." They are in a large globe, all twenty of them. Fi would not make sense, so I use the Chinese name for fish. Not really fish at TK6. Never underestimate them. How come they all are oriented right side up under weightless conditions?

"They prefer the term Pi." Something new?

"On account of their math abilities?" Bait asks.

"Short for Pisces I think."

"What's the Ceph name for them?" He smiles and shows me. Sort of a wiggly motion. Makes sense. I try it myself. One of the simpler words in keeping with the concept.

Most of the people are wearing robes of one kind or another. I feel out of place with street clothes on.

"Unc, can you make us some robes?"

"There are extras just down the hall on your right in your rooms. Your names are on the door. Open the access panel inside with the white robe symbol on it."

"Thanks." I grab Bait's hand and we take off. We find the panel fast enough and I grab two that look like they will fit. Not that hard with these robes. Not exactly fashion statements. Tiny room, but I don't care I am so excited. Bait is bigger than me, but not by much. We both shuck our street clothes and quickly get into the robes.

"Well hello dears! Never thought I would get to see such a lovely sight! Heaven knows I tried enough times. Lily, you have lost some weight. Looks good, very good."

"Mr. Withers! What are you doing here?" We both scream and turn gummy bear red.

His voice completely changes, "Relax ladies. I was in on the 'lesson' and am not normally like the character I played. Though it was sort of fun coming with all those ways to annoy the two of you."

"You aren't, ah, changed are you?" Oh God, if he is TK I will die.

"TK? Naw. Though I spent some time as a pear and did have the treatments, so I should live another hundred years anyway."

"I don't understand. Why are you here?" I double check to be sure I am presentable to a norm. I keep forgetting they are some here as well.

"Ah, that will be explained later. Don't want to give away the surprise."

"Do you know where we are going?" We have made it back to the main room.

"Not that far. You'll see soon enough. Oh, there is Kuma Roshi. You

really should meet him. I understand you two will be working under him for your next assignment."

"How come a norm knows so much more than we do?"

"And all this time we were in the same home."

"I get the feeling that everyone knows what is going on except us."

We have been shunned. A common practice in Cat culture.

"What do we do to get out of this state?"

Lick butt of course.

"I am not licking Cat butt."

A figure of speech. Means be real nice and quite until they get used to our presence again. Screaming in the hallway is not a good way to go unnoticed.

"Two points for Ms. Obvious." I make the two point symbol with my hands.

"Watch Mr. Roshi." I turn in his direction. He is very animated, smiling a lot and showing a great deal of interest in what ever is being said.

"Let's go meet our new teacher."

"Don't use TK. Use your slippers. Velcro II on the bottom. The floor has the mating surface."

"That's how the norms do it. Amazing."

"Also accounts for the sound." Of Velcro coming undone with every step. Looks very awkward though. Momentum is still a problem.

We get there and then wait patiently for Mr. Roshi to notice us and allow us into the conversation.

Finally he bows to us much like Silver always does, then laughs as he comments, "Nice robes Honorable Ladies." We both blush red again.

Bait tries to explain, "We thought we were alone."

"Apparently." He laughs again. We laugh along with him.

"Mr. Roshi, what brings you here?"

"Where ever you are, there you are." He laughs again as he sees our confusion.

"He means he has just gone with the flow. This was neither his decision nor against his will." Silver bows to him. He seems to be everywhere.

"That has to be hard." Our recent experiences have certainly born that out.

"Very easy actually. Much easier than fighting. You should try." He smiles.

"Ah, you know about us Mr. Roshi."

"Roshi means teacher in Japanese."

"What does Kuma mean?"

"Bear."

"Teacher Bear or Bear Teacher?"

He laughs, "You find out, yes?" He laughs again and turns to the next person who wishes to gain his attention. He bows to a Di with gorgeous blue feathers with white stripes.

"Let's go see Rooi." Bait grabs my hand this time and we go foot sticking across the room as best we can. A kitten goes zooming past us making a huge racket, followed by a second and then finally a third one. I can't help but laugh at the train like appearance. Having four legs is definitely an advantage at this game. They are playing hide and seek among all the appendages. Maybe I should be a Cat in my next life.

You are not worthy of such an enlightened state of Being.

"Can it fish breath."

"Where did you get the food?"

Not saying. Show no respect.

"Fine, we are not without abilities. We will find our own food."

No Cat food left. Fine with me. Bait and you might like fish but I get tired of it.

"Rooi is next to the buffet." Bait points. We go up to the buffet. Lots of good stuff left I think.

"Wait, what is this?"

"I think this is TK chow."

"No animal protein then. Oh well. I'm hungry. Wait, what did the Cats get?"

"Long Tail eat tofu? I don't think so."

"This looks like fish though." I taste some, "Tastes like fish. Almost. Not as strong."

"Believe me. This is no species that ever swam in the ocean." She skips the 'fish' and sticks to vegies and bread. Not me. I don't mind. In fact, the idea that this is not really fish makes me feel better somehow. Less stinky helps too. I am concentrating on the other snacks when I see a tentacle grab what I was looking at. I look up to see Rooi. I do a short form of the Nauti salute. Does not involve getting flat on the floor and loosing my meal. She does the same as she is also holding a bowl full of goodies.

~Rooi. We are so happy to see you here. What do you think of the food?~

She shows rather than speaking, ~It will suffice. Pretty bland. Have you seen any of the green root spice?~

~Wasabi?~ That would be fun to try on the kittens. I hear a growl from behind me. "Just kidding Long Tail." No fun at all. So much for training them about the world. I hear the classic sucking sound of their dinner being served. I look under the table to see them going at it. Glad I

will never have to suffer that indignity. Mine would not hold much milk anyway.

I get back to the task at hand and don't see any on the table.

~I will ask. Be right back.~ I scan and figure out where the kitchen is. Wish I could DS. Instead I cheat a little on my swooshing across the floor to speed things up.

In the kitchen I see Doc and Hei Long arguing over some dish they are apparently working on.

"Look, the Grand Blue Feather herself said this is the way to prepare it."

"I have been preparing crepes since you were a little boy. Only bird eggs will do."

"They have no birds to speak of and I had to make do. At least try it."

"The smell is enough. No thank you."

"I see where the birds are needed then, chicken!" Oh no, not now. You don't call Hei Long chicken.

"Ah, excuse me. Rooi would like some wasabi if there is any." They both turn to look at me at the same time. Then come running up to hug me.

"When did you get out?"

"I was beginning to think I would never see you again." Doc adds.

"Tell me about it. Bait is out with the others. Long Tail is nursing three of her own under the buffet table. I really need to get back. Wasabi?"

"Sorry, we only have horseradish. Let her try that."

"Can we color it green? The taste is similar enough maybe she will just think it is a different batch?"

"And read your thoughts. No, just take her the bowl and say what it is. Most commercial wasabi was really horseradish anyway."

When I get back everyone is sitting on the floor rapt in conversation. I hand Rooi the bowl. She tastes it and hand signs thanks. She then grabs piece of tofu fish and dips them in the bowl before disappearing under her privacy cover to her mouth. Still does not like to eat exposed. I try some of what she is having and she shows amusement when my head nearly explodes.

~Wow!~

~You have something to add Lily?~ I have interrupted the conversation.

~We have missed so much. Why do you call this time the time of forgetting?~

~Why did we evacuate E1?~ Bait quickly sneaks in.

I answer that one, ~So the planet could recover from all the pollution

we did. All of the TKs helped with the more dangerous stuff that would have held up recovering for thousands of years. And of course, as you and I were personally involved, there was the documentation project to try and recover and remember some of the finer points. Art, thought, music, etc.~

~There was one more aspect. It is the intention of our group to eventually let Hu back onto E1, but if were to do so as soon as the cleanup was accomplished the pattern would just repeat itself.~

~Thus the time of forgetting. Isn't it more of learning of better ways, from the Ceph and Di for instance?~ Bait is better at thinking about such stuff that I am.

~Partly, but old ways are hard to erase. We have to wait until they become unbelieved legends and fairy tails.~

~That will take time. How long until the remnants are gone from E1?

~

~Done. The remaining 'thn assisted. We have taken the additional step of making the metals less concentrated this time, so when Hu do return it will not be as easy to make pure metals.~

~Less able to make weapons of war.~

~Oh, they will still be able to kill themselves. Don't worry.~

~We are good at that unfortunately.~

While they have been showing I have been scanning as far as I can around me. This ship is huge. Really huge. Must be able to hold several hundred people.

"Isn't this thing too big to move with the eights and nines?"

"They are not moving it. Or rather won't be. We are still stationary."

Hei Long comes into the conversation, "We have developed psiotic engines."

Bait comments, "Wait, I have seen this shape before."

"We passed a diagram in the hallway showing the lay out." I can't admit to scanning in front of norms. They show up like dead lights. More than thirty present, though I am not counting carefully.

Fish says, "I will take you on a tour later. Let's get back to the conversation at hand. The first gens have had the most experience with how long it takes cultures to change. How long do you think it will take this time?"

Silver defers to Jesan. S/he thinks for a moment, "I am guessing it could take as long as a thousand years. We have five colonies at present. That will likely change as we mix and match groups. We have the added advantage this time of the indigenous species assisting."

"That makes sense. But how do you know this won't end up contaminating the good guys?"

Rooi comments, ~The Ceph are not likely to be affected. We are very different and slow to change. Your species is much more impatient and will adapt and change quickly to adapt to the Ceph culture rather than the other way around.~

Doc shows, ~Don't be so confident. In the last twenty years your culture has changed more than in the last several thousand years.~

~That will slow soon as a new stable point is reached. But you are right, because this new point includes Hu in the mix. I will alert the others to be watchful.~

~Especially Mandhi. She has taken in the Hu culture the most.~

~Sussi has been more affected by the music and there is culture in music.~

~Subliminal?~ She nods.

Rooi looks worried, ~This is coming into my responsibility now. I will investigate.~

~Not everything that Hu do is bad Rooi. Don't forget to accept the good as well. You would not be here now without Hu help.~

She gives us a Nauti salute, ~True. Thank you for reminding me.~

"So, why is Mr. Withers here and where are we going?"

"Oh, Dr. Withers will be heading up our earth search program. If the froth hits most branches at approximately 35 mil intervals and if this has been going on since the beginning of the solar system, then there are millions of possibilities just in the last billion years alone. The Pi have a more exact estimate."

It is only an estimate. We already know the froth does not always happen to all earths at the same time. E0/1 and E35A/B events are separated by three hundred twelve point five seven years. Also don't forget that the earth has been around for approximately four and a half billion years.

"But Rooi's group found some of their counter parts on E35B. How can that be?"

Their culture moves much more slowly. Less variations enter into play. We suspect that we will find even larger separation distances in our own froth branches.

"Whoa. Guess the monkey branch is more stressed." I agree Bait.

"Now, as to where we are going. We are going to Luna City. The people there are under the impression that they have been abandoned by circumstances and are starting to fold under the stress. We need to reach them before they are no longer of any use to us."

"Not because they could all end up dead? Nice thinking." Let's show a little compassion folk.

"We can't be everywhere and save everyone. It took us some time to

decide whether it would be better to let nature take its course or to intervene. Remember your own experience recently with this decision." I swallow.

"But there were nearly a thousand people there at the fall."

"Less than half that now."

"Why? I thought they had reached self sufficiency."

"Our guess is they are trimming stock to insure there are enough supplies to start a new generation."

"Cold. Very cold."

"The classic life boat philosophy test. What do you do when there are too many people in the life boat and you have no idea when or if you will be rescued."

I think about it. I don't know how to answer that question. Everyone dies or you have to choose who dies. How do you do that? Yet, isn't that what this group does? How do we do that?

"Rooi has been chosen to be point." What? How are they going to react to her? This is crazy. I look back and forth to Rooi and Doc. I trust both of them with my life, but this is crazy.

"We have been preparing, don't worry Lily. You look like your face is going to explode." Doc scrunches up his face to make fun of mine.

"Sorry. I was not prepared. When do we go? Should only take a few minutes right?"

"Actually it will take several days. We don't want to scare them any more than we have to."

Bait comes back with, "Are you kidding? Do you know how much larger this ship is than anything seen on earth before? Just the size alone will scare the shit out of them." Suddenly Bait's mouth is full of soap bubbles. She spits them out and TKs the rest away. He did warn us.

"They have seen this ship before or something very similar to it. It is important that we impress on them our strength without scaring them. It will be delicate we agree."

Silver adds, "We have some experience. Watch and learn." Of course I can't pull off level nine tricks like they do.

"Come you two. Let me give you a tour of the bridge and engineering." Engineering? Engine room? Fish leads us out before we get into any more trouble. Rooi shows me a symbol for confusion. Hope we have not messed everything up for them. She is suspicious now. Maybe they will be more careful at least. Even a nine can be fooled. I look back to Long Tail and her crew sleeping in a cat ball. Guess they won't be coming. Will have to ask her later what they said. She only pretends to sleep half the time.

We go down some sort of elevator that also goes sort of sideways as

well. I can start to scan more of the edges that I was missing before as they come into my range.

"Recognize it yet dear." He is talking to Bait.

"You didn't!"

"We did. All that recon finally paid off. Ran into a stash of old books and vids. Some people were really into it. This place had their entire house decked out like parts of the ship. Functional to a large extent too."

"Surprised the saps did not destroy it."

"It belonged to a sap. Everything they did went into it. Took their entire life I expect."

"That's crazy. And what are you two talking about?"

"An old sci-fi vid that had a huge cult following."

"Before my time. I certainly don't recognize anything."

"Ah, here we are. Engineering." We enter through doors that automatically open with a funny sound. At least I recognize most of the sentients inside. Looks like Mandhi is in charge. Also present are Aimee, Ron, Hashra and George. There is another Ceph I have not met yet. He appears to be watching Mandhi closely. A student of hers? We stay to the wall and just observe. Lots of activity. Quite a few displays.

"Excuse me." We move so Aimee can get to a display behind us. Slowly I start to feel heavy again.

"Great work team. We have gravity." I think I liked it better without. Oh well. I am sure the norms prefer this.

Barbara phase shifts in from another room, sees us, hesitates, then realizes that we are all TK. "Sorry. I thought for a moment there were norms present. They are not supposed to be down here. They all had their tour days ago." She is blunt and immediately ignores us and goes back to work.

"She was cetacean for so long it is still hard for her to be Hu." We laugh. Barb raises a hand to dismiss us without looking back at us.

Back in the elevator Fish explains, "We really had to hustle to get all the effects to work. She is capable of warp seven, artificial gravity. The impulse engines are TK, but not us, actual tech. As is everything else."

"What about the transporters?" Trans what? I don't recognize any of these terms.

"Tech, but DS is used. Mandhi was able to miniaturize the ones from her world so at least we did not have to invent those. Though we did add the spatial components."

"Would not want to have to go to another world every time." No, I guess not. "What about the glitter?" Glitter?

"That is one thing we have not worked out yet except with our own abilities. Can't do a slow fade in either, even with our 'gifts'."

"Hope no one was hurt in the trials. Phase shift might work, especially if combined with DS."

"Not everyone is an eight remember. We used inanimates for all of the initial tests please. No one was hurt. Ah, here we are, the bridge." The doors open with that swoosh sound again. Strange, I scan the edges of the door and there are pancake speakers where the sounds came from. Huge display in front of us. Probably came from a retro movie theater or some pear's house. New Hope is before us, if this is forward.

"Back up slowly. We want to be able to use the station again." Mei Ying is in what I assume to be the Captain's chair.

"Is that Graas?"

"Yep. One of the best pilots we have. Took right to it."

"Who would have thought a Cat would go for it."

"Are you kidding. They love being in control of anything powerful." We laugh and are rewarded by shushing and a glare from Mei.

Fish ushers us out quickly.

"How come we don't feel movement?"

"Same reason we don't when flying with TK."

"Inertial dampers." Bait says. Whatever. Why was there a funny light going back and forth under the forward display?

More time in the funny elevator box. The only sign of movement is the direction the lights make as we move by them.

"We will gradually reduce gravity on board until we reach the one sixth gravity of the moon. We all need to get used to working in lower gravity." The door opens on arrival.

"This room is different." Lighting is more subdued. No displays, soft furniture and lots of tables. Only a few people sitting at tables talking quietly. There is a long table in the middle with lots of bottles on shelves behind some with their back to us.

They turn around and I see who it is, "Pushy Paws!"

Bait comments, "Guinan!" Pushy Paws does a gentle bow. "You are perfect for the part. Even got the hat right." Must be another reference to the old stories. Means nothing to me.

"What will you have ladies and TK Fish?"

"Double chocolates for all of us!" She smiles and gets to work. Fascinating to watch. Everything is done by hand, from scooping out powders and other ingredients to shaking it all up in a metal container. She then pours this out into three tall glasses and pushes them towards us. She then goes to wiping the counter next to us. Bait is watching everything. I am more interested in the liquid in the glass in front of me.

"This is wonderful and to think she used no tech."

"Better than a replicator." Fish adds.

"You have replicators too? Wow! Where is one? I want to try it."

Pushy Paws answers, "There is one in every room. You will have plenty of time to play with it. The inventory is still rather limited though. Here, people come to relax and get away from tech. Sit, enjoy your chocolate. You are forbidden to talk about work, only ideas, pleasures and fantasies."

"Over here. I want to sit here next to the view screen. How fast can she go."

"Ah, you heard her Bait. No work talk. Just enjoy."

"Oh, I am enjoying. I am in heaven." And I thought I was excited to be on the space station. I can hardly wait to get to the moon.

Luna City

I read the books that Ravi gave me. More out of boredom than anything else. I don't know, alternative earths and magic glass balls. More fantasy than real sci-fi. I was really too tired to deal with them at night, so I brought them to work. Better than ag duty straight. I set the book to send to my implant so I could work. Most people did music or books. My own thoughts are usually enough for me, but ag duty is especially boring. I drift out several times, but don't bother going back to catch what I missed. This is just to get through my work periods, no test on it afterwards.

"So, Spider, what did you think? Good huh?" Glad I did not see Ravi until after shift. Would have been embarrassing to have to admit I had not read them last night. Hope he does not ask too many questions. I still have several volumes to go. This author does tend to run on a bit.

"Ravi, you are even more bored than I am. Let's get something to eat. I'm starved."

"Too bad that won't get us more. Rations seem smaller to you?"

"Or there is more work to use up the calories we do get."

"All hands meeting in ten. Better to get there early if we don't want to be crammed in the back left standing. Everyone goes to the dinning hall for these things. At least you can eat at the same time." Of course calling it food is a stretch.

We quicken our pace but are far from the first ones there. Everyone has learned, except for maybe those who think they are above the rules. Sector heads, etc. We squeeze ourselves in to one side and find a place for two. A bot puts plates of nondescript material in front of us.

"We have an announcement to make." Just in time. "Please look to the monitor nearest you." There is a barely functional one at our table, separating the table into two halves. A few lines have gone bad. Recycle time.

"I can never figure out why they have to assemble us. Why not just broadcast on all of our room terms?"

"Power Spider. Because they can. Besides, when else can they search our rooms. Looks like New Hope. Wonder when it was taken. Good rez, for this screen anyway. Does the food taste different to you?" One thought at a time Ravi.

"You mean the fact that it has taste?"

"This is a file image taken with the Earth Scope a year ago." I have had to service that beast enough times. Amazing how some people can mess up even the most fool proof designs.

"About what I remember when I came in myself, though I was only

there for a few hours. Wonder what happened to the people on board when the fall happened?" He shudders. No one ever asked, though we all wanted to know.

"Didn't they have emergency pods? Guess not. Look at the hole in the one side. Not pretty."

"But the closeup shows the pods all missing from the underside. Some got out at least. I hate thinking about . . ."

"People dying the way we do. Amen."

"During the last year we have been carefully monitoring the construction of a ship of a design not seen before." The scene zooms out and we watch a time lapse image made from the frames of each time the station came into range.

"What do they mean not seen before! This is amazing."

"Ravi, I have seen almost every design in the last thirty years and have never seen this before. That thing is enormous. At least five times the size of the station itself."

"You never watched the vids from the 20th century? This was the hottest program among geeks. My parents met at a convention in fact."

"So it is not real?" A fantasy story apparently. The ship is probably just inflatables. But why bother?

"And this is what was seen yesterday." The ship is moving away from New Hope.

"It works! They actually did it!"

"At the rate of acceleration seen so far we predict they will arrive in two terran days. All hands are assigned to be ready for their arrival. That is all for now."

"Notice anything strange? There is no exhaust. How does it move without exhaust."

"Could be ion drive."

"Accelerating too fast for that and you know it."

"My orders just arrived. That was fast. Usually we have to wait for two hours and then run like hell to get in place in time."

I check my bracelet, "Mine too. They want help getting the decom rooms operational again. Good call given where they are coming from."

"Hopefully no more nanos. How is the captain doing?"

"She is out of sickbay, but I don't know where she has been assigned."

"My guess they are grilling her for as much info as possible about what is going on with this ship and I am guessing she doesn't know a thing."

"Not a good place for her to be in." No.

"Best to get to it. Break over." No sleep for the wicked.

I spend most of the next two days running conduit to replace the fiber

melted in the fire used to burn out the nanos. Everyone pulls two shifts. Their normal workload and then one shift of extra work. Some old man is assigned to do the janitorial tasks and cleanup. Never seen him before that I remember and I think I would have remembered someone that old. So few left alive. A janitor would not be considered essential personnel either. How did he survive? Maybe my theory is wrong.

I bump into him by accident on the second day, "Sorry."

"You are one de call spider no?" Thick accent. European descent. Maybe eastern Europe?

"Yes, sigh. And you are?"

"No one important."

"Believe me, a janitor would be missed before a section head would be." Especially ours.

"How kind." He smiles, but still does not mention his name.

"I hear things from time to time. People ignore me much. Something interesting will happen in main conference room at 18:30." He smiles again and gets back to work. I check my schedule. Amazingly, I am off at that time. I am not sure I want to do this alone. I check Ravi's schedule. He is free also. How did the old man know?

I have two hours, but Ravi does not get off for another hour. Everyone is busy. Wait, how big is New Hope? I log into a term and call up New Hope. Not that tiny. About a hundred and twenty meters long. Yet, it looked tiny next to the ship that formed next to it. It must be over six hundred, give or take.

"There you are Spider. I finished early. They should reach orbit in another 30 and then here an hour later maybe. Probably take them several orbits to get situated. Polar orbit of course. Aren't you excited?"

"A janitor overheard something and said we should be in the main conference room when they arrive."

"Strange, I would have thought all the action would be at the air locks and decom. Probably called ahead to warn us they were coming. But it will take days to get through decom. Probably coordinating everything from the conference room as it is bigger than orbital command. Doubt they would let us in to the conference room if they have taken it over for this."

"Regs say they have to keep the gallery open. We can watch from there."

"Good idea. Everyone else will be occupied. What are the chances we would be the only ones free?"

"We have done our tasks, nothing left for us to do but stay out of the way. Ravi, did you notice the size of the ship they built? How did they boost that much mass into orbit? Where did the design come from? I

mean this is no comic book, it actually moves."

"Yeah, but only one tenth impulse. Wonder if it can do warp speed?"

"What's that?"

"FTL"

"Right. Comic books."

"Don't laugh, who would have thought they could have built something that big and gotten it here in three days. No tech I was ever exposed to. Here we are. No one in the gallery section yet." When we get to the port windows though we see a lot of activity. Several huge screens set up with trajectories, images of the ship, equations and such. One screen has an image of the decom room I was in. That makes sense. The janitor is finishing up, gathering his things into a cart. He looks up to the camera and winks. I look around the conference room. No one else pays any attention to him. He was right.

"We are early. What do we do now?"

"I want to know more about where you got those books from and what that ship is out there?"

"Not related. Some old man gave me the books. The ship I have already told you about. I really have no idea how they did it. The story for the ship took place in the twenty fourth century. We are on the eve of the twenty second. Not a match."

"Not to mention there is no sign of civilization left on earth itself to have built it."

"The story went though a collapse also, but I don't think it was this early and not as extensive as what happened to us. There were only a few episodes that mentioned it. Oh, wait, there was one old series that started just after that time period. Now, those stories were strange. Time wars or something."

"Someone is coming." We turn to the opening door. The janitor comes in.

"Did not want to miss this myself. Anything happen yet?"

"That is the man who gave me the books. Said he found them on earth before he left."

"That I did. Hidden in de wall of de library of former marine research station."

"You did not mention that earlier. The story mentions the books being found. The leader of that group would be about your age now."

"Yep." He goes up to a port and looks down. "Soon now."

"Looks like the ship took up orbit around the moon as I said it would. They were not designed to land. Oh God, I wonder if they figured out transporters too! That would be so cool. Naw, bet they send a shuttle. No one even back then believed transporters would ever work." Shuttle

makes sense. The ship is big enough to hold several shuttles. The images on the screens are much more detailed now. Certainly well thought out. The attention to detail makes it look real enough. What are their intentions? Why go through all this effort? Is this the last of the human race or are they coming to get us to bring us back to earth?

"BATTLE STATIONS! BATTLE STATIONS!"

Those loud horns are so annoying. I check the large screens below. Nothing apparent. Must be just people getting nervous.

"Well do we go or stay here? If that ship has even one tenth the capability of the real one they could level us with a single shot. Battle stations are a joke."

"We are not totally defenseless. Never knew on earth which ways the political winds would blow. Some despot gains power and decides to take it out on us as an example."

"I would recommend staying. It will only be few a minutes till we know. None of us could get to our assigned positions in time anyway."

The only other person with us is the old man. No one else bothered to show. He seems content to stay where he is. What was the nickname they gave him in the book? Something about flying. He was also in the military. We are both looking at him now. He points to one of the screens. I turn to look and it is an image of the three of us at a port window looking dumb. Sigh, not the first time I have been in trouble.

The door opens behind us and two MPs arrive armed. Another month in the brig.

"Spider look!" I turn back to the room. A creature has appeared in the largest open space. It looks like a sort of octopus and is waving its arms about. It has some kind of device in one hand. A weapon? Why come alone into an armed unknown group. The captain from the shuttle is screaming that this is one of the creatures that took over earth! The MPs upon seeing and hearing this take up positions at the port windows, pushing us aside. They activate the controls on the windows to be ready to open them.

"A Ceph Spidey, just like in the books! Wonder which one? Might even be Rooi herself. We need to get down there. Everyone else is just getting freaked. They could hurt her by accident."

They are trying to get people out the doors. It is chaos down there. That creature is severely out gunned. What are they afraid of? Anything strange and humans go bazerk.

It speaks, "Take me to your leader!" Really? Very windy and not that easy to understand. It repeats the message several more times. Everyone has stopped moving and is staring at her. Okay, they were already.

"What was the sign of respect Ravi? The Nauti bow. The description was kind of vague."

"You're right. Spider I think we need to acknowledge her. Follow my lead."

"I am a lot bigger than these port windows, as large as they are. We will probably not even be noticed, especially since the MPs got the best ones." We go to the port anyway, bow as low as we can and then raise our arms in the air with faces down. He read the books twice. A distinct advantage I guess.

"Only three show respect. Bring them to me." There is a scramble as they try to identify who she means. The MPs wake up and direct their weapons at us.

"Come with us."

"Wouldn't it be easier just to open the port and drop down. To go around will take much longer."

"Move it now!" Nope. Takes us several minutes to make our way down stairs and hallways to the one unlocked door. Our fearless leaders are all going down the hall away from the conference room. When we enter she is facing us. Her hearing is good then.

We both try and make a proper bow this time, fully on the floor. I notice they have abandoned the captain who is huddling in one corner scared to death. When she sees us bowing, she rises, curious.

"You may rise and explain to the other Hu." Hu? Humans? I look to Ravi, who obviously paid more attention to the books, though the old man has at least lived part of them and he is our third who paid respect. I noticed he did a bow very close to ours. If he really is the leader of the group mentioned, he would know for sure how to bow and Rooi would know him.

"Go ahead Ravi." I nudge him. Weapons are directed at us as well. Apparently knowing what to do makes you a suspect.

"Your weapons have been rendered harmless. Might as well put them away. No one will hurt you." Ravi confidently declares. I think that was a really stupid move. We really know nothing.

The highest ranking MP questions us, "You know this creature? You are working with it?"

"Her. The creature is female sir and sentient. We have never met or commed before. The Ceph prefer a visual language. And, no, I do not know their language. She is from an alternate earth, another world."

"She is not from the ship then? No shuttle has landed. She just appeared. Ugly thing."

"I am sure you are no cutie to her, so why don't you just ask her?"

"Ah, creature, did you arrive with the ship." She remains quiet look-

ing at Ravi and I.

"Sir, I think she will answer you if you show proper respect first. It would be wise for all present to do so. Would save time in the long run. She will have a good memory and will know who has or has not shown respect."

"We do not bow to false idols Spider." Just a thought.

Wait, "But you would shake the hand of a visiting ambassador would you not? Think of it in the same way. She does not see herself as a God and does not ask that of you."

"How could you possibly know that? As he said, you have never met. The creature is the one who arrived unannounced with a weapon. What do you expect us to think?" Right, got us there. She swings the arm around that was holding the device, setting off a round of weapon locks, and then looks at it more closely. No eyelids or eyebrows is strange. Hard to read her, ah, face?

May I ask you a question without the other's thoughts? I am startled. Weird experience. If it was not for the books I would have freaked. I think back to her as best I can that the device resembles a weapon from a story. *But it is a non functional device I was told would reassure you.* I think someone has played a practical joke on you. *Thank you. Please come up to me and receive the device.* Good idea.

"She wants me to take the device, which she has told me is a toy, nothing more. I will hand it to you. Slowly." I go forward and take the offered device, then immediately hand it to the MP handle first. He already thinks I am working with her. I don't need to give him a reason to shoot me. The other MPs then surround the creature. They think she is now unarmed. Even without TK, those eight arms could probably take them out before they realized what happened.

The MP looks at the toy and even presses the trigger while it is pointed down at the floor. I would not have done that! Nothing happens though. *I rendered it non-functional. It really is just a toy now. You were right. They 'set me up' as is shown. I am not amused.*

"Shit. Okay then. Ceph Rooi, where are the others? Pilot we know. Where is Doc, Aimee, Mandhi, anyone else?" That should get some action.

"Good thinking Ravi." How long has Pilot been here with us as a janitor? No one pays him any attention. He could have prepared the others for arrival without anyone here the wiser.

I nudge him and whisper, "Are you TK?" He nods affirmative and holds up seven fingers. Those were not just books it would appear. More historical novels then. But wait, one goes to twenty five million years into the future. Yeah, right, they explained that. Too much at once. I am

going to get a headache for sure.

"Mei Ying, please send the others down before I bring them down myself." She says this out loud while touching a badge on her, ah mantle? Communication device? Three more creatures appear suddenly. Now I can see why command was freaked. That is weird. I look up to the port windows, now above us. There are faces peering down at us. Chickens. Okay, being somewhere else right now, like under my bed, would be nice.

Everyone in the room does the Nauti bow to the new ones, except the three of us. I remember that much. We do a simple bow with hands folded, which the three return. Nauti bow is only for the Ceph. Wow, a real dinosaur, sort of. Head is too big and the mouth too small. Are those feathers on its head? One human at least. Oops, another appears. Two humans, both young women. Well fed and maybe a little older than me. The ladies and the dino are wearing simple robes. What is that last creature? Resembles a blob more than anything. A pet?

"Sorry. I needed some help. Ah, I am Lily. The other Hu is my friend Bait. Oh, yeah, her name is strange on account of her father's nickname is Fish, so growing up, well. Ah, sorry. This handsome fellow is Bai. He is from E65C. We grew up together. The last one, the sort of dark pink blob, has no gender, but is sentient, though a bit slow. It is from an earth we have not classified yet. We call it's world Pink for now. Lots of pink creatures there and the first world that Roo found. Oh, Roo, or more formerly Rooi, is the beautiful Ceph whom you have all just met. Good guess Ravi." They know us and have been watching the entire event? She does not appear to be tracking us though. Looking all around the room at everyone more or less equally. Lily goes up to Roo and gives her a hug. That certainly illustrates that Roo is harmless, if you can believe people that can pop into any location as harmless themselves.

Still hanging onto Rooi she addresses her, "We did not know about the prank Roo. Honest. We are as lost as you why they did all this." She is flicking her hands rapidly as well. Is this the visual hand speaking from the book?

"I will determine who to get even with. This is not the first time and I already have suspicions. It was a lackey of Silver who told me what to say. Though others agreed that it was correct."

Bait adds all business like, "Others were involved then. No wonder we were not brought in until the last moment. We would have told you and spoiled their fun. So which ones are Spider and Ravi please." She then giggles. Not visual then, they only heard what was said. That means Rooi must be transmitting everything back to the ship from the communication device. Lily gives Bait a dirty look who shrugs in response. They

are winging it! Probably don't trust the script that they were given now that the prank has been exposed. I know I won't. They both look around to the unresponsive MPs, then center on Rooi who points us out immediately with two arms, one for each of us. Caught.

Ignoring the armed MPs with guns pointed at and tracking them they walk swiftly up to us. "Happy to meet you." She holds a hand up, "Ooh, hold on a sec." They then both go past us to hug Pilot. Bait would have grown up with him. I am feeling a little light headed. Have they reduced the oxygen in here? Maybe because everyone is hyperventilating. I turn to Rooi to get her take on this, but she is gone. I would not want to be Silver or the others right now. It would appear Roo is being included in the pranks they have always played on each other from time to time. I wonder if we will get to meet Owa as well? Imagine a large cat.

"So, nice place you have here. Do we get a tour?" They are playing the female card on Ravi. Reminds me of cats in heat. Cats are good at catching the roaches and fit in tight spaces. We only have the hairless ones here though. Seen pictures of real cats. A lot of fur. Messy.

I butt in to break up their plot, "I should introduce you to our 'leader', if we can find him. It is he to whom you should be talking to. Ravi and I are near the bottom of the command structure." A slime layer away from the bottom.

"Don't be so sure. You both faced the unknown far better than your 'leaders' did. Who would you follow given a choice? Hold on a moment." Her face goes blank for a moment and then relaxes. Mental thinking or implant? What level is a seven? I don't remember the characteristics. They seem young to be high enough to mind read.

Suddenly Commander Dai appears before us very shaken and ten centimeters off the floor! Bait turns to the commander and with attitude says, "Commander Dai, did you or did you not order the execution of over two hundred and twelve colonists without a trial and for no other offense than they were breathing air?" He turns bright red. So it's true. I instinctively back away a step. He disappears again. I look around. Definitely gone from the room. I hope his seeing me does not get me in even more trouble. I don't want to be number two hundred and thirteen.

"Now the formalities are over with." She laughs, "We have a special place for people like him." Such an evil grin. Guns are raised at all of us by very nervous MPs looking every which way for the next surprise. "Oh, give it a rest." All the weapons disappear. "If you don't want to follow the commander, chill out."

One MP has to ask with a touch of anger, "What have you done with him?" He is gone.

"Any more questions?" Shit, don't mess with these people, er, beings.

"Relax, no one is dead. They are safe, for the moment at least. Look, all of you. You are obviously on the short end of the stick. Why don't you just play along until you learn why we are here. Who knows, you may even like it. And just so you don't get any ideas, Lily and I are at the bottom of our command structure as well. We did not do the people moving. Many others are watching and you really, really don't want to mess with them."

"Yeah." Lily rubs her behind like she has had personal experience. I chuckle and she smiles at me. We both roll our eyes and laugh at that.

"All right, we have fiber feed, finally. Everyone in Luna City is seeing this now. Here is the bottom line. There are no humans, or any other high level sentients on the earth you see up there any more. Everyone has been moved, not cooked and eaten Colonel. They have been moved to other alternate earths so ours can recover from the abuse we did and so our race can learn from the other sentients how to better take care of our world. They learn from our mistakes and gain from some of our tech. The idea is that some time in the future we all go home. Everyone wins."

"Are we to be relocated as well?"

"Actually not. We have another task for you."

"Actually several, depending on skills and desires." Pilot adds with a throat clearing. His accent is gone too. He comes forward.

"Right. Oh, and we brought supplies. Pilot told us what you needed and I think we brought everything. Not our department of course." She reaches into her pocket and pulls out some bars of some kind. That's it? She hands one to Ravi and I. "A taste. Chocolate. Go ahead. Try it."

"I am not much of a chocolate person."

"Strange, you should be."

Lily nudges her, "Bait, I don't think they know yet."

"Oh right. We won't have to train them will we?" She asks Lily.

Who answers, "No idea. They did not exactly tell us much before we came down now did they." Nope.

"Well it was nice to see you ladies again. Heard you had a good time at the old folks home." Pilot smiles at them and waves.

"Oh yeah, great time. Did you know that Mr. Withers is on board?"

"Good idea. Is he going to head the search project?"

"How did you know?"

"Good man. He's a great choice. Good bye ladies." He waves again.

"Wait, what about our tour?"

"Yeah, we just got here."

"And haven't seen Uncle Pilot in years."

"I am touched. Bye." He waves goodbye for the last time as they whine, then disappear.

The MPs grow less afraid at the urgings of the few staff that remain. Never fight your own battles if you don't have to. Cowards. Without thinking I have placed the chocolate in my mouth. When I realize I make a face, then change my mind. Strange, but this actually tastes good to me. Wonder what's in it?

Then it hits me, "Shit. When did you do it? You made me one of you!"

"About a week ago. Some people are slow. It is fun to see what finally happens to clue a new one in. In my case it was by invitation, which I had declined for years, so I knew it was going to happen."

"Then why were we drafted instead of invited?"

"Time. We needed two from here who fit your profiles."

"Two, that means me too. Only nut cases need apply." Ravi says.

He laughs, "Pretty close actually. Though Ravi is not that far gone." Meaning I am. No surprise there.

"I disagree. I have to be nuts to be friends with this one." Referring to me of course. I am still watching the MPs. When they finally decide to rush us I start to scream a warning when they suddenly fall as if they have hit an invisible wall. I am just told I have the ability I have actually had for a week and now it decides to work. Okay, that's weird.

Pilot turns to me, "Good first effort Spider, but I want them concentrating on something other than us for a bit." Meaning I should be concentrating on him instead of them. They disappear one at a time. How far?

Over the comm comes an announcement, "Supplies have arrived! We need help getting them moved. All available hands are requested. The earth ladies say more is on the way."

"They're back. They must really want that tour of our dump." Ravi grins.

"But working this time. They do work hard when given a clear assignment. They just get bored too easily. Something I apparently have to work on with you two as well." I grin sheepishly.

When the strange creatures left, most of the people here did as well. A few staff come up to us, "You two going to be okay?" We nod. "What's going to happen to us then?" They were careful to avoid Bai who flashed his teeth at anyone who looks at him strange. Now that he is gone with the ladies, they are much braver. Wait, they forgot one. The Pink one is still slowly making its way around the room. It would not scare anyone. If I did not know better I would think it is tasting everything. Pilot sees what I am looking at and it disappears as well.

"Ah, right. I haven't said yet have I? One choice will be to remain here. We need people to do long distance cataloging of alternate earths.

Being this far away has some advantages."

"Not all will be lower tech or will be unsafe for some other reason." One of the remaining staff gets brave enough to suggest. Good for her.

"Good, right on target. So we set up a massive telescope array with everything we know about. Sorry, but your array really is lacking. We can fix you up quick enough though. People are needed to run, maintain and analyze the results." He looks at me when he says that. More conduit running, only on a larger scale. Oh well.

"A lot of people here would love that project." I suggest trying to deflect his thinking.

"If they don't elect for the second one or the third. The second will only appeal to the recent arrivals. Sorry Spider, but you will not be going. You will not be able to handle heavy gravity for awhile. Once interesting earths are found, someone needs to go there for first hand experience. Had the commander waited a bit longer we would have taken any excess population. I am sorry we did not get here sooner, but a lot has been happening at once and we knew you had enough supplies."

"You could have saved them. Why didn't you? And bots could do new world surveillance."

"We don't like to interfere until we have too. Making all of you dependent on us before the committee had decided would have only made for a larger mess. But yes, in hindsight we should have acted. As you get to know Lily and Bait, acting too quickly has its downside as well."

"You gave the Commander enough rope to hang himself. That I understand, but why did more than one have to die?"

"I did not witness any of the deaths. He was good. Never did anything obvious. Accidents do happen, even here. Actually Lily's accusation was just a guess to test a response. Those two can be very intuitive, but unfortunately are not always careful. Looks like the correct one this time though. And before you ask, we don't read minds unless forced to. Besides no one would believe me. Actually I don't think the commander knew about most of the deaths. Underlings did the deeds. He just gave out general orders.

As to the bots, they would have worked on some of the worlds, but they would scare the locals on most."

"More than Pink or Bai, no offense." Right, Pink is not scaring anyone.

"None taken. Hu are very scary to the Di young. Hu have been known to capture and eat them." Of course it works both ways. I close my mouth like an idiot.

"And the third?" Ravi is curious now.

"The ship. We know from the journals and the E0 TKs that there is a

lot more out there. We can't reach the same worlds because of the time paradox, but there are still millions out there we can visit."

"Why make it like the Enterprise?" That was the name! I am starting to remember. They used to play those stories sometimes. Never interested me though.

"We could not resist. Kind of scary that we could get that close to 'just a story' actually. Makes you wonder. Were the original stores based on some other parallel earth?"

"So, where did you send our leader and the others?" A staff member asks.

"On board ship for now. Eventually they will end up in a retraining camp of sorts. We send all of our special cases there. Hu got into a lot of trouble because of Sauron's attempts to breed a super race that could defeat the 'thn. We want to de-breed that out of ourselves. Ah, right, only Ravi and Spider have read the journals. You will get your chance."

"Speaking of which, where are the 'thn? I would love to meet one." They sound fascinating to me, even if they are apparently not seen as so special any more.

"They are around. Since the events that Rooi and Silver were recently involved in it is harder to take them seriously now. They seem to feel the same way about us. Their need has been taken care of. Makes me think this was all just a set up to get them mated and now they don't need us any more."

"Maybe." I really don't believe this is the end of it. Too easy.

Surprisingly the Colonel comes back in and carefully looks around, sees Pilot and comes up to us.

"I am sorry. I wanted to thank you for saving my life."

"Too bad we can't say the same thing for your two passengers, Hansel and Gretel." Male and female? They both had such large boobs.

"You knew them? I had no way of knowing what was going on. That your group would save everyone."

"They had talents that would have been useful. You are right though. You could not have known. However there were more than enough supplies on board for all of you to get here. I really did not think that I would have to watch you."

"You were not on board. You could not have known what I went through."

Ravi asks, "Wait, when did you get here?"

"A few days before the Colonel did." He smiles. The Colonel's mouth falls open.

"Wait, the shuttle was faster than even the big ship. How could you have gotten here before I did and how? There were no other ships."

"Oh please. I don't need a ship and the Enterprise purposely went slow so as not to scare everyone. It could have beat me here easily in a race."

"No ship! Who are you people?"

"I think the Colonel is more afraid of you than of Rooi."

"So, just how fast can you guys move?"

"Silver or Rooi could get here in less than a second."

"Shit, that's faster than light. I know I read about it in the journals, but facing it is something else."

"So, you could have easily brought supplies to everyone."

"We had a lot of other things on our minds. Don't forget that most of the world died in the plagues. Even we could not stop something as massive as that."

"So you just sat by and watched instead? And you say I'm evil."

"When we saw that it was going past our ability to do anything, we saved as much of our art and science as we could. Once the world is clean again we will reintroduce what we can, when we think it will not cause harm. Lily and Bait even helped in that effort. There was a lot of art in New Pebble Beach. Remember, there are not that many of us. We don't reproduce like rabbits. We have to be very careful in our choices.

Our own experience has shown that the large ship showing up at an expected time and place is a lot less scary than normal looking Hu 'pop-ping' in unexpected."

"Even Rooi?"

"Strange huh? Hey, we have lots of work to do. Colonel, come along with us. Maybe we can put you to work too."

"You will make me one of you too?"

"Maybe, we will see. You are on probation for now."

"That's fair enough. Thank you."

"It was not easy to fly a shuttle of unknown design to an unknown greeting on another world. You do get some credit for that."

Raptor

I am definitely out of my element. There is no way this is earth. Nothing looks familiar. Even the smells are different. There are more terpines. Reminds me of the smell some wood centipedes make. There are conifers, ferns of huge sizes and rarely small bromeliads and orchids. Not the sweet smelling ones either, the shit and death scented ones. Definitely not Kansas or Utah. Of course this is what I can see and figure out in the moon light. Maybe in the daylight the sweet smelling flowers will open out.

Bernice leads me. We follow what appear to be deer paths, but I doubt there are any deer. The path branches frequently and Bernice's choices seem random. Are we running or going to someplace specific?

I can barely see and keep getting hit by branches. She either knows this area really well or more likely can see much better than I can. Of course she is younger than I am. I wonder what their normal lifespan is. Age affects reptile/birds as well as mammals. We all face old age and death. Does she molt or shed or does it fall off in patches?

I am getting winded and will have to rest soon. I tried to keep up with the exercise program, but lost heart when it was obvious I would never leave the janitorial position.

I make an effort to try and catch up to get her attention to tell her I need to rest. When I get to the clearing where I see her silhouette I see she is not alone.

"Whoa. There are a lot of you aren't there." In response a few chirp back at me. All of them are looking at me. Bernice, I hope it is her, comes up to me and takes me by the hand. I am no anthropologist, but it does seem weird that she does this. I look around to see what the others are doing. Most are pairing up and holding hands! Why?

"You don't understand. They will come for me. All of us have implants. They certainly know exactly where I am right now. I can't endanger all of you by leading them to you. It would be better if you left me alone." I am not about to scare them off like some grade B vid, but I want to.

Bernice chips at me and tugs at my hand.

"Okay, we try it your way for now, but I need to sleep too. It will be light soon. I can't go much further."

"Chirp!"

She turns to the others and rattles off a huge range of sounds, only some of which seem to repeat. Some respond in kind. Everyone takes off in different directions, each in pairs. She looks back up at me and chirps

again.

"Okay, that was weird. You can obviously communicate. You have a language. I am afraid I am not used to my study subjects talking." I get up and she goes.

We quickly come to a stream where the others are waiting spread out along the bank. Water would be nice. I can see the first glow of a new day. Only a few clouds so far. I don't see anyone else drinking though. I watch and wait. Outlooks go up the small hill near by chirping and barking back information. Some signal is given and everyone else quickly goes to the water's edge to drink. I do the same.

A moment later I hear a commotion and everyone starts to run. I follow as fast as I can. We run along the stream going north west by the angle of the sunrise. Salt Lake would be north of here if this was earth, though still some ways away. We stop. Everyone turns to look back.

"What are those?" Bernice covers my mouth. That is clear enough. Everyone is nervous. Whatever they are, they retreat into the trees after looking around and sniffing the ground. No one moves. We wait. A moment later another creature emerges. Low to the ground, slow moving, it makes its way to the water to drink.

Very quickly it is surrounded by the creatures from the trees. They have nasty looking teeth. Reminds me of something I saw as a kid. They take turns harassing the creature. None of them actually make contact and the creatures does not even seem to notice them.

I remember them now. When I was little I saw an old movie called Jurassic Park or something like that. These are raptor like creatures. Meat eaters par excellent. Why isn't the creature worried? Granted it is bigger than they are, but I am guessing it is vegetarian from the placement of its eyes on the side of its head. Prey.

I feel something on my arm and look down to see two eyes looking up at me.

"Well hello little friend." I allow it to follow my arm down to my hand which I then hold up to my face. Interesting. Fur. So there are mammals here. Where are the birds? I set it down on the ground and it scampers off. The raptors are trying to tip the creature over, but are having a hard time of it.

"Whoa!" The creature suddenly rolls up into a tight ball exposing large sharp triangular scales or plates. They manage to move it a little, but are also obviously hurt in the process. It does not take them long to give up on this one.

Three go south and two sniff the air before zeroing in on our scent. A loud warning chirp that even I can guess the meaning of and we are moving again. Not too fast. We are allowing the two to gradually catch up

with us, but not quickly. We have gone faster earlier, so there must be some strategy to their behavior.

The trees are thinning out on my left, west I am guessing, as the hillside becomes too steep to support them. On top there are more trees. The sandy soil is easy to run on. Not sure we can outrun the raptors once they reach this spot. Up ahead there are no trees. Possibly a lake or large meadow. Lake. I can feel a cool breeze and can now make out small waves. The now cliffs on my left are coming closer to our path and steeper at the same time.

The little equipment the Captain allowed me to keep is all water proof, but I am not the greatest swimmer in the world. Our group is now going single file with me towards the end. I feel for my knife and look around for other possible weapons. Lots of river stones about the right size. I look back to see there are now five again. The other two much have been trying to circle around, but when we moved out of range they had to give up and join the others. About twenty of us. My group consists of creatures about half my weight and I am guessing about the same ratio to the raptors. Those raptors don't look stupid either. They would not be continuing in this direction without a good chance at dinner.

"Looks like I have to make a choice." Either into the water with the others. They swim very well. It is now with the stronger light that I can see that their tails are flattened dorsal-ventral and act like a large flipper. They don't use their arms and legs at all in swimming. I could never keep up with them. I look up the cliff and see lots of hand holds. Even I could do this.

Bernice, who has decided she is my protector protests. She is probably safer in the water. I motion for her to join the others. She argues with me. I finally let her make up her own mind and start up the cliff only to have her jump on my back. Okay, now this will be harder, but I know I can't abandon her to the carnivores either.

I struggle up the cliff as they arrive. Everyone else is safely in the water a short distance away. The raptors do not go more than a few steps into the water. A few of the braver friends nip at their legs and speed off. After a lot of splashing the raptors retreat from the deeper water and no one dares harass them again. The friends would be easy prey in shallow water. At least they are smart enough to know it and keep their distance as much as I appreciate the help.

Unfortunately their interest is now directed to us. At first all five try at once and end up fouling each others attempts. It would be comical except for the teeth and determination. One snarls louder than I was expecting and the others back off. It jumps right at us and tears off part of a pant leg and nearly pulls me down into their waiting jaws. I am too low and

scramble higher, heart pumping so loud I will wake up the late sleepers in the forest for miles. I hear Bernice yelp and speed up. Her claws have dug into my chest. No time to think I reach the top somehow, too hyper to even remember how.

Panting and heart still pounding I notice, "You've been hurt." The very tip of her tail is missing. "I'm sorry. I wish you had joined the others." I break out a wound kit and seal her wound. It has pain killers, antibiotics and cauterizing agents. It stops the bleeding immediately and hopefully will prevent infection. Bernice sniffs the results in curiosity. She then points to one of the beasts going back. It will try and find another way up this cliff. One kilometer back it wasn't a cliff. Patience will be their reward. Trapped up here we are easy prey. Meanwhile two try jumping and climbing the cliff. Not successful. Not designed for this clearly.

"I am not going to wait for them to get here." I find several large rocks and proceed to send them crashing down on our guests. One is killed immediately and another severely wounded. The resulting roar of pain is also impressive. The wondering one returns immediately and the three intact ones tear apart the other two, even the wounded one. Shit, if I had known they were this nasty I would not have even waited. Bernice is right beside me watching without comment. She has apparently seen this behavior before.

"Not sure I like your world Bernice. Not sure at all." After eating that much they will need to sleep. I am not going to take a chance however that they will not be alert enough to bring us down for a snack to be savored later. If savor is the right word. Not much more than bones and blood now.

I look around and see several branches the right size. I take out my military issue carbon edged knife of destruction. Standard issue. At least the Captain let me keep it. Only takes me a moment to fashion several spears. Bernice watches this whole process and complains that they are too big. Almost comical the pantomiming she uses to illustrate this. I look around, but it is she who finds the right size first and bring the branch to me.

"No Bernice, very sharp. Don't touch." She has to try anyway and is rewarded with a small cut. She sucks on this without comment or apparent concern and together we make a few spears for her as well. She then takes a much smaller stone knife out of her tool belt and puts notches in the tip and a smooth holding area near the back. No splinters on your throwing hand.

"Good idea." I do the same to mine. If these things do penetrate they will not come out without tearing flesh and we will be able to hold then

tight enough to use a lot of force without ruining our own hands on the bark.

Out of a pouch I remove some emergency cord and proceed to tie all of the spears together. Bernice objects and removes her three and proceeds to tie them with what looks like leather cord. Probably someone's intestines. I show her how I will carry them as we go down the hill to a location further up stream. I don't want to chance walking right into them unarmed. Meanwhile all of the others are watching this entire process and talking to each other. As we go upstream they follow off shore.

Once down at stream level I take a chance and go into the water. Cold, but not numbing. I proceed further into the center and get as low as I can. I then let the current carry me past the sleeping pests. It does not take too long before I am in the lake itself and shivering from the cold. I cannot stay in the water.

I follow the others as best I can. They keep circling back to make sure I am there. We go northeast. At least we are on the other side of the stream. It was pretty shallow at the mouth. If the raptors figure this out they will be able to follow us. They appear to be sleeping it off. Hopefully by the time they wake up we will be out of sight and smell of them. Can't track over water. I hope the seal on Bernice's tail is hard enough to handle the water soaking. There was not time to let it set properly.

Once we appear to be a safe distance away I proceed to shore. I can make better time on land, not to mention dry out and warm up in the now sunny sky.

"A fire and some food would be nice. A nap would be nice actually. Are you guys nocturnal or diurnal?" Their eyes are not huge, so maybe generalists. Do what you have to do. We have been traveling all night though, not to mention the encounter. Once on land Bernice proceeds to tell the others of our adventure I think and shows them the spears. In the better light I see they are all wearing belts and bags to carry things. Stone age tech at least. Do they wear pelts in the winter? Are they warm blooded or partway there?

I gather some twigs and branches from the edge of the trees and proceed to build a fire. A lens should be enough for this task. I don't want to scare them with a flare or torch. I soon have a fire going and an audience watching. They all want to handle the lens, but I keep it safe. Last thing I need is a forest fire because they are staring fires all over the place.

All but Bernice and two others run into the forest for some reason. She does not seem concerned, so I stop worrying about the sudden change in behavior. I am getting sleepy when they return a few moments later.

Contents of their sacks are overturned into a large pile. Nuts, seeds,

fruits of some kind, roots, a few grubs and slow moving insects and an assortment of dead rodent like mammals similar to what I saw earlier I am guessing. Oh well. They are food for many creatures on my world too. We would be neck high in them otherwise. I was not afforded the luxury of a full basic training, as the plagues hit just before I was 'recruited' and for that I am thankful. I heard enough about it later from others. Everyone takes things out of the pile and starts to eat. I stick to the vegetarian items. I may get hungry enough later, but hopefully by then I will be hungry enough to not care. Almost makes MREs look good.

Bernice hands the three spears she has helped make to three others. They are studied. Several go back into the woods and return with building materials. Three take the made spears and take up positions as apparent guards. One large fellow looks at my three but changes his mind. Wait, that is a female. The females are larger than the males. Not uncommon in reptiles, birds or dinosaurs. I fall asleep next to the fire and Bernice, to the sounds of soft talking and chipping at branches. I have formed my own army. Great. Actually probably not. They seem to have grasped the concept of a spear and its purpose. They have seen this before and are only making them because I gave them the idea that they might be needed. That makes Bernice and I their now apparent leaders. Not sure I am ready to be a Captain, not liking mine too much.

I wake with a start. I had a horrible dream of running from the Captain. No matter what I do with this small group, a single well armed grunt could take them out before they could take a breath. Raptors are nothing compared to my kind. The fire has gone out and I cover it with sand and a few rocks. They know where I am, so I don't have to trouble with erasing my tracks. Giving me a leash long enough to hang myself with.

I am going to need to learn their names soon too. One comes running up to Bernice with something. She looks at it and then both of them bring it to me. Whatever it is, it is definitely dead now. Looks at first like a large insect. Wings, legs body. Obviously squashed. I turn it over. Tech. Good stuff too. I wish I could ask them where they found it. Well I knew they knew where I was. Now I know that I am being watched as well. I strongly suspect that I have been set up. Captain knew that by telling me not to leave the compound I would do exactly that. That psych profile on each of us must be very good. Now the reason is why?

Bernice tugs me. I gather my spear package and follow. They all have three spears now. Potter's Plotters? Jake's Gang? Neither fits well in my throat. A few days ago I was having dreams of my love. Now I am in love again, but for a much better reason. I just realized that. Interesting.

The old world is gone. Welcome to the new world Jake. As much as I would like to know why and how we ended up here, I have to survive

long enough first. Getting to know and understand the environment and the local sentients is a good start. As we go up a rise I look back at the lake. This is not the Salt Lake that I left. Huge. A new world. I look around at my new friends. Am I the snake in the garden? That is the real question. One day at a time.

We run at a slow pace most of the day. In the afternoon we stop and everyone rests. Not too hot for me yet, but I don't mind the rest. Their pattern seems to be to run for a few hours and stop for one before setting out again. So far we have been eating the same thing we had for breakfast. Hope this is not the only thing on the menu. I am whining too much. I should be happy I am alive. The water is great here. No aftertaste.

We make effort getting up a steep hill. I am panting and nearly doubled over when we make it to the top. It is only when I look before me that I am blown away. Bernice has my hand, but is not tugging. She looks out over the city with me. That is the only explanation. There are fields, roads, buildings of both wood and stone, and lots of activity. Still too far away to see details, but they are at least at the feudal level of tech. And there are a lot of them. I know enough to know that these things don't happen in isolation. There is a civilization here folks. This is no genetic experiment, escapees from some pear's compound. There must be a lot more of them unseen over who knows how far a range. World wide?

Chirping happens all around me. Something is coming. I turn to see several commandos in full readiness facing us. That was fast. Do they know what's below? The "bug" was some time ago. Is it possible they have not reconned this far out. Our path was anything but straight. The grunts don't move, just point their weapons. About five that I can see.

I lower myself to face my team, "Look Bernice, guys. This is important. You need to go without me. You will be safe in your home. They won't bother you there. I have to go with my own people. Don't worry about me. Have a good life." There is a tear in my life. I really want to go with them. I push Bernice away from me. She goes a few steps and stops. I don't want the humans to see their town. At least not yet. The only way to do that is to sacrifice myself. Once they see they will kill their own kind as well they may take precautions.

I go down towards them with my hands on my head. I expect to be shot at some point, but I still want to postpone it as long as possible. Amazing how clear everything is when you are about to die. The colors seem so alive and real. At least there are witnesses. No one will be able to say I resisted or threatened anyone. It is then that I remember that I have three spears on my back. Maybe with my hands on my head they won't be threatened. Hell, any of them could take me down before I touched one. Nothing to worry about. I know it, they know it.

There is movement and up the path comes the Captain. Of course she is behind this.

"Well Potty. Here we are. I vaguely remember giving you an order. Do you happen to remember what that was?"

"Yes Captain. You said not to leave the compound."

"Right, that was it. And Potty, where exactly are we?"

"Outside the compound Captain."

"Right and what did I say I would do if you left the compound?"

"You would shoot me on the spot Captain."

"That is the most courageous thing you have ever done. To bad it is the last thing you will ever do. See Potty. I don't tell lies. I keep my word." She raises her gun to point it at me. "Can't say that I won't look forward to this. I know I am not supposed to be taking pleasure in this but I know about your fantasies and I can't allow this to continue."

"Ah Captain. Those are private between me and the Commander."

"No, you don't have a relationship with the Commander. You are just some scum janitor with a sick head. Say your last words Potty. This is it."

"Captain. We have a problem."

"Not now Lieutenant I have a duty to preform."

"I would not recommend it Captain. Really."

I was staring at the gun. I notice the Captain's eyes change as she refocuses. I carefully look around. At each grunt there are three of my friends, each with a spear to the throat of the person. Noticeable depression. They are pressing hard.

"Captain. They are sentient. This is not a game. They know exactly what you are doing. They know about guns and they don't approve of your proposed course of action. They are reasonably peaceful, but they do know how to kill and are not afraid to do it."

"It would appear that I have underestimated you Potter." I am amazed that she knows my real name. "I will not make that mistake again." A warning. Great. I always wanted my own mortal enemy.

"Please lower your weapons and leave them behind when you go."

"That is a negative Potter. I will not allow my people to leave here defenseless. I lost two of my people already to ambushes. They were eaten alive Potter. It took thirty rounds to kill one. Even you could not allow that. To leave here without weapons would be a death sentence. Your problem is with me, not them. Let them go and I will remain as your captive."

"Oh, the raptors? Those little things gave you problems Captain? I knew you knew where I was the whole time. We are all implanted when we join up and you yourself took my weapon away. You did not come to help me when I needed it. Well, we managed. Hell, we killed two of the

raptors with rocks just laying around. The locals at your throats know how to get things done. You just have to think like them. Imagine what they could do with their spears. You will still have your knives, same as me, or if you would rather, the locals will trade you for their obviously superior stone knives they made their spears with. You have already declared me dead. I have nothing to lose and will not allow guns at my back." I know I am laying it on too thick, but hell, I thought I was dead. I grin. I am not budging. They all lower their weapons. My friends take them all away. God, I hope no one gets hurt. They are keyed to each soldier, but these friends are very creative.

"Gather your people here Captain. I want to show you something now that I have your attention." She signals them to advance to her position. They slowly get up. She offers me her gun, which I decline.

"I don't want it Captain. No one will hurt you if you don't threaten anyone. If you do, you are dead. If my death is worth that much to you then go ahead." She puts it away. She will wait until she thinks she can get away with it. I am not worth that much to her.

"What is it you wanted us to see Potter?"

"Stand next to me Captain. It will be obvious from here." She comes up and looks to where I am pointing.

"You must have figured it out by now Captain. We are not in Utah any longer."

"We decrypted your report."

"If you can see my private life of course you can see my reports. Look about. This is one of many settlements. If you can call it that. Looks like several thousand 'people' at least. Even with all of our tech, how long do you think we could hold out if they decided to go to war with us? Oh, before you answer that, my friends all around you, they are just some of their children out on a field trip. The adults don't even know yet. Think they will be as forgiving?"

"Shit." She waves the rest forward.

"Captain. I am going to go with Bernice and the others to their home. You are free to go. Give my best to the Commander. Oh yeah, since you seem to know everything else, you must know that she was my wife for ten years. She forced me to divorce her when I joined up so that I could be in the same Armstrong. Regs or something. She was an active participant in our fantasies. You should try it some time. However, I don't think I will be needing it any more. You can tell her that too. Goodbye Captain."

I turn and with my hand in Bernice's I walk down the path towards my new home. The others soon follow. I notice they are wearing the weapons from the soldiers. Not always right side up. They will learn. Ac-

tually I think it would be better to destroy them. We will see what the elders think. They are at least teenagers judging from Bernice's drawing. I stretched the truth some. I smile. Never been happier.

Dino Town

We leave the ridge with the Captain and the others watching. I really hope this is not the only village. I am sure there are not more than a couple of hundred adults of fighting trim, not that the kids would not cause a great deal of grief judging from Bernice and friends. There are some pretty nasty things in the Armstrong. If nothing else they could be enough to enslave the people to their leadership. If we are to interact, I want it to be of mutual benefit, not all one way.

Actually I am really jazzed about the idea of sentients different from ourselves. The fact that they are evolved from reptiles doesn't hurt. There are still lizards around too. A lot of tree climbers I noticed. With so few mammals they must have taken over a lot of the niches. But, where are the bird equivalents? Why on our world and not theirs. The branching seems to have occurred sixty five mill ago. Birds in the fossils record go back a hundred a forty five mill at least. What's the difference?

Duh! Oh, of course, I am staring right at it and didn't see it. Look at the weather, the life. This is Utah! Just not our Utah. Dinosaurs did not go extinct in this version, they evolved. The raptors were little changed, but my friends seem to have more in common with sauropods, albeit with larger heads, working hands, etc. Birds were the only dinosaurs to have survived the cretaceous extinction. No asteroid strike! No global winter, no changed weather patterns or ocean currents. Hence different climate now. And of course different species.

We quickly reach the town. It is surrounded by a three meter high wood wall. That should slow down the raptors some. There are outward pointed wood spikes at the top too. We proceed to an opening. Bernice holds me back as the others go ahead. She is nervous. Yeah, bring home a large monkey and the parents are not going to be happy.

A very large one comes out. It is wearing cloth clothing! None of the friends wore more than tool belts, male and female. No boobs or external genitalia to hide and the weather is nice enough. If I was not a reptile expert I would not know what to look for. Being covered with clothing means I can't see enough to tell. Since the females are larger I am hoping this one is a female. Otherwise that means they are even larger. Then I notice, the face is different. It is not so beak like. More lizard or dino like. This one is a different species. At least three times my weight. Are the smaller ones slaves to the larger ones? It comes toward me. Bernice remains at my side holding my hand. Facing death three times in one day is a bit much.

"Greetings Jake, my name is Simone." That is when I faint.

I wake to Bernice sponging water on my face with a cloth. I am glad it was her and not the larger one, Simone?

I croak out, "You speak English." Then I see her face above me and nearly lose it again. I slowly rise. If she was going to eat me, she would have by now.

"I was raised by Hu, so it came pretty naturally. Even the locals here could learn if need be. They are pretty flexible with speech patterns. Sort of like your parrots are, only a thousand times more intelligent."

"Hu?"

"Sorry, humans. Got shortened to Hu. All of us dinosaur derivatives are know as Di. Makes it easier when dealing with different sentient." "Short for dinosaurs. How many species are sentient?"

"Ah, you noticed we are different. Three, no four, on this earth. E65C by our current naming system. Welcome. You are the first Hu to make it this far."

"The 'Hu' as you call us, are dangerous. I would recommend evacuation of the settlement immediately. It won't take long for them to decide to come after everyone, to kill, enslave or dominate."

"That won't be necessary. I am well aware of your Armstrong Unit's capabilities. We have, ah, certain methods for dealing with it."

"Then why wait? Why didn't you show up at our door step and introduce yourselves from the moment we arrived?"

"We were waiting for you Jake. Oh, and for 'Bernice' here to show her abilities." She says something to Bernice who responds.

"Speaking of which, what is her real name? I feel so bad that I don't know it."

Can a dinosaur smile? "She likes you too. You saved her life."

"And she saved mine. We worked together. Am I going to be allowed inside, or is my form too scary for everyone?" It is getting to be late afternoon. I really don't want to be outside when it is hunting time for the raptors, dawn and dusk are the best times to hunt prey.

"That depends on you Jake. Where are you in this whole equation? What do you want to do? I can take you back and square things with Commander Hutchinson. Considering what the implications are, she would be hard pressed not to want you back."

"No that's over. I don't ever want to go back. The Hu have a few screws loose, especially the military. They made me a janitor there. Out here I am free. Out here, if they will have me, I can help."

"They won't need your help as much as others do. How do you feel about Bernice here? Do you think you could work with her for a time?"

"I could work with her the rest of my life. I would be proud to. But, she is just a child. Won't her parents object?"

"Not many Hu would answer that way Jake, especially to me. I know I am scary. Yet here you stand. Not to worry though, she is twenty five and a full adult. Just small for her age. There was a hard time, food wise, during a critical time in her development. All of the children from then are smaller. No one holds it against them. She was put in charge of the expedition and has done well."

I can't answer. I squat down to face Bernice, "This is not just my decision dear. What do you say? Do you want to work together to help others?" She looks up at Simone who translates.

After she answers for herself, "Yes." There are tears in my eyes. Simone explains that I am not broken.

Armstrong HQ

"Good job Jake. Very good job."

"Commander?"

"As soon as Captain Lewis gets back I want to see her in my office without delay."

"Yes Commander."

"Commander!"

"Now what?"

"The core is gone! We have gone to H backup!"

"Calm down, what do you mean the core is gone. It weighs several tons with all the shielding. Do you mean the shielding is gone as well?"

"Everything is there except the fusion core itself. The sensors all dropped to zero. Major Drago went in himself. He even took the cover plates off. We were all convinced he would overdose. We all went in after all the Geigers said there was nothing there. There wasn't. Just empty space."

"What about the supply? We had a hundred years of fuel left."

"Gone. Empty tanks."

"How long do we have running at half normal load?"

"A few weeks at most."

"Then we have that long to get ourselves outside. I want an impenetrable fence around enough land to get a crop in. No more deaths to raptors. Underground will only be used as a fall back and long term storage. It looks like we are not being given a choice. Oh and get Sargent Potter back here as well. Now, more than ever, we need him. Promise him a restoration to Captain as deserving of his education and abilities. No more bullying the intellectuals, understand? We need them."

"Commander!"

"This is getting to be habit forming. What is it Lieutenant?"

"Potter is gone. Captain Lewis went after him and she is gone too."

"Explain."

"We had surveillance on him. He was with the small dino we called Bernice, whom we implanted of course, and the larger one wearing clothes."

"Clothes?"

"Yeah, a robe of some kind. Weird. Anyway, all three disappeared. Captain saw this, went ballistic and charged down there to investigate mad as hell and then she vanished. Didn't even get halfway there."

"This is becoming a habit with whomever is playing with us. Will they keep picking at us until we are brought down to their level?"

"Commander, that could happen, if we don't behave ourselves. Captain Lewis did threaten everyone and now we see the results."

"If the two are connected. We had best be careful until we know. We have found no other humans. We could quickly lose what we have."

"We are most certainly outnumbered and they are smart. Once they know something is possible, they will learn and adapt quickly. Bernice was most certainly a spy along with the others. Who knows what they already know about us."

"Better friends than enemies then. Best learn what we can trade with that we can afford to give up. I feel like the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock."

"They didn't do too well the first couple of years Ma'am."

"Hopefully we will have learned from that mistake. Jake was right. We need them more as friends. Maybe we could help with the raptor threat. That might endear us to them. Who else do we have on our rolls we can tap for ideas."

"I'll get right on it."

Hell

"What was our option? Kill them?"

"Oh, so it is alright for them to kill each other? We set them up to the point where they snap or feel they have no choice and that's okay?"

"The only other choice would be Botany Bay."

"And once their tech reached the point where they could DS we would be totally unprepared for them and they would slaughter everyone."

"If they reached that high. Chances are they would just kill each other forever."

"Maybe, can we take the chance? At least this way they can serve some purpose. We have only visited a hand full of worlds so far. Sooner or later we will find a nasty one. Announcing our existence could spell our doom if we are not prepared."

"I agree. Reading the journals does not reassure me. Too many close calls where even TKs were nearly not enough. Sooner or later our luck will run out."

"Silver's group survived twenty five million years. All of them did."

"That group likes to play games too much. I think they have gone crazy."

"No argument there. And how do we know they were not duplicated in a froth event. That would give them more chances at survival."

"Shhh! Here he comes." We straighten up like that will fool him.

James announces as soon as he enter the room, "Listen up." Why do they have to dress up as Klingons? Not going to fool anyone. What was the species at the Galactic Center with all those razor sharp spikes all over their bodies? Those were scary.

"We have a new group coming in from initial processing. Let's look alive." Looking dead is an option? Yeah, Zombies would be cool.

"Jordon, get your head out of the clouds." Shit.

A group appears. These don't look like trainees. They look like first year TKs.

"A special treat today. Ci'lan's class is visiting on a field trip."

"Is it safe for TK3s to be here? These nut cases are dangerous even for us. Tricky bastards. Especially the newbies who have not been softened up yet."

"They will remain behind a 'thn shield." A shield goes up around them.

"A thick one I hope." It fades to look like a rock face. They can still see us, but the incoming group cannot see them.

An alarm sounds.

"Incoming in five seconds," is sounded from a loud speaker.

"Only three I heard," James says.

"I hate small groups. These must be particularly nasty ones."

"Best get it started." The door opens and two Hu and a species of Di are shoved into our little enclosure. I am surprised the Di did not eat the Hu. Still has some brains then.

"Attention!" They look confused, but not likely to come to attention. Naked but not bothered by it. Maybe because there are only three of us.

My turn.

"Welcome to Hell gentle ones." That gets a smile from the two Hu and a snort from the Di. They know why they are here. That makes it easier.

"I don't know your old names or your history. I don't care. I don't care about you. You are just meat to me. I process meat. You are meat." I point to the Hu male, "You, you are now Private Merde." Then the Hu female, "You are Private Crap." And lastly the Di, "and you, the little one, are Private Sheisst. You are all shit. That's what I think of you, that's what you are. Oh, and I am the nice one of the three of us."

Grapper, a really mean looking Di female of one of the smaller species, but actually a very nice person, goes next.

"Look around you. We are in a clear dome on a hunk of rock. See that mountain top over that way. See the dome on top of that mountain. That is where you came from on the transport. The transport is going back there right now. See it about a half click off near the gully? The dome on the mountain top is the only way on or off of this rock. Two clicks away. The transport will remain there and will only come here to bring more guests. It always returns empty. Always.

To open the dome to be able to walk to the second dome you press the red button over there. Once at the second dome you can go home without interference. Honest.

"Private Merde, will you be so kind as to press the red button." It is the only button visible to them.

He goes up to the button all cocky.

"Too easy," he says. You got that right.

The other two size us up thinking they are easily stronger than we are and/or can easily outrun us to the dome. We carry no obvious weapons, though we are robed and could hide tech in them. We don't need it. The others nod and he presses the button. The dome goes down and they run. About three steps. The Di gets maybe seven. The air temperature is about one hundred and thirteen degrees centigrade and poisonous. Though not immediately. First it corrodes the insides of your lungs out. Painfully.

James goes to the button, but waits. They all look up to him with total hate in their eyes, but can't reach the button themselves. When they nearly are ready to pass out, staying conscious only on anger, he finally presses the button. The dome goes up and a cooling spray fills the room. It has healing agents and an anesthetic to kill the pain.

He comments, "I am the nasty one." Don't mess with him. Even we know that.

"Now we are ready to proceed to the training area. You are free to leave the 'camp' any time you wish. You are not prisoners here. However, one more thing, you don't play, you don't eat. Hey, you can always leave if you don't like it. We don't feel obligated to be nice."

Sheisst comments, "I have eaten larger stinkers than you, raw." Their name for Grapper's kind.

Crap comes back with, "They are immune to the bad air. Attack them and we are either exposed again when one presses the button or rot in this chamber. How long do you think our bodies will keep you alive?" He assumes correctly that Sheisst would have no compunction about eating them.

"Look outside. There are piles of bones on the ground. It's been tried before. Save your hate for later and we will help. Besides, we are all innocent. I am sure this will all get sorted out." Those bones are not faked. One in nearly every group thinks they can make it somehow. Or they go mad and don't care.

"It had better." Sheisst, you just don't get it.

"What do we call you guys?" Crap seems to be the more inquisitive one. Maybe because she is clearly the smallest.

"Anyone with a robe is referred to as Guardian. Our names are irrelevant. If a Guardian tells you to do something, do it."

"There must be some kind of mistake. I don't belong here. What gives you the right to abduct us and bring us here?"

"One in every batch." James sighs, pulls out a scrap of epaper and recites with the names appropriately changed. We always use variations on excrement. "Private Merde, killed two hundred and twelve colonists in Luna City who had committed no crime and were never tried."

"They died of accidents. Space is a harsh mistress."

"And your rate of death went up ten fold as soon as the plagues hit earth. Funny how that works. Plagues got all the way to the moon without a shuttle. Amazing."

"We had no choice, we had to reduce our numbers or we would have all died."

"You reduced your numbers so the elite could start having children, not because there was any danger to those already present. You had al-

ready achieved a stable ecology.” He hands the paper to Grapper.

She continues, “Private Sheisst, killed and ate a hundred and fifty six of my species in violation of the inter sentient species act and major truces of the last two hundred years. Victims were played with and tortured before being eaten slowly, piece by piece until they died.”

“You have no proof.” Grapper hands the paper to me.

“Private Crap, oh, gee, maybe there has been some mistake.” She looks surprised. “Ah, nope. You killed a bus load of children and older people during the plagues just so you could commander the bus to get to the Armstrong Unit more quickly. The plague had not even reached your sector yet.”

“I had no way of knowing that.” I hand the paper to her so she can see for herself.

“This is blank!” She hands it to the others.

I continue, “At thirteen you were raped by your always drunk step father and miscarried his child because you swallowed disinfectant to kill yourself. The bus passengers was not the first time you had killed. You finally joined the military at seventeen to escape the ghettos. Ask me any question and I will know the truth. Shall I go on or do you want more details?”

“No.” They never do.

James does his introduction speech, “You are to join others, like yourselves, in a few moments. Everyone except the Guardians is here because of mass murder of their own species or of other sentients after it was declared illegal.”

Sheisst spits out, “I heard no order.”

I sigh and tell her, “A Guardian, of your own species, told you personally five years ago. This discussion is over. All of your minds have been probed repeatedly. You are all guilty of more than enough to be present here. Get over it. There is no process of appeal. There is no way off of this world. You can't harm us in anyway. Even if you did, it would only mean your immediate death, not your escape. If you wait for the Guardian to continue his introduction you may find it is not that bad.”

A moment passes, but no one says anything. They just glare at us. We have seen it before.

“You are to be trained to be an elite fighting force. You will be given the necessary weapons for whatever assignment you are sent to. If you are killed during training, too bad. We don't care. If you die on assignment, too bad. So, don't get killed. If you are injured, you will be healed. It is not a pleasant experience. Don't get injured or learn to live with it. You all have scars, you will have many more soon. You will be fed enough. You will have adequate shelter. If you injure anyone else except

during official training, the same will be done to you. Only slower, with everyone else watching, and healing will be withheld for an adequate time for the message to sink in. Private Sheisst, I would recommend in your case that you don't try anything. Your wait will be especially long."

"We are going to leave you now. The platform you are on will descend to the training area. Good luck. You'll need it."

"Wait, what do we get out of this? Risks should be rewarded."

"You get to live you piece of shit. Don't be a slug." Sheisst hits Merde and then she immediately feels the pain in her own arm, but makes no comment. The bruise shows quickly. She will soon be a commander and will reign with terror. She knows it. Whatever works.

The three of us offer no emotion. We walk up to the edge of the dome and then walk through it like it is not there and continue up the ridge and out of sight. We will let them sit and stink for a few eighths. We always get the 'good' ones here. It will be interesting to see what we have in a few generations and if this experiment is worth anything. At least the victimized people don't have to put up with them any longer and they can only hurt themselves while here.

We circle back around to the visitor center where the class is waiting.

"I don't understand. How was Commander Dai able to handle the heavy gravity? He should be as weak as we are or nearly so."

"In yours and Spider's case you will be returning to Luna City. There was no point of putting you through the adaption process. The sudden change in your appearance would just scare your colleagues more. Besides, this forces you to use your abilities to counteract the gravity. Good practice. Dai will be here the rest of his life. Being a jellyfish with these others would just mean he would die instantly. We think he should suffer a bit first. Don't worry, his bad habits will eventually put him at a disadvantage. All of their habits will. They and we can't help it really." Maybe James really has seen too much.

"You need to understand. For all intent and purposes these people are dead. All that they are to us now is how useful they can be. They serve no purpose otherwise. We will feel no guilt letting them all go if necessary or if they become more of a danger or hassle than they are worth." I try to soften the pessimism.

"So, why us? Why bring us here?"

"It is the strangest thing, but we are finding our angels in the same places as our demons. Dai with you Spider and Ravi of course, Lewis and Aasci with Bernice and Jake. Jake, I understand that you did not know about Aasci. Get Bernice to fill you in. Doc has a theory that only in extreme adversity do the saint properties become highly visible and easier for us to identify."

"But only if we get there in time. All of you were marked for death. They were just waiting for the right time. Spider and Ravi were too well known, though they tried to stage several accidents anyway. Bernice volunteered to spy on the new creatures knowing that Aasci was out there waiting. The raptors were really the smaller problem. They can even be tamed for awhile if you capture an egg."

"That can't be easy."

"Bernice has done it several times. Anyway I think you get my point."

"Until you mentioned her past I did not think Lewis was that bad."

Bernice adds. She must have gotten that idea from Jake. The two of them are obviously close.

"Compared to the others she is not. She will have a rough time, but we can use her to counter balance some of the others. She will try to do the right thing even if it gets her extra attention."

"If she does not get eaten."

I shrug. They are all just shit to me. Maybe I have been here too long. Makes me wonder why they made me TK. The first Ba inducted. They said it was because my culture did not have these kind and I needed to understand. I don't think that is true. We have had our share of bad leaders and individuals. Maybe it is just the leadership who are in denial still. My instructors said that most would find me ugly and would be repulsed and yet I have yet to see that reaction on anyone. TKs are tolerant and 'guests' don't care. More to learn I guess. I itch under my glide flap. One of them must have parasites. I will have to do a careful body scan now.

"How did you find this world? Luna has not been set up yet and it seems so different."

"Like Pink, it was found by accident. More on that later. Hey, do you guys know Ozi and Pu?"

"Everyone knows them, but they are in the class ahead of us. TK4s at least by now."

"I was in two classes ahead of them. I was there when they won the prize for fastest time to finding the life forms and understanding the relationship. I was supposed to be graduating, but we all felt humbled by two newbies doing the challenge within twenty four hours and even before they had heard of it."

"Still the fastest time. They are legend."

"Not in tech. Taking Tech 3 over again I hear."

"Hey, just because you two are two classes ahead in tech does not mean they are behind."

"Really? I would expect Jake, but Bernice, you are too?"

"We work together and I like tech a lot. I had not even known it was possible until they brought me into the lab where I first met Jake. I can't

get enough."

"That's for sure. Drives me nuts asking questions all night long. Even TK2s need some rest." He smiles when he says this though.

"Does Ozi still read people at first sight."

"Oh yeah, creepy. Speaking of which, have the new demons.."

"We call them Enforcers. We hope that will be their future role."

"Excuse me. We call them demons at school. Have the new Enforcers ever seen a Ba before?"

"Unlikely. You want to know why there were not afraid or at least curious about me?" Spider nods. She is very differently shaped for a Hu. She must be used to being seen as a curiosity herself.

"They would not have thought much of any of you either. These people all know why they are here. They probably staid awake at night wondering when it would happen. None of us appear to be a threat. We are small and weak looking. They ate people like us for meals every day and they don't appreciate what a TK means yet. They think all of this happened because of tech."

"Literally in Aasci's case. Sorry, I don't mean to be insensitive Bernice."

"He would not have lived much longer. Jake gave us the spear and we learned the way of war from the Hu. Though I am gone, the others remember. We do not have war among ourselves. At least not for many generations."

"Yeah, I am the snake in the garden. Frustrating that they won't tell us what is going on back home." Jake adds.

"You are forbidden to return until at least three generations out. Same for me. You can't believe how much I miss honey bee soup." My mouth parts water just thinking about it."

"I have a question. We went on a virtual tour before coming here. How come there are no Ceph? Every other species but no Ceph. Do they never qualify? Are they different?"

Grapper answers, though any of us could, "They never make it here, but oh they do qualify. It is rare to even identify a Ceph who fits the ah, necessary profile, in time any more. Once someone is even suspected they end up darted and eaten. In the Ceph culture it would bring such shame on them all that they do not allow it. Just the threat of Hell has radically changed their culture. They no longer have maniacal matriarchs. Change is happening much more rapid than they are accustomed to. It will be very interesting to see what happens."

James adds, "Mandhi loves it. Rooi is about to have a cat fit." Nasty creatures cats. They way they always look at my kind. Dinner. You know that is what they are thinking. Nothing every happens, that we know of,

but you know they are thinking it.

"Any other questions?"

"What is the average age? These three did not look exactly young."

"Average age is 40 relative to Hu norm. There are still not enough TKs to identify every candidate at an early age, though of course we try. Then there is the fact that the young ones don't last long."

"None of them do. The average life expectancy is a little over two years. What happens to the young ones though is that being usually stronger and faster they are seen as a threat. The more numerous older ones use their brains more than their muscles. They set up the young ones for accidents."

"So they can avoid the eye for an eye rule."

"They administer that themselves. Not even our rule, except at arrival when someone always tests it is a small way."

"Two years. Not much time for instruction."

"We need to extend the time admittedly, but on the other hand, their 'role' will not require much in the way of wits. They will have tech far in advance of the locals. Demons might actually be a better term. They are a deterrent. In most cases we hope their mere presence will make sentients come to terms."

"Then make them anonymous. You won't be able to disguise the species, but you can the identity. They should all wear the same uniform with the faces, feathers, glide markings, etc hidden. Lots of shiny metal and black."

"Emotionless machines have no mercy. Very quick and efficient. Unstoppable, even when killed. Oh yeah. You could make them something else. They may even get into the role and not fight each other so much. You will be using their own need as a plus."

"And if they become so good that they never get to 'practice' their trade? Will they revert to killing each other? You will need to find an outlet and soon."

"You are not going to believe this either, but we get the best ideas, like those you have just given us, from the saints. That is why all of you will spend time here when your turn comes. We have come a long way since this camp was started. I expect it will eventually get to where it needs to be."

"The difference between a saint and a demon is not their thoughts, but their actions."

"Amen."

"There is one last item you all need to see before leaving for this time. When you come back you will spend more time on the project."

"I thought the Enforcers was the point of this place."

“We are not even sure they will work out. As TKs we have a hard time just killing anyone, though they all certainly deserve it many times over. We know this is a weakness of ours and could end up being our downfall. We decided to hedge our bets and prepare for the worst. Even if we are destroyed, maybe they will be able to do something.”

“A bunch of thugs and bullies. Without an even bigger stick above them they will revert in a moment.”

“Look at any of our histories. They are punctuated by great sentients who lead us out of one situation or another. If you looked closely at any of them you would find thugs and bullies.”

“That was just Sauron.”

I interject, “We had no Sauron, neither did the Ceph or the Di or the Pi. Only the Hu and Cat were so handicapped. Yet we all had thugs and bullies that lead our cultures.”

“Are we doing a disservice then by removing them from our cultures?”

“Some have reproduced. We do not take their children. The genes will remain. Ah, we are here.”

“It looks like a city, but underground. Why did you go to all this effort? Even I can scan it is nearly empty. Only a few TKs present. How far does it go?”

“My Bernice, you are the curious one.”

“Jake was thinking it, I was just the first to ask.” They are paired well. It will go hard for one when the other dies. We all will eventually.

James says solemnly, “We did not build this. It was all here when we arrived.”

“Then where are they?”

“Long gone. Nothing has changed until our arrival. Nothing has changed here in approximately two hundred and fifty million years. We are on E250C. There should be roughly a hundred and twenty eight variants. We have studied about half briefly. The city only exists in this one so far. The froth happened at the time of the Permian extinction. On most of our worlds ninety five plus percent of life died at the time. Here it looks to have been a hundred percent.”

“Nothing?”

“The air outside, as you have seen is toxic.”

“Life adapts. I would expect bacteria at least. Or cyanobacter even.”

“Nothing. Not even a dormant virus.” They are silent.

Jake finds the container we let them always find. It is roughly where they found it the first time.

“Shit, this is 'thn glass.”

“Yes.” More silence.

“Do we know what they looked like?”

“Nothing remains of their art. Either because they did not do art or because what it was done on did not survive the time and atmosphere changes. We can guess from the size and shape of the openings that they could have been similar to any of us, well except maybe the Ceph.” The openings are tall rectangles like Hu and Ba might use, but not uncomfortable for any of us.”

“Bones?”

“Either they did not have any or they dissolved as well.”

“How did the city itself survive? It does not scan as any different from the surrounding rock.”

“Possibly because it is so far underground. We think there may have been markings on the walls, but they are partially gone, so we can no longer tell.”

Bernice, “They have equipment at the school lab that might help.”

“We have tried it.”

“If so much is gone, what do you study?”

“The entire planet is like this. The entire planet is one very large underground city. Our best guess is that when the disaster hit, which we believe was a carbon dioxide inversion, they moved underground, or were already there and just sealed the entrances to the surface.”

“That would explain the heat on the surface.”

“We are in the middle of an ice age by this planet's standards. Normally it is nearly six hundred degrees centigrade.”

“That would explain a lot of the degradation, even aside from the acidic atmosphere. Were the caves sealed when you arrived?”

“Some, like this one were. Most had collapsed or been opened by movements of the continents, earthquakes, etc. There, of course, it is hard to even find the outlines against the normal lay of the land.”

“Makes sense. Do you find it depressing to work here? Between the nasty ones and the lost city, death is all around you.”

“That is why all of us are here and must spend time here. It is why we brought them here of all places. Not to be mean or to extract revenge. They provide some of the labor, but it also gets them to see that all plans of domination are ultimately pointless. And it forces us 'new immortals' to realize we are not immortal at all. Even TK, an entire culture of them, can die.”

“Amen.”

Great one from the skies, I pray that this experiment of mixing of the sentients and colonizing many worlds spares us this fate.

I always say this prayer to myself after each tour and we all go back to the transfer point alone in our own thoughts. I never forget the prayer.

At the transfer point we wait. Spider gets it first, then Bernice. I can see it in their eyes. The eyes always give it away.

Spider comes to me. I look to be the least frightening. They would be wrong if it ever came to a battle. Even a Cat would not live, but they don't know that secret. Anyway, she comes to me, floating with TK on account of the gravity.

"You said that this is the only one. Only this world has the world city." I nod in the way of the Hu and Di.

"But, this city is old. Not a recent froth event." I nod again.

Bernice conjectures, "You said that you have searched half the worlds. Are the other half forbidden?"

"No, we can tell by the way you sort of slide by them in DS space. We would know if there was a world we could not reach, yet existed."

"Besides, if this happened before the next froth event at approximately two hundred and five mil, then all one hundred and twenty eight would have the city. As far as you know, the other sixty four exist."

"Yes."

"How? How does this world not replicate in the froth?"

"The world does, just not the city. On the other worlds it is just rock. How does the froth work and maybe we would know the answer."

"THN. There is something about this world that they don't like. Have any 'thn visited this world?"

"No, but they don't follow us everywhere. There are many worlds we have not seen a 'thn on. Just not interested is what we thought. They look for new TK potential. Ones who have not learned their secret yet. Nothing here for them. TK9s with baby 'thn will not visit here either."

Ravi finishes with, "I am getting a headache."

"Amen." No one says the one word we all fear and die to know about. Are these the Makers? The 'thn said they were from many universes ago, but did some survive, just for curiosity sake?

"The last froth event has not reached here yet. We know it happens at different times on each of the worlds. It has not reached here yet. This will be the last place it will reach on EARTH. It is always last here. Someone needs to be here when it happens. Someone needs to be here to see what happens."

"God, let it not be me." We all say in unison in our own language. Even James. We don't tell groups who don't get it. We just let them ask questions and see what happens. Not all groups do. Maybe one in eight. Ozi guessed right away and would not say a thing about it. The rest of his group of students left without understanding. All but him and presumably Pu. That is why I always ask about those two. I fear for them. Even for Pu. Only a few more years and I leave. Wish it was today, right now. I

have the ability, you are not stationed here if you don't, but I am afraid.

Ap'el

"It will be nice to see Bernice and Jake again."

"Will there be food?"

"Pu, this visit is not about food and you know it. And don't give me that look."

"It is the only reason I come along."

"And it shows. You need to lose weight if you are not going to stand out."

"A Traveler will always stand out. Being rounded just says that our help is appreciated and therefore we are worthy of being invited in.."

"For more food you mean."

"That is the point is it not?"

"Aaagh! You are impossible!"

When we reach the cross path I turn to the right.

"Ap'el is back that way, why are we going towards Emess?"

"We will only have to backtrack a short ways. I want to collect some information. We will stop at the first working farm we reach."

People coming into range. We could ask them and save my paws.

All ready for the Cat and Monkey show?

I get to be the Cat this time.

You always get to be the Cat.

Because I do a better job.

Cheater. Try doing it in a Monkey's body sometime.

What would be the point of that? How come all of these stories are from your point of view?

Because you are too lazy to write anything down.

Cause Monkeys talk to much, even in flat speech.

True.

When the group reaches us, they stay to the other side of the path and avoid our eyes. This is strange, very strange. They are a mix of Hu and Di2s, the smaller Di. The Di appear to be acting as if servants. They are clothed more simply in even more ragged cloth. They all appear to be very poor. I scan injuries on most, knitted bones, poor nutrition, scarred lungs from some disease. Maybe they are the exception. Some out group. We do not comment or engage them. We are not here to spread fear. They are soon past and resume their travel down the center of the road.

I let them pass. I have the information that they would give me.

"Do they not have Travelers on this world?"

"I am sure they do. All worlds have them. It is the one consistency. We spread knowledge and occasional help in other ways. Never harm.

None should fear us.”

“Except those about to be banned. They are walking away from the city.”

“Did not do your homework again Pu. Here they are called Corpses.”

“Dead things? Why?”

“It is a bastard word derived from corporation. Their point is, is that the city itself is actually a dead thing. It is the people who make it alive. Corporations were the same. The similarity to a corpse with its attendant life forms and the word Corps to Corpse happened I guess.”

“But a corpse is soon eaten and the life moves onto the next one. Do their cities more as well?”

“Used to. You could not stay too long with a large population without going beyond the allowed destruction of the local area. The rules have relaxed enough now to allow for more permanent cities, but the old word remains.”

“Ugly. If we had cities we would not call them corpses.”

“As if Cats could ever cooperate enough to have a city larger than two Cats in heat, or a mother with two kits.”

“Sometimes two generations will get along for a time. Takes a lot of game to feed us. We can't afford to be concentrated.”

“The down side to being a strict carnivore. Good thing you can make your own food now.”

“Ah, but the pleasure of the hunt. We could never give up the hunt. A melon just does not offer the same challenge.”

“Except when guided by a good TK?”

“The end is not pretty though. Icky sweet juice everywhere. Tastes horrible.” She has the most horrible expression on her face when she says that.

I laugh. She never ceases to amuse me. Nor I her apparently. Another group leaving the city. Again, they avoid us.

“I am beginning to understand why Jake and Bernice called us in.”

“Confirmation. Maybe this time they will let me march with the Enforcers.”

“Can't have angels and demons mixing. Can't let them know we are on the same side.”

“It has been nearly five hundred years, but I still desire to hunt down Hu who abuse sentients.”

“We are doing just that in a way. We just don't do the killing itself.”

“Too bad. Maybe they would let me join up.” I push her off her stride.

“You are too much a pussy cat for that kind of behavior. Remember when we put in our time and had to control them on a hunt. The blood lust was something else. If I remember, you had to stop two of them

yourself."

"Never treat prey disrespectfully. They honor us with their presence."

"Oh, yeah, they got that one real quick." I smile and she hit the back of my but with her tail.

"There is a farm up ahead. I think we should pay a visit. All of these people avoiding us concerns me. I want to talk with some citizens."

"Talk. All you want to do is talk."

"They might have food . . ."

"Okay, if I must." Her head is in the air in a snit. I know she is pretending to try and maintain her dignity. I let it go.

"Look they have a good size herd of trips."

"No challenge in a trip. Just have to know the secret and domesticated ones are even worse."

"They will not let you hunt one silly. We have to put up with whatever they offer. Probably salt plant mush." Tasteless starchy with a horrible smell.

"You can have mine. You need the weight."

"Hey, I have always been thin. Better stop talking. Their Cats can't speak Standard."

Best thing you have said all day.

We go up the walking path to the house with smoke coming out the chimney. The door is open.

"Blessings upon you." Standard greeting and promise we give. No answer. I scan. They are out back chopping wood and setting it to a pile. Winter will be soon. At least it looks like they are preparing to stay around. I sharpen the ceramic axe and add an extra hard edge. His next whack splits the log and nearly splits the stump underneath. We wait at the door. He talks with his wife about what happened. She comes running to the door.

"It has been too long since we were thus honored. Please be welcome." Standard response. The norms have not been lost at least.

We enter the house and bow to her. Her husband quickly comes in and the two bow to us together. She motions for us to be seated at a table. Then she looks confused as to what to do about Pu.

"Pu will sit on her own. Thank you." She relaxes.

The husband is more direct, "Thank you for what you did to the axe. My arms thank you especially." I loosen it from the stump to make it easier for him to remove later. I nod to acknowledge his thanks.

"I will prepare broth." She pours hot broth from a pot on her hearth. An old ceramic design. I check for microcracks and give it new life. A person who greets Travelers regularly can save a lot of grief later. She finds her best bowls and pours some into both. She looks at Pu and checks the

temperature of one bowl and decides it is too hot. She adds some cooler water to hers. She then presents the bowls to us and places the best one on the ground for Pu.

Pu does not even sniff it first. Indeed a great compliment. I raise my eyebrows and laugh. The two relax. I taste mine. Good.

"Please join us. We don't stand on ceremony. Honor has been satisfied."

She puts broth in mugs for the two of them. She then introduces herself, "I am Pur and my partner is Han."

"I am Ozi and my partner is Pu." She smiles at us.

They do not ask for help. This is good. It means I am free to investigate for myself. I hate greedy people.

Di2s coming in. She does not look up. The last ones we saw were treated like servants. How will these be treated?

The wife hears them first and places her hand on his knee. He listens and hears them too. He stands.

"Excuse me. I will bring the others of our holding to meet you as well."

That sounds good. Or are they playing the game. Everyone knows the rules and most don't try and break them in front of a Traveler. Not that we would do anything outright, but it is well known we do report back to people who could make life unpleasant. The carrot and the stick. A very nice carrot of knowledge and help if you play by the rules and a very big stick if you don't. I feel like I am dealing with children.

We were not allowed back to New Home for the requisite three generations. The three who killed Pu's mother and brother did not last a tenth that long. Not our concern. Old history. Their people however were pests for so long even the Ceph patience wore out. When the Ceph population died of a plague the new gens who came in quickly figured out it was the Far Meadows clan that spread the disease. They don't exit any longer. The New Home people still speak of our deeds, though we went incognito. That was nice.

The down side was that we knew so much beyond what we experienced while growing up in the desert. It was nice and still very beautiful, but we clearly did not belong there any longer. Pu even thought that the posturing and politics of the pride were boring and most of all, the food was horrible. I still smile when I think of her eating raw kiki again. I never thought it tasted good when cooked, just better than starving.

A crew of five Dia come in. Three males and two females. They look well dressed, shiny tool belts and healthy. Han talks to them in Dia Standard. Most Hu would not bother. He tells them who we are and that we have sharpened the axe for all of them. Interesting.

In Standard with only a slight accent they then each come up to us and shake my hand and bow to Pu, introducing themselves. George, Martha, Thomas, Alice, and John. Not their Di names, but will serve. I can speak Di, but it might be easier if we just all used Standard. I sense she is not as good in Di. They go to the hearth and pour mugs of broth. Each cup has a name on it. All of the cups are in the same location. They pull up modified chairs and distribute themselves randomly among us.

Pu is watching also, *They are all co-owners.*

Yes, I noticed. Now I am very curious.

"On our way in two groups passed us going in the opposite direction."

"From Emess Corpse probably."

"They avoided us. It also appeared that the Di were servants, not co travelers."

Everyone looks at each other. No clear leader either.

George is the one who answers, "You are Travelers, so we are honor bound to comment, though it may cause a loss of business. Fortunately we have been doing well."

Alice adds, "We have been doing more business with the Ap'el Corpse. They trade better for quality. The Emess Corpse only seems to care about quantity. They run their culture to maximize food production."

Pur comments, "There is another corpse close by, the Lynnuks, but they are self sufficient. We visit them when we can to trade small things for materials we need. We all like it there, though it can be confusing."

"How so?"

"They are very helpful people, but we don't always understand what they have done and can't always repeat the process."

"They help anyone without question and ask nothing in return. We leave our donation at a central warehouse."

"Still, it is always pleasant to visit such happy people."

"Just not too often." They smile.

"What brings you two in this direction."

"We wander more or less randomly. Our curiosity is well known. As you can guess, it sometimes gets us into trouble. Information helps us avoid situations where ignorance would be harmful."

"Then you will probably want to avoid Emess. They have orders out to not to talk to Travelers. Any Traveler who shows up is escorted immediately to their Tor'vault where they are 'squeezed' for information. We never see them return this way."

"That is not unusual. We rarely return to the same location." In their life time anyway.

"Pu thinks the food might be better in Ap'el."

"True, if you can afford it. You will have to do some serious healing

and fixing to afford your supper there. We rarely go there except to trade in our stock."

"Your herd of trip look well."

Han gives the credit to the Di, "George and Martha are experts at their husbandry though Alice, Thomas and John are learning fast. Pur and I do most of the trading. As you have noticed, there is some prejudice against Di."

Alice comes in, "In Emess they are nearly slaves." The others hush her with a look.

Why is that?

Best we don't ask more right now.

"Will you spend the night or are you in a hurry?"

"This may come as a shock, but we know someone in Ap'el we hope to visit. There is no hurry, but there is still light and the day is good."

I healed a cancer in the Alice and a bad knee in George. The rest appear to be fairly healthy for their ages.

When we all get up, George notices the difference right away and bows to us. The others notice.

"Thanks."

Martha has the last word, "Well met. Thank you for blessing our home." The rest bow to us as we exit.

Only broth. We should have had at least a trip steak.

You don't even like trip. Surprised you got the broth down without hacking up a furball.

I was being polite. I give a snort as a response.

We may have been overly generous.

Maybe, but it is easy for us and much harder for them. We got confirmation. We will have to visit Emess for sure, but I would like to see Jake and Bernice first.

Agreed.

Going in the same direction as the others we saw fewer numbers. No one is going towards Emess it would appear.

"The ones going towards Ap'el do not appear to fit what we heard. Not well off enough. Ap'el people would never walk."

"I agree, sauro at least and there is not even any sauro droppings on this road. The transfer station is well past Ap'el. It is possible they are going there."

"More likely." She sniffs the wind, "I will need to hunt for a bit."

"Can it wait till dusk? We will not make Ap'el during the day and we can travel faster at night."

"Will you run with me?"

I sigh, "If I must." We have this exchange most nights. I like the run

as much as she does, just can't admit it to her because of pride. She plays with me as well.

The people we visited are about half way to Emess from the cross path. It is dusk when we reach the cross path and turn towards Ap'el. Unfortunately we are in an open area with little prospects for game. Or so I thought. Suddenly Pu takes off at a full run off the path and across the open field. I bound after her.

Move more to the left. This will help flush the game towards me.

I comply. We have done this routine many times and I know my role. She is the master hunter. She goes hard right and then circles around being much faster on the run that I am. Just as I am losing my breath I frighten a small group of vergas. Not much to eat, but fast and will take skill to catch. With Pu it more the challenge than the reward. I stop, my task done and start my slow walk back to the path. When I arrive she is finishing the one she caught.

"What only one?" I tease her.

Took you long enough and you say I am the fat one. She uses mind speak when eating. The crunching of the bones is the most disgusting part. I sit on the path and pull out a few small uasa melons to satisfy me. I don't have problems with eating meat like some TKs, but since I can eat without killing I don't see the point any longer. I eat it, as I did the broth, when offered, without reservations.

Will you two get your butts here already. The feast is waiting for your arrival.

That gets Pu's head up. She abandons the rest of the vergas to the waiting scavengers just out of reach. I can see their hungry eyes and grin.

Is there as safe place to arrive without notice?

There is a blind spot just south east of the main guard tower, next to the copse of trees. Come in there and make it quick. They close the gates at dark.

"I would have preferred the walk, but heaven forbid I keep you from a feast." I smile.

"Priorities finally come to my rescue. My poor paws." She licks one for good measure, putting on her best poor kitty look. Like anyone could ever feel sorry for a maw with legs.

"Fine, I'll drive." No idea what that means. No wait, must have something to do with the manual mechanical transports they called cars. I hated tech classes.

We arrive without incident. Well almost.

"You had to put us down in a thorn bush? I could DS better when I was a kitten."

"You did not even know you could DS until you got to school."

I heal my robe in several places where the thorns have ripped it. Pu licks her flank.

"Ready?" I part the bush with TK to avoid any more damage and we proceed down the path to the just closing gate.

"Two more if you please!"

"Hurry up, I got a family to get to." He yawns. We scoot through the narrowed opening.

"Tall gate that closes at dusk. I thought there were no more raptors in this area."

"It's called a portal here. There are raptors of the two legged kind. You are new here, you will have to go through the firewall. Follow the path to the right. Can't miss it." Firewall? He yawns again and goes straight ahead ignoring us.

What happens if we don't go right?

There are people watching us at all times. Note the spy holes in the walls. Let's go see what this firewall is.

That's easy for you, you are not covered in flammable fur.

The robe would burn fast enough. At least your death would be quick. And very painful.

Oh, like you have never inflicted pain on others.

Only non-sentients.

Non-sentients. You can look into their cute little eyes and say they are not sentient.

"This must be it Pu." A thick wooden door in front of us.

"Now what?"

Same as I always do. She lets out an enormous roar.

"That is not a cute little meow."

"Meow"

"Oh, now that is really pathetic." I try the door. It opens. I give her a dirty look.

She ignores me, looks inside and sniffs, No flames.

We both enter. I have already scanned of course, but I have to maintain the illusion of not being able to. At the end of the narrow hall is a desk with an old man sitting at it.

"Good evening. We were instructed to report to the firewall." He is writing something on paper and ignores us.

I need to poo.

Hold it. On second thought start scratching in the corner.

Stone floors, no point.

What would a Cat do if they were trapped and had to go.

She goes to the corner and starts scratching and meowing plaintively.

Aren't you overdoing it?

She lets her load go, *That is overdoing it.*

The old man looks up finally, curls his nose and looks at us, or more precisely, Pu, licking her rear.

"Travelers?" I remain silent glaring at him. I was treated better by the road people. They did not impede us at least.

"I will need some proof." He goes back to writing. He is a cold one.

A door opens to our left. Jake peeks his head in. Bernice's head appears lower down.

"There you are. What are you doing here?"

"At the gate, er portal, we were told to report to the firewall."

"The firewall? No one gets past the firewall. This is just to get people to turn around and go back. Who shat?"

"We were trying to get his attention. Didn't really work."

"Nothing gets past the firewall. He would be executed if you did. We will have to go out the way you came in. One way door. Come on." The poo disappears. The man takes no notice.

"What is he working on?"

"Crossword puzzles."

"Puzzles?"

"In Ceph. Takes him weeks to do each one. He has done hundreds. Best firewall we have ever had."

"I supposed I don't need to ask about the previous ones."

"Nope. Most do not die from breaches, but from irate visitors." He smiles.

We are back at the courtyard and this time go the same way the guard did.

Pu sniffs the air, *What would have happened if we had gone this way at the start?*

Bernice describes the setup, "Archers on the walls. Trap doors under the path with the latch controlled by unseen eyes. The room up ahead closes with a heavy weight balanced above that fits inside the grooves on the sides here. Rare that anyone makes it this far. No one gets past this point."

"Nice. How do you keep Travelers out?"

"They are always invited guests. Never a need. The guard has already been disciplined. He knows better, just tired and lazy." He smiles. That seems extreme.

Enforcers could get in.

Let's hope there is never a need for their sake. Not all would make it out, even if they were successful eventually. She continues, *Scan about. There are traps all over. There is always someone behind them, so normal people have nothing to fear.*

Why?

War is illegal, but there are other means of war besides the physical.

"Come, enjoy the feast. It is not often I get to invite anyone."

We are not allowed to take sides. Be careful.

Oh, you will hear both sides after the feast. There is time yet, but not much.

"Invited?"

"We are guests as well. All Travelers follow the code. Even us, as hard as that may be believe."

"I meant no offense."

"None taken, top of the class." He smiles. Bernice looks confused. Not all clues cross cultures.

"The guard needed to piss. That was the reason why he rushed us. It was our fault for being late. He should not be punished for that."

Bernice is the calculating one, "That fits. He would have had to follow you all the way to the reception and then wait for us to get you. Probably figured we would find you eventually. Well, it is not like they don't know we are special in the talent department."

What is the reason for the party and what kind of food will be served? I gave up a good vergas for this.

"I am so happy you two made it in time. This is the Feast of Lisa. My favorite feast." He whispers, "Has the best food. Lots of meat and sweets." Something for both of us.

Any chocolate? He nods quickly.

Travelers special. No cocoa trees on this earth.

"I contributed for all of us." Group share. My favorite. More variety then.

"Hope you made something good."

"We made four dishes. One for each of us. I contributed the melon soufflé made with tree haster eggs." Jake sticks his tongue out like he is gagging. Good safety tip, avoid the soufflé. Bernice see it and returns the favor. Her tongue is longer in relation to her size.

"It's alright. Pu and I rarely agree on food either. Different species, different tastes. As long as there are happy faces, that is enough."

"On that we all agree."

I only care about the meat.

"Right."

There are two guards at the door. Both Dio. Strange that we never see any Diu. They do like a warmer climate. Maybe that is it. Bernice's Dias are the most adaptable. They have no problems wearing clothing when needed. Right.

"Bernice, I must complement you on your beautiful blue robe. Sets

off your feathers nicely.”

“Thank you Sir Knight. At least someone noticed.”

“Meow!” Now you say something. I turn to face her and she is wearing a pretty pink ribbon on her neck.

“That’s it? A single pink ribbon. You will have to do better than that.”

She sniffs the air. Everyone else is already eating. She moves. There are several other Cats to one side. Nearest the meat platter I see.

“We won’t see her again until she wakes up. I hope your contribution was significant. She can eat a lot.”

“It was. The table to the right with the most people around it.”

“A chocolate fountain. How original. Milk chocolate though?”

“Like they would be able to handle special dark. Come on Oz, be realistic. I can’t work miracles.”

I laugh, “Right. So, who is Saint Lisa anyway?”

“You really were asleep in tech class. I know you have a perfect memory for everything else. Come I’ll give you a big clue.”

He takes us to the front where all the flowers and decorations are. On a very nice well made table. In the place of honor I would have expected a statue of a female. Instead there is a statue of a box. On the front are lines drawn at random. No, not random. I squint. It is sort of a face. Lisa? No, not a face.

“I give up. What is that on the front.”

“Ah, come on. I know it has been over five hundred years and things change, but Bernice and I got it right away.”

“You two were tied for top of all the tech classes.”

“Barely. I had to work hard. Bernice here barely built up a sweat.”

“We don’t sweat.”

“Old expression. Hu talk.” She looks miffed and takes off for a group of Dia.

“You two not getting along?”

“I am getting her back for leaving me out of her group. I will make it up to her later.”

“Dia have long memories.”

“I have a surprise for her. We are going to spend time at Farpoint. I have not told her yet.”

“Don’t wait. Pu and I do not let the day spin on an argument. You two are a great team. I’ll be fine. I am a big boy now.”

“Well, not exactly big.”

“Don’t push, just go.” He smiles, then frowns, turns and goes. I don’t know what I would do without Pu. I have heard of teams where when one partner dies the other soon follows. Well, it happened once anyway. We really have not been teams that long. Not that nearly five hundred

years is not long, just not by TK standards.

I have no idea what it is. The Feast of Lisa. I expected a female statue at least. This place is strange. Everything seems so perfect. Nothing out of place. Everything is super clean. No holes in tapestries or nicks in the stones below our feet. All of their clothing is perfect. There are Dio and Dia here as guests as well as servants. Position is not based on species. One point in their favor.

I look over to where Pu is. She is separated from the others. Some kind of conversation is going on. She can take care of herself. A TK7 beats a TK2 any day. No one has approached me. I look down at my robe. A simple Traveler's robe. No jewelry or patterns. I do have my staff, but if you have seen one before it is nothing to get excited about a second time. We purposely make it plain. There are thieves in every sentient culture. Some cultures even encourage it. Of course the staff is just a staff to them.

I think some fresh air might be good. I watch where the servants go and follow one into the kitchen area. Smells good enough, but plain. Fancy hall and fancy clothing, but the food is boring. No wonder Jake decided on milk chocolate. Probably would have been better off with white. Nice to see he could not go that far. Again, all species are present. I suspect that if those refugees had shown up here they would not have made it past the firewall.

I make it out to some sort of courtyard garden. It is quiet at least. Lots of stars, but I sense clouds a few hours off. I hear some kind of music starting back in the hall. Similar to what used to be called new classical. Wonder if they will dance? Does not matter. I don't belong here.

Jake. I am going for a walk. Which way to Emess?

Bernice and I have made up. Thanks to you. We should go to Lynnuks first. I think it is important that you see it. Problem is, is that we need to be here for a bit yet. Oh, oh, looks like Pu will be there in a sec. She is not getting along with the others. Not surprised. They are royalty here. That reminds me that I had not seen any Cat servants. Not that easy with their body plan. Go down the road that follows the mountain ridge north of here. Lynnuks is up into the hills about a twenty five kilometers. Takes a day walking straight. Three with a heavy load of supplies.

Basic city layout. They need to be far enough away that they don't compete for farmland and other resources. Most of the farmland looks to be down in the large valley below. Standard practice also. Cities are forbidden to occupy farmland. It also means that the clouds come up to the hills, drop their load, which then goes back down into the valley via streams and rivers after passing through the cities. Compost and human waste goes down stream to be used a fertilizer for the crops.

Pu pops in next to me and pretends to sniff a flower.

“Having a good time?”

“The food is tasteless. The company is boring. Can you believe they have never been on a hunt? Never! How can they even be called Cats?”

“They insulted you. Called you a wild cat from the country.” They more or less did the same to me silently.

“They insulted me. Me!”

“Did you tell them?”

“No. I just popped out to here. They have not even bothered to follow, even to gloat.”

“I am going for a walk. Care to join me?”

“Where to?”

“Another city Jake and Bernice say we need to see north of here.”

“Dark, we could be there in a moment. I can scan it easy enough.”

“I want to walk. They need to do more here first. Walking will give them time to finish and catch up. We will be there by morning I promise.”

“Could almost get there and then nap for a few eighths.”

“You don't need to nap. You just remember how much you liked it.”

“Used to like sex too.”

“Well sevens don't do that either. Get over it.”

I move us to the road after scanning to be sure no one is nearby. I do remember to scan the walls and behind the walls. Guess if you get this far they stop worrying about you. The old man in the firewall room is gone. Guess once they close the portal and account for everyone he can go home. That's good.

“On the crests of the hills.” I look up. Can't see that well so I scan.

“Cats. What are they doing up there? Beautiful, very statuesque.”

“Of course they are. But you thought we never did any work. I was beginning to wonder myself after seeing the party animals.”

“I'm sorry, but all they are doing is sitting there. That hardly qualifies.”

“Scan stupid monkey.” She sniffs the air and walks ahead of me. I scan the surroundings. I have to go quite a ways out from where they are.

“Cows. Or this worlds equivalent. Some kind of sauropod descendant. Vegetarian, eating the grass and shrubs. I am sure the Hu started this habit. They must have been pretty docile for it have to happened so fast.”

“And what eats cows?” She is growing impatient.

“Hu and Cats for one.” Pu suddenly moves at lightening speed across the field. The ones on the hills move too. I follow the trajectory. Are they hunting the cows? Ah, that's what they are there for. The Dia cowboys calm the herd and let the Cats do their work. A pack of mini raptors.

Small ones, hard to get rid of, breed fast and are cagey. Takes the place of dogs or wolves on this world.

Pu gets to one and tears it apart. The other Cats are their nearly as fast and get the rest. Surprised that they even try for the cows. Oh, that's why. These were leaving a fresh kill. A young one nearly to the bone in a rut. Full and nearly asleep. So, they do get away with it sometimes. Most of the time maybe. Enough that they are here. Probably go after other game as well, but with the advent of quiet herd animals, why not. If the herders employ Cats it must be common enough occurrence.

I walk towards the cowboys.

“Good evening Traveler. See your Cat got first kill. Congratulations and thanks.”

#!She does love the hunt, especially anything resembling a dog.!#

#! You speak Dia well. I have heard of those creatures. Nasty. An ancestral thing I imagine.!#

#!Some Hu have dogs as pets, but domesticated ones, never wild. Even the pets can turn bad if left alone too long or allowed to group.!#

#!Not worth it.!#

#!I noticed the people of Ap'el had pets. Small di that stayed on their shoulders.!#

#!A habit they borrowed from us. We carry our young with us in a similar way. The difference is that ours grow up to be useful beings. Theirs are full grown lesser species that never amount to much.!#

#!Eat and shit! Thanks for your conversation. I had better find my Cat.!#

#!Thank her for us.!#

#!I will.!#

Once out of sight I DS closer to her. Unfortunately I am noticed.

Your pet Hu can pop? Why did you teach him that?

So he can keep up. Otherwise I would be forever retrieving him from trouble. You would not believe what it was like before I did.

Think we can teach our Dia? They can't see a uasert unless they fall on one. Must be the wolf like creatures they ate.

Were the uasert good? I ask.

Still impertinent though.

There is only so much I can do. So tell me about the setup here. How long have the Dia worked for you? Do others use Dia as assistants?

Nah, we are the only ones stupid enough to try. The others are still laughing.

And they call themselves Cats? Everyone knows prey comes to those who wait. They must be kittens only chasing leaves. They weren't by any chance those pampered lap cats I met in the nearby Hu colony, all fat

and stupid?

So embarrassing they wear the same fur. We are sorry you had to witness their existence.

Are the ones in other colonies similarly affected?

Must be in the water they make them takes baths in.

No way! They wouldn't dare! A most grievous insult!

They do. And they go willingly. They perfume the water I hear.

I swoon. This is too much. I must avenge our honor. Come my pet, we go to make mischief!

We will come as well.

When only one Cat is needed? Whatever for? Better you take care of your herd. This is good fun. I only wish I could join you. Ah, the taste of pack hunters. There is nothing better. You live the good life and don't let anyone ever tell you different. Be proud.

We are Cat!

I follow a few lengths back just for show.

“That went well.”

“I thought so. Uesert taste really bad by the way. Those Cats are totally loony.”

“Yeah, I got that impression too. But the information is interesting.”

“It would appear that Cats are losers in both areas. The city Cats are so spoiled they have forgotten they are Cats. And the country Cats are working for Dia?”

“It's called civilization. Everyone loses something and gains something. We are not in the desert any more.”

“Too bad. Though it has changed there too much to.”

“Yeah. Incoming.” I move away from Pu and Jake and Bernice pop in between us, holding each others hands.

“So, what exactly were you two doing in Ap'el?”

Bernice announces proudly, “We were 'neers!”

“That is not allowed. Are you crazy? An eight finds out and you two will be spending an extended time as Guardians in Hell.” Bad enough the first time.

“We stayed within established parameters.”

“How did you explain that?” Pu asks.

“We told them that different Travelers had different abilities. Some do healings, some fix things.” True enough.

“That might give them the idea that anyone can become a Traveler. We have enough problems with imposters.”

“Had not thought of that. I think that Bernice has discouraged them though. They will look at Dia much differently now.”

“I may have scared them into thinking they are either very far behind

the Dia or the Dia could steal them blind without much effort.”

“And all was within the tech they already have. That was the best part.”

“So, what did you do for them?”

“Not much, just instant communications with the Lynnucks Corpse.”

“WHAT?! They why would they need put up with Travelers any longer? Oh, right, that is why they ignored me. Once they connect up to the other colonies we will be out of work.”

“No, we won't. That is the genius of the method. It allows them to com with Lynnucks, but not beyond. It will only work over short distances.”

“So, everyone knows whatever knowledge is exchanged. Until they figure out encryption.”

“Won't work. No one wants to pass on knowledge they don't know about. What's in it for them? Besides, wait until we get there. Then you will understand why they would not do that.” Is that a smile on Bernice's face? I did not know a beak could do that? Of course a seven could.

“And they won't trust people they have never met. Hell, they both hate the Emess Corpse. Rivalries will still exist. We are talking Hu here.”

“We Dia are not much better. Being smart means you are always worried about someone else outsmarting you. Part of the reason our communities never got large.”

“Less talk, let's pop.”

“Don't we have to wait for daylight, until they open the portal?”

“What portal? This is not Ap'el.”

We arrive just out of sight of the locals. I hope. Sooner or later we will be found out. I just hope they are still at the age of magic instead of trying to figure us out.

“They have figured out gas lights?” The place is all aglow. There is one in every home and one all the street corners. I scan. Ceramic encased copper tubing supplies the gas to the lamps and is part of the valves. Distributed supply. Each unit has it's own composter to make the gas.

“Pretty easy really. Though they occasionally blow something up by accident. The hardest part was the regulators. Mech of course. Metal is hard to find replacements for. They have some, but have to spread the use.”

“What, you have not given them computer controlled AI systems yet?”

“We asked you to confirm, not build up a case against us.” They both look all innocent. There is just enough light from the false dawn for it to look comical.

Lynnucks

The gas lamps were a bit much. I knew he would see them right off. It would have been so easy for them to have been off for just one night. Jake may think that Ozi slept through tech classes, but he remembers rules. The people were the ones who figured it out though. Jake and I had nothing to do with it. They did not break any rules. The copper was not mined, though we did tell them where it was on the surface. Still, they had to figure out how to get it, melt and form it, all without polluting the environment.

We walk right into the town. I hate the term corpse. I know from history classes that is a derivative of corporation. Certainly poetic as I understand the term. Corporations were and made corpses. They had more rights than the people they served. Scary that it went that far.

Even though it is not even first eighth half the population is awake and working, if what they do here can be called work.

You would think that I would like this group. Their entire lives are devoted to the pursuit of knowledge. Unfortunately it is at the expense of hygiene and personal relationships. I can see Pu has noticed. The two Hu can't smell it unless it is shoved in their noses. That will come soon enough.

I mind Pu, *Watch out for blood suckers. Some will attack Cats.* She looks at me like I have just said there were TK parasites about. Strange that we have not seen them in our many earths. I guess the 'thn took care of them in all of our worlds at the same time.

Now Farpoint, that will be interesting. I have heard so much about it, but we never got a chance. I wonder what Jake had to do to get permission. Pulled his tail out of the jaws. I was almost ready to ask for a separate assignment. Is it Hu or just Hu males? Our males are not that stupid. Not that I was treated that well on account of my small size. Now it is an asset. No one pays any attention to me. I can see and hear much they certainly would not want a Traveler to know about.

Jake is leading them the long way around to see the Tor Vault, the chief information officer in the old way of saying it. Linus would be so proud that he made it into long term history. Ah, runners are taking a short cut so the Tor Vault is prepared. In my opinion we played too high a profile on this one. Jake has a hard time being hidden for long. At least he has not done a God yet. That would get us kicked out for sure. Straight to a limiter.

We were posted here as soon as the two towns declared their intentions to become permanent. That gave them the right to put up stone and

ceram structures. Until you are given permanent status you are limited to more ephemeral materials like wood. They had to meet all kinds of standards for population, pollution and self governance. That was over fifty years ago. We got here about three years ago. Fifty years. A good long life for my kind. Now I have done ten times that. Still seems like I have barely begun. So much to learn. So much to see. Farpoint. I can't believe it. I'm going to Farpoint.

"You are being quiet Bernice." Oz looks at me. I am glad my face does not turn red like with the Hu. Of course that would be much harder to see on Oz without the sight.

"A lot on my mind."

"Jake?"

"Partly. I am glad we are going to Farpoint. He told you?"

"Yes. He wanted to keep it a secret longer, but I told him not to wait. Pu and I won't rush this. If he had waited until after." He lives the rest unsaid. He is observant about sentients.

"Thanks." I leave it at that. I know he understands. He is legend after all. Oz and Pu. Okay, Pu can be as clueless as a rock. They make a great pair anyway. Just like Jake and I do.

I brighten up, "The most amazing thing is that they did all of this with virtually no help or hints."

"How?" Oz asks and then turns to see Pu sniffing at something.

"They got a rep for being the place for having the freedom to try out new ideas. It fed on itself till what you see here."

"And the other communities?"

"Ap'el, well, they came to be by taking all the best tech and refining it to be perfect. Frankly not everyone wants to live in a garbage dump."

"We had noticed both of their tendencies in those directions."

You mean obsessions. Pu adds as she avoids something rotten in the path. I morph my beak to a smile.

"What Ap'el did, did not upset the people here?"

Jake jumps in, "They encouraged it. They were excited that their crazy ideas were actually useful. The most common visitors to Ap'el are from here."

Bragging rights. Pu would know.

"How do the Ap'el people feel about that?"

"They don't like it. You may have noticed that the people here don't, ah, bathe that often either. Ap'el tolerates them so the connection does not stop. They in return don't care one way or the other what the Ap'el people think of them."

"That sounds familiar. And the rich always live off the poor."

"It goes against Dia beliefs, but it happens even with us. In this case

the poor are poor because they don't need anything more. They are just happy to be allowed to create. Nothing else matters to them.”

“That is one powerful resource of mind.”

“We are here. We are expected.” I think they could have figured that out Jake. So easy to forget these are TK and not norms like everyone else we have dealt with for so long.

I turn around rapidly, “Jake, we have company. Emess thugs.”

“Quick, get in.” The Tor'Vault pulls at us. We look out through the window on the side. All of us are scanning like crazy of course, but we pretend to be normal. Just the three.

“They have been showing up a lot recently. They especially hate Travelers. I will need to hide you. I will not have a guest molested.” Any guest not just Travelers. A point of honor with the people here. They would offer themselves in sacrifice rather than let a guest suffer.

The thugs are going up the path growling at everyone they pass. Most go inside and shut their doors. All that does is induce them to bust down the doors as they pass. Laughing of course. Is there anything more frightening than a Hu laughing while giving others pain.

“Why are they doing this?”

“They accuse us of stealing their people. Thugs come to search us for them.”

“Are you?”

“What for? Don't get me wrong. All are welcome to come and go as they please. Just that we don't need them for anything. Not exactly up to our standards, knowledge wise. They do however send spies to try and see whatever it is they think we are hiding.”

“Which you are not of course.”

“Nope. Don't have time for games like that. Our projects are too important. If they want information, all they have to do is ask.”

“At what cost?” I love it when someone asks that question. The Tor'Vault screws up her face like you have just slapped her hard.

She turns to Jake, “Traveler, are these friends of yours? They are most rude.”

Jake laughs, “No, just ignorant. They are near. May we have the honor?” The door opens on its own. No, not us. They have it rigged with cords and hidden weights. Drives the thugs nuts.

I tell the others, *No TK, just wits. We have not let Emess know yet. Keeps them wondering. Besides, who does not love a challenge?*

The thugs approach the front of the home. They see us, four Travelers, if they know Cats can be one too. They growl at us. One spits.

“I hate Travelers. I hate em bad.” So cliché.

Pu who has been ignoring them all this time, while taking yet another

bath, suddenly turns and “ROAR!” She then jumps and pins two of them to the ground while they are shocked. I trip one with my staff, who was reaching to try and assist. He falls into the last and both fall down. Okay I used some subtle TK. Oz then lets loose a string of words I have never heard before while waving his hands wildly. Ceph. But just nonsense to them. The hands are showing an unseen's instructional story. Simple stuff. We now have two staffs at their chests. I am silent but putting on my meanest face and I am using the pointy end. Ooo! What I would really like to do

The Tor'Vault comes forward once it is safe. They have a strong aversion to violence. “All are welcome here, even Travelers. If you don't like that then you can leave.” The people here are normally passive to violence. It is amazing that they still exist.

“You have one of our people. We want her back.”

“If she wishes to leave, she will. We do not hold her or prevent her from leaving in anyway.” He speaks to us, “Let them up please.”

We release our captives. They slowly wise, wary now, especially of Pu, who is yawning as wide as she can. I try not to laugh and ruin it for her.

“We will be back when you least expect it. We won't be so nice next time.”

Oz asks, “Or what?” He is just curious, but they take it as an attack.

“Do you think I am stupid enough to say anything in front of a Traveler? You can twist my words with ease. I know your kind.” He points to the Tor'Vault, but does not say anything. He turns and motions to the others. They all leave, slowly. Ego makes Hu so stupid. Sort of like Dio, present company excepted. I think they come from the same stalk.

“Will they really come back?”

The question is, are they that stupid?

“It will not look like they did it. An accident will occur. We lost an entire block of homes and three people once. Afterwards they will lie low. Sometimes for years. It is the reason we use the gas lights now. We can see them coming now and at least get people out most of the time.”

“Why have you not reported this? If anything breaks the rules against war this does.”

“We trapped one once. A simple pit trap. He claimed to be from some distant corpse we had never heard of. Just passing through trying to find something to eat and a place to stay. Claimed not to know the other two of course.”

“Right. Attack people who will not fight back. Three would be enough. Why risk an army and the Enforcers?”

Just enough to keep everyone in fear. We treat our prey with respect.

These are

We all say together, “Bullies!” Like thugs was not already said.

“Please come in. Have something to eat. It is a fine day. They will not be back for a few days at least. Let us enjoy this day.” We follow her in. The place is as I expected from previous visits. A total unrepentant mess. There are mech projects partly finished all over. Papers everywhere else. Even a few stone tablets. One broken one. That will be expensive.

He brushes aside a collection on a table to the floor. A young Dia comes out half asleep, sees us and immediately wakes up, turns around and goes into what I scan to be the food area. He tells a few others, two Hu males and soon we have a collection of left over bread like materials and fruit.

One of the Hu in good Dia says, #!Tea in a moment. The pump needs priming.!#

I answer back, #!Not a problem.!#

“Please, you must have many questions as you are new here. Will you be taking over for their territory?”

Jake and I remain silent. Pu has gone back to taking a bath. She will pretend to sleep soon. In reality she will be scanning and learning. Tor'Vault has leaned over and is gently massaging her. Ah, purring she is out in a second.

“Your culture will not survive constant harassment. People will leave.”

“We know. Many have already left. The female Hu they were looking for left three days ago. It would not be safe for her here.”

“Even if they searched every room they would not find her. That was smart.”

“We help people who want to leave Emess.”

“Where do they go?”

“I don't know. We keep that knowledge even from ourselves.”

“So even if you are tortured you can give them away. Is that wise?”

“We have no proof of their activities. Everyone we send to Emess is found out and never returns.”

Oz turns to me, “Is this why you called us in?” I remain silent. They have to see for themselves. I follow the rules.

Jake finally says something, “We will remain here to protect these people. Go to Emess. See for yourself.”

The Tor'Vault is visibly upset, “No, please, don't go. We can evacuate. We are prepared. Don't throw your lives away. No Traveler ever returns from there. Even these two did not go near them. I made them promise.” True, not that we felt limited by it.

We scanned from here.

And made investigations by DS bubble.

Understood.

“Surely this has not always been a problem?”

“No, only in the last few years has it gotten out of hand. Before then you would get roughed up or held up waiting or ignored at worst.”

“Others welcome our visits. Why are they different?”

“When the three communities were more or less equal there were no problems. Then Emess became much bigger. They are now close to if not over their population limit.”

TorVault interjects his opinion, “Oh, they are definitely over. We have telescopes good enough to count housing units from here.”

“Really?” Oz is suspicious. It is nearly forty kilometers from here walking. Thirty by sight or scan.

“One of their specialties.” *Even we were impressed. They have banks of people forming a sentient calculator to figure out the equations.*

A Ceph gave them a lot of help. One of Mandhi's former great grad students took a liking to them for awhile early on.

“Tea is served. Do you mind if the other's join us?”

“Please, I would be honored if they did.” Oz gets up and moves his chair out of the way so they can sit. They follow the house method of brushing materials off anything that will serve.

“These are my apprentices, Linus, Steve, and Jun.” They have to stop naming everyone Linus, Bill, Fiona, Gill, Steve, and Xian of course. There were other people in the tech industry. Though come to think of it, my Dia name, Small Walker Big Doer, is fairly common. A distant ancestor that saved our people.

“Are all apprentices male?” I am looking around the room to see if there are any new projects. Nothing obvious. They spend a very long time on something, then dismantle it to build other things before they perfect it. Makes me mad.

Linus answers quickly. The apprentices here are not shy. “On no. The women are in retreat at the moment. There are five of us normally. We have so many because we don't put all our eggs in one nest. We will go on retreat when they return so we are not all here at once.”

“Given recent problems we have stepped up all our programs. If we evacuate, we intend to split up and form at least three communities some distance away.”

“Good strategy, but your numbers seem low for that strategy. It will be hard to form a stable working community. Maybe with luck you will not need it.”

Enough talk monkeys and lizards. We run before the sun gets high. She gets up and does a big stretch. Cats are good at that. Impressively

limber.

“The kitty is getting bored. We need to go. Don't worry about us. We will return. Knowing what to expect means we go in prepared. Very prepared.”

You two will do backup for us?

I answer, *Of course. Pu, have you finished your scans?*

We go in from the east portal and then to the dungeon. Disgusting practice. Much information can be had by ones with nothing to left to lose.

“It is customary for us to leave an offering. Perhaps metal would be useful?” Oz asks.

“Metal is heavy. If we have to move quickly we would have to abandon it anyway. We do not need anything. These two take good care of us within the limits of your code.”

“Our code?”

Jun answers, “Traveler or Guardian no matter to us, we are the best of the brightest. We are not without abilities of our own.”

“What else do you know?”

“Blessed is the Code. We follow the Code. Do not worry, there is some sensitive information we do not share.”

“But we do not hide it. Anyone with the necessary training can see it any time they want.” TorVault quickly qualifies.

“Mirror writing of Ceph equations. I noticed. Good stuff. Not all correct, but with time you will figure that out. I understand why you hide it though. Some of it is rather, ah, shall we say, explosive.”

“Now I am impressed Traveler. We will add what we learned today to our knowledge.” I give Oz a dirty look.

Sorry. It was Pu who was only pretending to sleep. I read Ceph fluently, but Pu knew the chemistry of explosives when I read them to her.

A Cat who is an expert in explosives. Great. All we need.

“Meow!”

“You are doing it again.”

“What now?”

“When you go all silent we suspect you are communicating by some means we have not figured out yet. I understand the need. You must know much that would not be safe for us to know yet. It is said you have knowledge from before the fall.” I had not heard this before. They were not supposed to know this. The whole point of this exercise was for them to forget the before times.

“Meow!” Pu is scratching at the door.

“Oh please. ANY Cat can get through doors. Don't play poor kitty with us. Just go.” She pops outside.

“We had better go. No doubt the thugs have a head start on us. We need to get there before they do. Surprise is usually more effective.”

Use a TK ear to hear what they say when they arrive.

We know what to do.

Tell them before I do. Pu is very impatient.

“The Ceph writing shows that you know much more than we thought you did. So, we have also learned much today. Yes, I am sure you suspect us of much. We would not be Travelers if we did not know something. Or, it could be that just traveling literally from community to community we gather information and share small portions of it from time to time.”

“For instance. We are known for healing people. How is that? Have you ever seen one of us touch anyone? Or give them medicine? Or do anything towards anyone, even point? Are you sure we are the cause, or are healings attributed to us because of traditions that we have not denied?”

“Certainly we trade information and small items, like metals. But are we different from you? If we were, why are we not surviving trips to Emess. Special communication? Or just careful thinking before speaking?”

“You have done much here. You cannot believe how useful what you have learned is to other communities. You have seen Ap'el of course, but it goes much much further than that. We have much to trade after visits here.”

“Actually our 'Code' normally means we do not see the same community twice. Could that explain the missing Travelers that go to Emess? Or at least how the rumor got started? The fact that you know these two by sight only means this area has been under more careful observation recently.” Need to change disguises and bodies more often. I sort of like this one though. It is easier in Hu communities. We all look alike to them. To a Dio and several Dia I have to do more. Just my luck that this generation's Tor'Vault is Dio.

“Don't forget that we do remember the stories and myths.”

“And you think we are the Guardians from those? Right. We can walk through walls.”

“Pu can and just went outside without opening the door.”

“Maybe they are the Guardians and we are their servants.”

Jake laughs, “That fits. Get going Traveler. They are waking up in Emess. Making good time you will make it in a couple of days.”

“Well at least I can leave this token.” Oz brings out a wood box and places it on the table. He then goes out the door the normal way. I continue to monitor him. Pu is already quite a ways down the path to the val-

ley. What is she up to?

“May I open the box?”

“It is a gift to you. I am curious also.” I scanned it of course, but only see a giant pearl about five centimeters in diameter. Nice, but hardly useful. If she did not want metal, I can hardly see why this would be more useful. Tor'Vault seems excited though.

He motions to his apprentices who scatter about the room looking for something. A few arns later they come back to the table with a collection of lenses and assemble a contraption over the open box.

She exclaims, “I knew it! This proves everything. This object is more valuable than the entire rest of the community combined. Amazing!”

Well this peaks my interest. I scan more closely. The surface is ultra smooth, but there is something on the surface. Nearly at the limit of what a light microscope could determine is writing. Ceph! Oh Oz, what have you done? I read it. Mirrored. Wait, the microscope would invert that to normal text, just up side down. Easy enough to turn the sphere around. They were close enough to begin with.

Then I laugh louder than I ever have. He duped the writings on the walls of the town. There is no new information. Granted they will be able to take what they have already learned with them. It will take them awhile to figure this out.

“Come Bernice. Don't know what happened to you, but we need to get to a place where we can see things coming. I am thinking the hill just outside of the corpse.”

“Good idea. We have an observation tower there. Needed a place with less light pollution now that the lamps are lit all the time.”

Emess

“Remember, they are not confirmed yet.”

“I know the rules. I will be prepared though.”

“Like what you are doing to the bullies? I thought you did not torture your prey.”

“They are not my prey. You promised I would be lead this time.”

“So you are. But what is the purpose of the other Cats lying in the path back to Emess?”

“The bullies will be slowed down, but not eaten. Too much fat. Not good for our health.”

“Right. And the reason?”

“They will report back to their keepers. The keepers will report to theirs. We need only follow the path to find out where it stops.”

“Good idea. Might save us some time.”

“Of course. Besides, they owe me for yesterday.”

“How was the wolf?”

“I could eat again.”

“Did it taste as good as you remembered?”

“Better than the foo-foo they were serving in Ap'el.”

“So, what's the plan?”

“You will not like it. Monkeys are never much for pain.”

“I should have guessed you would put me in that position.”

“They test anyone who enters for self healing abilities.”

“That is so old. I don't remember, did the stories we gave this world mention that test? Sounds like it. I take it you don't want to just walk in the first portal we find?”

“Not the nearest entrance. There is a bounty on Travelers. I want to come in the east side so we are not given away by the thugs we have made friends with.”

He nods, “You enjoy placing me in dungeons. And you wonder why I don't let you take lead all the time. I would spend my entire life in one if I had no say.”

“Not my fault that Monkeys like to torture their own.”

“That's an interesting idea. They have a multiple sentient society, same as Lynnuks and Ap'el. We could get them on torturing and killing cross sentient.”

“Maybe. We will have to wait and see. Remember, they are not confirmed yet.” I push Oz off the path pretending to stumble. We play this game often.

We walk for several eighths. The day will be warm, but not too hot. I

keep a scan on the thugs. They are not that far ahead. Most amusing. We weigh about the same as they do, yet they fear us. Can't be aggression. Nor weapons. Certainly knives are as effective as claws. Don't think I don't know what you carry hidden in your cloth coverings.

"The real fun will come when night falls." Very good apprentice. You are getting into the spirit of the cause.

I can't believe that the Ap'el Cats, if you can still call them by that holy name, wore paw covers. This makes a Cat totally helpless to attack or ability to catch prey. They are can no longer be called Cats can they? Yet, they looked at me like I was a saber toothed tiger, an ancient relic. Amusing, but of no import.

I have to remember to take the long view. I was an old Cat long before their culture was even imagined and will be here long after they are gone.

We are outside the forest now and can see easily down to the valley below. Emess spreads out in the distance. Only a few structures over two stores, watch towers and stores houses for the very rich. There is one structure that stands above all others. Religion would normally be blamed, but what I scan does not match that. I am guessing this is where their Gates or leader resides. Interestingly there are guard Cats. Fully armored, they are the only ones who wear metal. Where did they get that much metal?

"They have reached the Cats. They are under the last trees seeking the shade. Of course this shade is over the path." He smiles.

"The bullies have seen them and have stopped to discuss the situation. The field is open enough for them to go around."

"What do they have to fear? Cats are bound by the same rules of sentient interaction."

"Not to say they can't threaten. Out here who would be the witness?"

"The telescope back at Lynnuks might be able to see."

"Not during the day. The heat waves will prevent a good view."

"I am impressed. I really thought you slept through all of the tech classes except the ones on explosives."

"To be able to see farther would interest any Cat. Besides, anyone knows heat causes this problem. You don't need a telescope to know this."

"True. They are going around. You would think they have plague from the distance they are maintaining. Ah, oh, the Cats are moving. Ambling down the path to the next stand of trees. I also scan more Cats further along. This will go on for several eighths. They are likely to be worried about darkness before getting far enough away."

"No moon tonight. Would not take much to scare them."

“No it wouldn't. Once it is too dark for the Lynnuks people to see our progress I want to jump ahead of them. In your estimate, will they still be looking for us at sunrise?”

“Because of the heat waves chances are they can't see us now. We are both light against the ground and would blend in easily. The bullies are wearing darker colors and will be more visible, but even they are likely invisible now.”

“Good. I really don't want to give all of our secrets on one visit. What is your opinion of the Ap'el and Lynnuks cultures?”

“You mean in terms of confirmation?”

“Yes.”

“Too early for a final report. It would be best to see how they react to Emess being changed first. My guess is they will not be included directly in the edict. We can do some subtle pruning instead.”

“I am guessing Jake will nominate Tor”Vault for TK school.”

“And Bernice? It takes two to nominate now.”

“After the Ba mistake I agree. Even species we think we know can hold surprises.”

“We really thought they had few nasty people in spite of their own telling us otherwise. Yet we still ask that at least one of the two be a different species.”

“To stop us from flooding the schools with just our own kind. Also why we are no longer unique in being sentient pairs. It has become the norm.”

“Wish you had a Pink for a partner instead?” He bumps me.

“Beautiful when they need food and no 'flowers' are available.”

“You mean incredibly smelly when they unfold their 'leaves' to capture as much sun as possible. You never forget your first time.”

“Not unlike the scent glands of a viral male during mating season.”

“I knew I knew that smell. And why I am repulsed.”

“Hu just don't appreciate smell.” I stop for a moment to bite at an itch on my left flank.

“Fleas?”

“There are a lot of parasites on this world, but most do not know how to deal with soft skins yet. They burrow in too far and drown.”

“In our blood you mean. We had better get used to it. We come in with no scars and we will be picked off quick.”

“You can have mine. I will take my chances.” I TK one over to him.

“You are so kind I could give you a hug.” Instead he rubs the fur on my head the wrong way. I bat him and he takes off at a run. I lope after him. He can't run fast, but it feels good to be running so I don't end the fake chase too quickly.

I pop ahead of him. He gets the idea and pops ahead of me. Soon we are near enough to the Cats that we drop back to just running again.

How did it go with the bad Hu? I ask them.

The alpha male responds with a yawn. The alpha female answers me, *You still have your pet monkey. Smelly creatures. I don't understand why you bother.*

We have rules we have to follow.

Why?

Why did you not eat the three who came by you?

She looks up suddenly as if only now learning of this fact. *Where? I did not smell any monkeys?* She bumps her head on the alpha male. *Did you smell any?* He ignores her and goes back to sleep.

Worthless males. Gotta love em though.

Our only mistake. She raises a tail to indicate affirmation. She then yawns and lowers her head as well. A cub swats her swishing tail. She will get a snarl soon. Life goes on.

It gets dark fast. The thugs are well off the path now and have decided to make camp out in the wilds. They have set a fire and made temporary spears. One will stand guard while the other two sleep with hands on their spears. Three is pretty much the minimal number to be safe. The fact we go in twos also sets us apart. Some try and pretend to be Travelers, as we are afforded much in the way of kindnesses by most sentients. They rarely live long going only in twos. Sometimes the third trails the other two and only meets up with them at night. This is usually the first taken and as such is in the lowest position.

“We are nearly even with them. How far ahead do you want to get?”

“They will suspect us if we arrive at the portal this late. Best to wait until morning.”

“If we pop to the other side and come in from that side at some distance we will get a feeling for the effect they have had there.”

I pop us far to the east. We are just outside a small farming community.

“Interesting. Looks like they have abandoned the town.”

I scan the inside, “They did not leave willingly. They were forced out, if any made it out at all. A lot of char visible.”

“Their grain stores are empty. Past time for first harvest. The stores should be full.” He moves some of the char and there is dry earth underneath. “This is recent. Bodies have been quickly buried.”

“Dismembered first. Gnaw marks. Several species in the same pit. They would never do this to their own dead. Someone did this to them. Tracks are all species though. Not specism.”

“I suspect Emess, but I see no proof.”

“They are not stupid. Best to remember. I smell something that I can't place.”

“Who knows. When things burn all kinds of gases are given off. Given more time we might be able to find proof.”

“If they took any of the people back with them they will most likely be in the dungeon. I scan they have a full house at the moment.”

“Yes, and they are not thin yet. Fresh meat.”

“Waste not, want not.”

“What do Hu taste like?”

“You know those little creatures on E35B that live under rocks and eat leggit roots?”

“Those are disgusting creatures.”

“That fits.”

“Want to know what Cat tastes like?”

“You have never eaten Cat.”

“Too stringy anyway.”

“We have the night to spend yet. How about a trip upstairs?”

“I had forgotten. Station is nearly above us. Good thinking.”

We pop up. I move to a view port and look down at where we were.

“You can see Lynnuks easy enough. They are way over their emission limits with those gas lamps.”

“Tell Jake and Bernice, not me.” He pauses.

“They are working on it. It will require a little cheating by offering mantle developments and controls they were not quite ready to find on their own.”

“Emess is nearly invisible in the visible spectrum. Only the largest structure is showing in the infrared.”

“Pretty dramatically. They have tried to hide the signature. Note the baffles above the furnaces. They are trying to diffuse the heat.”

“I just checked the logs. Things have changed quite a bit in Emess in the last three years just as Jake and Bernice have noted. There used to be hearths in most of the homes. That ended six months ago. Not just seasonal either. There is a weather system coming it. Should rain just before dawn. Probably last most of the day.”

“The three grunts will be happy about that. Mud will slow them down even further.”

“Will get messy for us as well.”

“Unless we camp just outside the portal in that abandoned hovel I scan.”

“A lot of bugs inside.” We play a game of who can scan the best. “Best get to it if we are to make enough repairs in time. Bring some reeds in from the wet lands between the charred city and Emess. They will

wonder how we knew to do this and not be surprised where we got them from at least.”

“Oh and you are so good with your paws I can guess who is going to do most of the work.”

“I have to maintain a disguise. You are my captive. You would not expect me to be working if someone comes to check us out?”

“There are a lot of guards at those portals. A large community to be guarding. At least a third of the population must be in service. That is a huge economic drain.”

“Not to mention all the lumber and stone they hauled there to set it up. No trees or stone within a day's journey.”

“Carbon dating says that the walls themselves are old. Most are anyway. At least half was from an earlier expansion. A lot of farm land in production. Most of the population is outside the walls though in smaller structures.”

Carbon dating? Isn't that a bit much? The station is moving to the edge of how far a seven can DS in one jump. I move us to the wet lands.

“Work captive.” I am suddenly covered in cut reeds. I explode out of them and pin him to the ground.

He gets out from under me. He twists very fast. Never been able to pin him for long. “How are you going to explain how you captured me?”

“Easy, wore you out by popping around you. The only mystery will be how I knew you were a real Traveler and what happened to your partner.”

“You ate him of course. Heard the bounty was for Hu Travelers. Nothing said about Ba. Made me watch.”

“And eat some yourself. Taste like chicken.”

“They don't know what that is. Gekker would be close.”

“Tasteless you mean.”

“Raw I suspect you only taste the blood anyway and that is pretty universal.”

“Feathers are a problem with chickens if eaten raw. Almost not worth the trouble. Can't imagine what my ancestors saw in birds anyway.”

“Starting to drizzle.” He pops us to the hovel. Will barely hold us.

You can stay outside.

“You trust me not to run away? When you fall asleep I am gone. What about fixing the roof?”

Do I need to wound you to near death? Remember my hearing and reflexes are lightening fast. And running will only mean someone else claims you as a prize. Think they will treat you better?

“At least they did not kill my best friend and partner *sszjt*.” He uses a Ba name equivalent to Fluffy. I roll my eyes and whine a complaint of

pain.

How could I have eaten a Ba of such repute? I would die of shame. I go inside the hut and make enough disturbance to scare most of the insects out. It will still not be pleasant. The sacrifices I have to make for this work. We never lie, but we do a good job of misleading. He did have a temporary partner back in school, a Ba by the name of Fluffy. We were required to practice with different sentients. You never knew who you would be linked with at any given time. In spite of all my complaining, justified of course, we do make a good team. It is hard for either of us to work effectively with others.

The rain reaches us. Oz is outside shivering in the wet. I may kill him if I go too far with this. Of course he will have hidden another body near by. I don't scan for it. I have done the same. You never know and I don't want to break cover for a mere death. One of us alone may still be able to determine the information we need.

You may come in, but do not disturb my rest. A normal Hu does not have mind seeing abilities, so from this point on Oz will not either. TK have been tricked before. There really is no such thing as low tech. Those who think that while around sentients will soon lose another body. If they get you quick enough, you're dead permanently. Not something I want to try just yet. We think we do not give ourselves away, but we do, in so many subtle ways. For that reason, I cannot scan ahead or read the minds I am not allowed to.

This is the exciting part of field work, hunting blind. With all the abilities the school has given me, hunting has become rote. I live for times like these, when I can be truly alive.

I spend the rest of the night in meditation, in preparation for the morning. Oz keeps it noisy by the insanity of actually repairing the roof by hand. I am tempted to use the abilities, but then he would forever hold it over me. Stupid monkeys!

It is light. We go. He is pretending to sleep in the driest corner. He is covered with bugs. *Your breakfast can be the vermin on your body.* I gracefully perform my stretching exercises go outside and do my morning absolution.

He comes out actively hunting vermin and consuming them. I ignore him and proceed to the portal. There I wait patiently in my best statuesque position. Always with dignity. Oz sits next to me, a total mess.

Fortunately we do not have to wait long. They open the portal and a large Dio and two Cat come out to look at us. I remain at attention as is my right. Any other Cat would be expected to cower and show fear, even if feigned.

“Ah, another wannabe. Third one this eighth.”

I swat Oz with my tail. He rises and hisses at me.

Test him. I will wait. I don't move a whisker.

The Dio moves very quickly. She is well trained. She has a claw at this throat and very carefully draws a single drop of blood.

“An accident. You are all witness.” The two Cats nod. I remain motionless. I will never be called to testify, being an outsider. Using the barest minimum of psiotic ability and showing great concentration, Oz heals the puncture.

Aren't you overdoing it? He gives the barest smile and looks at the Dio with hate in his eyes. Good detail. She moves to hit him again, but hesitates.

“Inside we have Hu experts.” Chains are placed on him to hobble him. Gold. Interesting. It is thought that gold will mute his abilities.

“Do you have his staff?” So many cultures think it is the staff that gives us the abilities. We can make one any time we want, or in my case the more classic and elegant collar.

I remain silent.

“Good. Come with me.” I fall in line directly behind her. Next comes Oz and finally the two Cats.

Inside the place is filthy. Lynnucks was messy. They had clutter and moldy food forgotten on plates and cups. This place has the smell of death. Raw sewage in the streets. Nothing is clean. Beings of all kinds look sick. Several cough. That explains the smell of death. Decomposed body along with the other garbage. A rope around it's neck. I glance up. Someone was hung, the body rotted in place. Finally, nearly bones, it was cut down. A rittel skitters out of the way as we pass. I can see the eyes of more in the shadows. Bad tasting, explains why they are left alone. Perform a service anyway. Not fast enough in my mind. Too bad they have to wait for the meat to rot before they can chew it.

The path we take is not straight. We follow a very convoluted path that doubles back on itself several times. There are many defensible positions in route. I already know this from my scans of course. I also know the quick way. They are showing me this path because they don't trust me yet. I wouldn't. I could have gone over the roofs faster than they are doing. Only there are archers on the roofs. Well inside their community. That means they fear their own more than the outside.

“You go with the other two. I take the Traveler from here.”

My prize. First thing I have said.

“Did you mark it?” Not him? Either they do not see Travelers as sentients or they know we can change gender if needed.

I nod.

“Then you have nothing to worry about.” Right. He could be

scrubbed clean and remarked of course. He thinks I placed my scent on him, which I did. We do live together. Of course he will bare my smell. I will worry about something more permanent later if I have to.

Good luck Oz. I dare not transmit.

So, what do you two do for fun around here?

They look at me like I am insane. No fun then.

Do yourself a favor, take your prize and leave this place. Do not allow them to recruit you.

That bad. *Hope your place smells better than the Hu section of town.* Most communities don't segregate. Not a good sign. Here it would appear that the Hu and Dia sections are the worst off.

We do alright. Lots of food. Hisses saying that. I already know, so I have to play along.

Any monkey? I love monkey meat. Charred to perfection over a wood fire.

You will get the corpse when they are through. Part of the deal. You can have it cooked or raw, though they are partly cooked during processing.

How long will that take? I'm hungry now.

Better settle for old cow then. They like to extract as much information as possible first.

Any problems with Enforcers?

You getting squeamish? They turn on me ready to rip my throat if necessary.

I stick my nose up in the air. *Please, the only thing that tastes better than a Hu is an Enforcer. Love that tang. Must be something in their food.* A certain amount of bravado is expected.

Don't like anything sour myself. A fine Dia liver is my favorite.

I add, *Not much sport in Dia, though you are right that the liver is tasty. Especially in the young ones.*

You could always challenge. You might get lucky and take down a Dio.

Too tough. The sport though. Yeah, that would be meat. Almost worth it.

If you don't mind being a cripple.

The day is new. Am I allowed to wander?

Only if you wear a black collar. Theirs are gold. Not real gold, more a yellow fabric. Lots of plants out there could do that color.

Fit me then. I slept in a wet lean to with a smelly monkey. I need to get away from the smell a bit. They don't argue or care. A naked Hu child comes over at a growl from one of them and carefully fits me.

Lose the collar and one of us will gut you. These two females would

not be a match for me, even if I was norm. They know it. One looks back over her head towards the back. There sits one the most magnificent specimens I have ever seen. I walk over carefully placing one paw in front of the other like a fashion Cat. I present my scent glands to him. He does not get up, but dignifies me with a small sniff.

Remember me big boy. He ignores me. I am still unknown. Must be a lot of competition for this one. Of course I am not in heat either.

I leave the company of my kind and make my way to the center. I want a better look at the 'castle' where we saw the IR signature.

The center is not as bad as the periphery we came though to get here. The buildings improve. Somewhat. Nothing to compare to Ap'el. Even Lynnucks looks a little better and could be much better if they cared. I get the impression that someone was punished to get the walls as clean as they are here.

I smell something good to eat. I sniff out a stand.

What do you use for trade here?

“Pesky Cats, always looking for free food. Hunt your own like we pay you to.”

#!She wears the black!# The one who made the first comment turns to see me more clearly.

“Sorry. Please accept my apologies and this nice lizard stick.” The Dia holds out a stick with a very nice smelling juvenile sauro of some kind. An expensive piece of meat. They protect their young well. I take the stick in my jaws then look around for a place to set it down that does not involve shit or mud from the rain.

One comes from behind the counter, gently takes my stick and places it into a slot on the side of the building at my height. How civilized!

Excellent, thanks! I won't forget your kindness. I look up at them and sniff the air. I won't forget. Though I wonder why I am being treated so well. Clearly the collar has told them something. Do all visitors get the same color? Or only ones who have brought in a Traveler? How far do my privileges go?

I hear an enormous roar and lots of yelling. A full size raptor of breeding strength comes bounding into the center of the square. She takes out a small Dia in one bite and goes for a group of Hu next. Pissed lizard. Not that I can blame it. Must be part of some kind of exhibit to be in the center of town. No way it could have gotten here on her own.

I roar to offer a challenge, wait for her to turn and see me, then duck behind a watering trough. Only my tail swishing back and forth above. It roars back. I tease it with my tail. It will be drawn to the movement and to the fact that I am a Cat. It is obviously been abused by at least Cats and possibly Dio as well. No one else would try. Would not be surprised if

she is to be part of a performance. She comes bounding towards me knocking a few others down and scattering the rest. No one is offering any assistance. I would expect handlers to emerge at least. Probably trying to get out of town. They would be held responsible.

My turn, she is nearly here. Most Cats, but not all, can pop, but there is no sport in that. Wear them out first and then go in for the kill. I suspect she has been teased enough by that method. Add another Cat to further the distracting and you could drive her insane. She has stopped. Cautious. Waiting for me to pop.

I wave my tail a few times, but she knows that one. Still, she is not taking out anyone else while dealing with me. I raise my head. She is looking right at me.

Hello. How are you? Mind sending has its uses.

She snorts. There is still blood in her eyes. The handlers finally show themselves. I continue to talk to her in soothing thoughts to distract her until they arrive. She is curious and suspicious. I was prepared to take her down if necessary, but this is a better outcome.

She reacts to something behind me and roars just as the handlers bind her feet and she falls to the ground centimeters in front of me. The fall knocks her out momentarily. They rush to muzzle her.

Bad breath. What have they been feeding you?

Scum who don't follow the rules mostly. A minor amusement. You did not move when she fell towards you. I am impressed. I turn to face the hunk. My heart misses a beat.

We passed some of the scum coming in.

We only have the one garbage disposal and we would not want her to get too fat. Lean and hungry is more exciting.

What will happen to the handlers?

I don't understand.

Ah, they were told to let her go. You were testing me. Not a question.

A small female brings in a Traveler. You will understand our suspicions. You are brave and smart enough at least. How did you know she would not kill you?

I didn't know she would not try. I have run into a few in the wild. I have experience.

I could use someone with your abilities. Ah, the recruitment offer.

I did not learn to take down raps by rushing in. I prefer to work alone.

You have had wolf recently as well. Only a few scars. You are careful, not stupid. Good sense of smell. Have to remember to lick better afterwards.

Come with me. I have more to show you. He turns his butt to me. The

scent is overwhelming. He is obviously part of the bargain. Too bad I will never come into heat again. I suppose I could always fake it. The night would be something else. The passion!

Well, one consolation is the fact that I have impressed him and without abilities either.

Looks like this encounter may have played into my claws. We are headed towards the castle.

We don't go up the main steps however. Cat and Dio guards there. We go down a narrow alley and into the servants entrance. Ah, the main kitchen. A Dio is head chef and notices us. She is clearly not happy, but says nothing. He helps himself to a bowl of scraps. Smells good. I suspect they are there for that reason. I look inside. These are very good scraps. Too good. I skip the meal. I want to be alert.

You do excellent work Chef Dio. I am so sad that I am full on market lizard. Such a waste. She nods her thanks. Dio are clearly the sentients in charge here. It is their world, though Dio are not usually so close to the ocean as we are here. A few days walk at most.

We go up a back stairwell. There are peep holes at regular intervals. Cats are great spies and confidants. Too narrow for a Dio to pass though here. We pause long enough for me to see into one of the holes. There is a small Dio male mating with a Hu female. She will be sore. Wonder what they threatened her family with?

It is getting warmer. We are nearing the inner chamber we saw from orbit.

Ah finally I am warm. He turns and looks at me in horror. Okay, no thought projection here. Why not, I sent to just him?

We enter the large chamber at the back of course. There is a screen protecting the entrance. There are two enormous male Cats at attention. They don't even acknowledge my now seemingly much smaller hunk. Those two look painful. Ah, not a problem. They have been emasculated. Probably a good idea considering the sensitive nature of this room. Inside there are braziers with fires burning. Must take a lot of wood to keep these going all day and night. Also explains how some of the Dio are adapting to the colder climate.

“Ah, there you are kitty. Please give our new guest a demonstration won't you?”

There is a terrified Dia female tied up in the center of the room in an awkward position. I stop just inside the screen. He proceeds to the center of the room and mounts the Dia and attempts to mate with her. She reeks of Cat heat blood. She screams horribly when he is done. I hate that part. Those barbs are something else, even when you expect them, which she obviously didn't. Rape is common among Cats. No big deal, but we usu-

ally don't mess with the other sentients. Entertainment? Or just power? He turns to the huge Dio female at one side. An obvious exchange occurs. He turns, nods to me and then leaves through another portal.

Another prisoner is brought in. Oz. He looks pretty beat up.

The Dio speaks, "Not the strongest one we have had, but then they were not brought in by a single female Cat. Females are the stronger don't you think." Not a question. I follow her hand to the wall. There are heads on the wall. Hu, Dio, Dia, Ba and lastly one Cat. The Ba looks like Jordan. He was the one who alerted us to come here. Tells me his experience was no better than Oz's. We need two independent confirmations. He and his partner Jakkleg were the first. It is very rare the first is wrong. When you are dealing with the fate of a people though, it better we are careful. We are not told anything ahead of time so we come in cold, but we are of course looking for trouble. Jake and Bernice have apparently tried to make this work and have given up on Emess, putting their time into Ap'el and Lynnuks.

It is obvious now that the ruse in the square was more than a test of my courage. A Traveler would have died rather than betray themselves. I didn't. I am little worried that I did not show any fear. Should have pissed myself at least. So, do they think I am a Traveler or just stupid?

There is more. I can feel it. The leader is different. Barely at the limits of my perceptions. She is a nat. Shit and good one at hiding herself. That must be how she knows and fears Travelers. Of course Cats all emit some, so it would be harder to tell in our case. The head on the wall could just be someone she got mad at. No natural Cat above a two, nothing a determined group could not take out. If Dio are similar and there have not been many, she could be a two. No telling what gifts she has. The Diy on E65B and presumably E65A, which we are forbidden to visit, are nat twos. They have mind speak at least. Their sentients separated thirty five million years ago or a total of seventy million years of separation since they went in different directions. All the Di on this world are covered in feathers. I am getting stupid with my own thoughts. I should be paying attention here.

An apparent advisor next to her speaks to me, "It will be awhile before you can claim your prize. Is there any special means you wish it prepared?" Like I am at a fine restaurant back on E1 before the fall. Or so I have heard. Wonder what that was like? To be so small and living at the mercy of the Hu, begging for every scrap.

I maintain my dignity and answer simply, *There was a nice little booth in your main square. They did an excellent job with my breakfast lizard.*

The advisor whispers to the Dio and then responds to me.

“We know the one. You may go now.” He turns away and then back, “Oh, do you happen to know anything about a Cat befriended by a Traveler?” That is too close.

This one said his partner was a Ba. Not very tasty. Too bony. Why would any Cat be stupid enough to partner with a monkey? I give my best disgusted look. Like I had just bitten a sour weed pod.

So he said. They are still checking our stories.

Since I do not know my way around I exit the same way I came in. As I turn I hear them taking Oz away. Apparently the questioning does not occur here. I am going to owe Oz.

I send a pulsed signal to him. Something she will not be able to pick up, I hope. I have made my decision. He will be more cautious before making his decision and he is usually right. I am too impatient when it comes to this stuff.

I will be watched continuously. Likely he will not. I have already scanned the dungeons. Holes in the sub rock like in most places. Yeah, they know they are not allowed to dig that far down. We have heard all sorts of excuses about not realizing they were that far down. They change the workers so the new ones don't know how much digging the previous set has done. Kill them sometimes.

Torturing and killing one sentient by another is illegal. The fact they flaunt this in so many ways here is enough evidence that things have gone too far. Then again, Travelers are not actively hunted either. We usually have the freedom to go anywhere in a community.

We came in through the transfer station at the Possix Corpse. We listened to many sentients talk of what they had witnessed. It all seemed too horrific to be true. Most will exaggerate once they have reached the station and are assured safe passage to a new world. Not like those on the road still. Fresh arrivals will listen to the stories to try and decide which way to proceed. There are communities all up and down this side of the continent, but most will settle within a couple of days of travel.

Of course there are corpse reps present to try and counteract the stories. The Ap'el reps went for the better dressed and dignified ones. The Emess reps did not hide their desires either. They ignored the minor unskilled laborers and went straight for the skilled experts, anyone with tools in their possession. When we were there they were particularly targeting people who could work with glass. The optics advances of Lynnucks must have gotten them worried. Have not seen this level of paranoia in some time. No need when there is a free exchange of information.

It was only when we were in disguise that we heard that they were recruiting chemists as well. Too many possibilities there to know what they were going for. There was a hint of accelerants in the town east of here.

Explosives? I need to get out and do a more careful examination before we dismantle this place.

Lynnucks did not need to recruit. But not everyone wants to live their life style. Since people are free to come and go, I suspect a lot of people are drawn there first and then leave quickly thinking nothing could be worse. They would be wrong. Few leave Emess alive. The ones we saw on the road must have been farmers who were already outside the walls. Individuals being paranoid is part of normal variation in all sentients. Cats are well known for the trait. But an entire culture?

I am met on the street by the hunk. Easy to smell him coming. How many times a day does he mate with something anyway? Reeks of it.

What did you think of our leader, Enron Gates III?

Hereditary?

Nah, just a history crazed kink. Nothing to worry about. She got to be leader the usual way, by eating her opponents. Literally I suspect.

How long ago?

About three winters. I had just arrived. Young and cocky. Got lucky and advanced quickly. I am much more careful now. He looks at me carefully.

I have no designs on your position. He nods. I certainly don't want to be mounted by a Dio for entertainment purposes. I was never that enthralled during the passion time.

You can't leave. It is best if you just find a nice comfortable position and play along. No one leaves.

I had figured that out. I know Cat get to go outside sometimes. I smelled their spore and saw other evidence.

Don't even think it. Only the emasculated ones and Dio. Oh, and of course the herder's slaves. Did not seem that way to me. Maybe the ones closer in? Herds are mostly on the hill side. Farms on the eastern side.

How long do I have to wear the collar? I scratch at it to make my point. Not that the yellow one looks any more comfortable. How would he react if I showed up with a Traveler's collar. Could claim I took it off a dead one? Too dangerous, not that many Cat Travelers to get one from. Come to think of it, I believe I am the only one on world at the moment, though there could be one in the eastern continent with the Diu. Tech ones are too primitive for me, even if these are nastier in their own way.

Till your first kill. They want something to hold over you in case you turn scardy cat. You should have nothing to worry about. Remember, everyone has a price. They will soon find yours if you don't find out first. Better if you do. I have duties. Smell you around. Yeah, not likely. Does not seem to be such a hunk afterall.

I go back to the booth in the square. They have removed all evidence

of this mornings activities. I sit by the booth looking into the center of the square. Not hungry yet, but I feel welcome here.

The cook comes up to me. She looks healthy enough. Old enough to have egged at least once.

“Thanks for your help earlier.”

No problem. They are much more fun in the wild of course. What was one doing here?

She lowers her head to my ear and whispers, “This is how most people are executed. Especially the higher ranking ones. Big public display.”

They don't follow the Rules?

“They are careful. Only a Hu will throw a Hu into the pen. Always someone willing to do it for a price.” So were the rapes I saw earlier also so arranged? Were they 'willing' participants? Be raped or your entire family dies and we feed you to the rap. Nice place.

I did not pay you earlier. What do you use for exchange here?

“We do not use 'money' if that is what you are implying.” Illegal, but I had to know. Metals are still the usual means. Even copper is prized. Tastes bad, I don't understand it. Iron, now that makes sense to me. Everything tastes good cooked in iron, the metal of blood. Cerams aren't the same. Spoiled kitty.

No, I am sorry. I meant no insult. But something else in trade? I could guard your booth for a time if you wish to do some errands?

“Accepted. I will send my mate to gather. Going now will allow us to gain an advantage. I will stay as someone has to remain to wait on receivers. We will get a midday rush soon.”

I took the pause as an opportunity to clean myself of dust.

The rush as she called it was an understatement. Horde would be a better description. If she had any problems with a trade I would move closer to the individual and glare at them. Most times this was enough. Once or twice they left quickly. At least it gave her time to wait on someone who could afford the excellent food. She was careful, but not stingy. Even to the most poor she would find something to offer with little in exchange. Of course the bullies came here as well and did not offer at all until they saw me.

“She was the one who stopped the Raptor this morning with a look. Isn't she beautiful?” She pets me on the head for good measure. I lick my whiskers while looking at them as my next meal. They pay up. Exchange is not exactly money, technically, though close to it. Small bits of metal, pretty rocks, carvings, and the like.

I will not be here forever. Won't this get you into trouble later?

“Who knows what the morrow will bring. Life is short in Emess. Live day to day is my motto.” Probably a wise one. “At the worst they will

make a point of coming here and taking a few times. I will still have come out ahead, as they have never exchanged before.”

And they will never know when I might return. More Dia coming. I strike my cute pose.

#!Is she the one?!#

A small male Dia reaches up to touch me and is swatted away by a worried mother.

It is alright. I don't bite sentients.

He embraces me with a big hug and I purr in return.

Made his day. A scruffy male Hu stands beside me.

Wondered when you would get out. Seen enough?

Not everyone is rotten here. Nor is everyone clean elsewhere.

Enough to hold a council though.

Yeah, enough for a council. I have so informed Jake and Bernice.

They are setting it up. Should only take a few moments.

Can we change into something more comfortable?

Why not. Nothing they can do to us now. Will make a good lesson for those who are not among the 'chosen'. Not a good thing to be chosen.

I go up to the owner, *#!I have a confession to make.#!* She nearly faints at my speaking Dia. I exchange my black collar for a Traveler's one. Shiny. Feels good to be back in uniform. Hey, I am proud of being a Traveler.

Oz goes to gleaming white with a polished staff and says, “You and your husband,” He pops into view surprised, “will come with us for safety reasons. Is this acceptable?” She nods, her beak still open. He huddles next to her shaking.

Of course this does not go unnoticed. A pack of Dio are quickly making their way towards us fully armed. Archers are gathering on the roofs. Fresh Travelers, yummy.

All weapons disappear at once without a glance from either of us. When they try to get closer anyway they are met with a barrier. I love this part of the game.

The Council is Called!

#!Time for us to go. We will take you two to Possix with us. With these passes you can go to any world you wish with our blessing. It was a pleasure meeting you and good luck with your lives.#! She gives me a hug. I did not know that Dia cried. From hell to heaven because of a single act of kindness. Those poor Dia were so happy to see the food she gave them. I will remember that most of all.

Possix

Why are they taking so long? I may have to break the rule about scanning other TKs. I can be so impatient

In spite of all the problems in the other three communities, life looks normal here. Sentients nod or wave that they recognize me as a Traveler, but don't try to kill me or suck up for some favor. Food is brought in from the fields and traded for finished goods, usually lighter, going back. No money means no pick pockets. Harder to run with a sack of flour and five locals chasing you.

Refuges. Must be coming from Emess. They are very poor. I scan them. Only one has a pass and it is not a family pass. The others will not be able to transfer. Wishing a loved one off? Or hoping somehow for a miracle. That can happen.

I move on. Behind me a moment later a scream of excitement. Package delivered.

When a request for a council comes this quickly it usually means it is over. Will not hurt to get a few out before it happens. It is my first director assignment. I am wondering if it will be my last. A new record for a catastrophic failure.

Jake and Bernice come up to me casually and give me a hug.

“Surprised we are the first ones. Pu told us they were ready. Figured they would jump immediately.”

“What's the rush? Usually these things take weeks.”

“Who did you choose for primary?”

“Jordon. He came highly recommended by all of you.”

“We knew him in school. He was finishing up when we first got there and apparently Oz and Pu were just finishing when he arrived. Full circle.”

“Oh Pu. Look, she has stopped at a food stand.” The others laugh.

“Not normal behavior for Pu at all.” The giggling continues.

“What do you mean, she always seeks out the best food? Oh, I see what you mean. Who are those two? I read no TK.”

“Refuges. I have noticed quite a few while I was waiting.”

Oz comes up and hugs me, “You should see the ones still stuck in Emess.” He sees us looking at them. “They were kind to Pu. She gave them passes. We left in a hurry just as the call came in. Seemed right to give them enough food to make transfer.” I nod, would have done the same.

Pu is hugged by the two Dia several times and then a few more times.

Are they going to ever let go? They keep going at it. Okay, this is getting to be too much.

Pu get over here. We have work to do.

Cat massage. I can't resist.

We can arrange some wet stuff. . .

You wouldn't! She pops over though. Not worth the risk, and yes, I would have. Would have to pay for it later though.

"Where do you want to go for this?"

"We have two eighths left of light. Do we wait or go some place more private?"

Pu has already started walking. Nose in the air. She soon finds the scent.

"Oz, are you sure she is not part blood hound?"

"Aimee would know more than me. Isn't Pu some great great grand daughter of her cat?"

"We did mess with their DNA a bit to get the size and intelligence up."

I heard that! Does not slow her down though.

"But we didn't use any canine genes. Pure Cat and a little tweaking."

"Too bad, could have helped, especially on the intelligence side."

Bernice plays with fire. Jake raises an eyebrow. Pu is still too interested in food to respond. I doubt she has ever seen one, no, she might have spent some time on E1. Lots of dog packs running wild there now.

"Of course she is going to the best place in Possix."

"A vegetarian's nightmare you mean. We will go hungry."

"Yes, but they also have a wonderful thermal bath."

"Private too."

"Ah, that works for me. Do we leave Pu in the food bar? The meeting will go faster if we do."

"She actually likes the baths, just don't tell any of the other Cats."

"But will we when the water is all full of fur?"

"Did someone say fur?" We turn to see Jordon.

"Looks like everyone is here. Let's do it."

"Aimee, you just got back from Luna City?"

"A few minutes ago."

"How's it going?"

"The Enterprise brought back a lot of information. It will take many years yet to analyze it and make sense of it."

"I heard Simone was working on that project." Jake asks.

"She was your recruiter? Both you and Bernice."

"First Di I actually liked." Bernice adds.

"Hopefully not the last. Did you know Gates has my head in his main

hall? Didn't hurt a bit.”

“I never went in the hall. Maybe Pu saw it. I spent my time in the dungeons.”

“Not again? Pu really likes to play it that way. Your turn next, what are you going to do?”

“I will think of something. Maybe a water world.”

We all laugh at that thought. One thing to be in a private and very warm spring pool, quite another in a cold ocean.

“Jake and I are due for a turn at Farpoint.”

“You two will love it. I hated it. Nothing but science. Nothing to do, worst rations, sentients idea of fun is to figure out what some new microscopic bug is. Alone in a dark room.” I grin inside. I actually enjoyed it on Luna City. Nothing but programming. Bliss. I think I even out geeked Simone. She went out every time we had to send the Enterprise off again to double check something or find a missing piece of the puzzle.

Jordon asks, “Who picked the eatery?”

We all answer at once, “PU!”

We enter and head straight for the baths, pausing at the altar to make a donation. It feels good to be warm all over. I accepted the assignment on Luna City partly to clear my mind. That was three years ago when I asked Jake and Bernice to watch for me. Six months ago they called in Jordon to do a first. Two days ago Pu and Oz show up for a second. Two days.

“You got her fast Aimee. Were you on an earth?”

“No, I was at Luna City with Spider and Ravi. Simone took lead until this is done.”

“We could be wrong. Even TKs can be fooled.”

“Do you really think that?” No one looks at me. Right.

“Water feels good.”

“Here comes kitty. Eeuu, cow breath, bad!”

“Did you have to eat it raw?”

Best way. Not every species has to burn everything to carbon to eat it.

“I really love all of you. I am sorry you had to be here for this.”

“You are taking this too personally Aimee. All sentients are responsible for their own actions.”

“Thanks.” It still hurts.

“Remember Covenant? That was a nasty one. This is mild by comparison.”

“A full Enforcer fallout is mild by comparison.”

“Religion just doesn't work. As soon as things get bad they rapidly attack each other.”

“Only fundamentalists. Most sens believe something, just don't push it

on others.”

“Bernice, what do the Dia believe?” She set herself up for that.

“We do not discuss it with outsiders.” Wise.

“I am placing a sound block on us.”

“Could we move. I will turn into an aquily root if I stay in here much longer.”

“Jordon, you look worse than a drowned rat.”

“We are mostly fluff. Sorry.”

“Not your fault Jordon. Do you need something to eat?”

“I can take care of myself, though Pu is starting to look good to me right now.” He is teasing, but Pu pops out causing a wave to happen in the tub. She starts to lick herself dry.

I move us all to the top of a nearby ridge. No one lives here, not even a raggi path near by. Pu shakes herself.

“See, I told you there were dog genes in her.” We all TK ourselves dry.

“What do we know?”

“After Oz and Pu left we started to look more closely at Ap'el. I sort of have a soft spot for them and was afraid that I overlooked something.” Bernice looks upset. “I found these buried in nearly every wall and structure.” She brings a few objects out of her pocket and places them in the center of us. I scan it, but don't get it.

Jake adds, “Think about it. Gold, hard to get around here. They hoarded every scrap they got from a Traveler. And nano carbon. What else do we know that uses those two elements?”

“Where did they get the nano? I certainly never heard of a TK, er, Traveler giving anyone at this tech level nano.”

“It is possible to purify from natural sources, edges of low ox fires. But how did they know to even need it?”

“Everyone shield your psiotic signature and watch carefully.”

We do so and nothing happens.

“Okay, now I will reset them. We have set them all off. This is tricky. Hold on an arn.” Bernice starts a fire, concentrates and slowly holds each over the flame at about twenty centimeters. They expand to perfect spheres with the characteristic gold and carbon lines of something psiotic.

“Now Aimee, be a two.” As I raise my signature the one closest to me starts to collapse.

“Sensors. Amazing that a tech two or three culture can do this.”

“So Ap'el knew when a TK entered anywhere.”

“The highest concentration of new ones was in the hall they called the firewall.”

Oz exclaims, “We were stuck in there. So, they use the firewall to

goad a Traveler into doing something that would show up on their sensors. When it does, like in our case, they then 'rescue' us from the hall and bring us in to milk us for information and goodies.”

“Now comes the interesting part. While Bernice was checking out her fav settlement, I was checking out mine. You already know from the report I pulsed you about the writings on the wall. Well there is more. They lied, they have a more secret archive. And guess what? In the archive is an exact description on how to make these sensors. Heaven knows how they figured it out, but it is all at their tech level, which I would definitely place at closer to three now, with some aspects of four.”

“In three years? How did this happen?” I am shocked. Maybe in three hundred, but not three.

“Maybe just a coincidence, but their current Gates assumed three years ago.”

“Don't forget the formulas for explosives in plain sight.” Pu adds.

“Suspicious, but not a crime unless they made them.”

I ask, “You said there was a fire east of Emess. I would like to go there. It should be dark enough for us to poke about. Do they have patrols out that way?”

“Not when we were there, but then a storm was coming. Going to be clear tonight. Can't use glow balls.”

“TK only.” I move us to just outside the settlement.

“I want to know why this settlement burned.”

“Too long ago. Organics will have all evaporated.”

“Classic farmer boo and stone construction. Reeds for the roof I am guessing, but they burned completely and remnants washed by the rains.”

“Look for the overall pattern. Where did it start?”

“This way about twenty meters. About the same distance someone could throw a fire pot.”

“If no arrows were on them. A Dio could toss it further, but it could also be just a kitchen fire. There is a hearth here. Even has pot shards.”

“This shard is different from the others. Too fine for anything poor farmers would want. Look, there is even an artist's mark on the bottom. Way beyond their means.”

“I have found their kiln. They only did terracotta here. Not porcelain like your shard.”

“I can dispel some of your curiosity. This shard is from a pot made in Ap'el by one of their better artists.”

“The fire definitely started here. Look at that shard, there is some sort of residue in the cracks.”

“Some residue to have survived the center of the fire.”

Pu comes over and makes a show of sniffing the shard. We all know she is really scanning it. Even a Cat nose is not that good.

“Incendiary. There is a formula for one on the walls of Lynnucks that matches.”

“Why would anyone from Ap'el or Lynnucks start a fire here? These people are too far away to be a threat to them.”

“There are a lot of bones here. Some are from sentients. But, we know that the people here had no squeamishness about eating the dead of other sentients.”

“Hu are tasty. Roast them over an open fire, or better yet a thigh smoked for two months in a cold house.”

“Pu you are outnumbered, don't push too far.”

“All of you are too skinny, especially Fluffy. The meat needs to be well marbled.” Fluffy being Jordon of course.

“Fish are better anyway.”

“Glad there are no Blues here.”

“Focus please. Bernice, you know ceram better than the rest of us. What shape would these pots be in if intact?”

“I have a guess there. There were some pots in the dungeon with me. I'll just grab one.”

“STOP OZI!”

“Huh? Why? There were tens of them there. No big deal.”

I hold up the sensor, “How about these?”

“Did not think to notice. Not much light and I did not dare use TK on account of the fact that their Gates hated TKs and I didn't want to be in any more pain that I had to be.” Oz glares at Pu when he says this. Pu is cleaning herself. Her belly must be full of fur she does this so often.

“Very carefully, and I mean carefully, scan the dungeon. Minimum TK, as passive as possible.”

“You're right. The ceram jars are stacked with these things in between. Why?”

“I want you to dupe the pot you see. Just the shape. Don't worry about the exact composition. I have a theory.”

Oz does so and a pot forms in front of us. I place one the now crumpled sensors underneath the oblong pot and lean it again a stone. I re-inflate the sensor.

“Now imagine this full of flammable material instead of water. A TK does something near it.” I collapse the sensor, the pot falls over and breaks on a stone on the ground. The material inside spills on the ground.

“Would need an ignition source.”

“They used fat lamps. Stinky things, but open flames all over.”

“That would do it. I see that there is a stack of these in every cell.”

“They said if we touched them we would die.”

“That includes TK touching apparently. I see that there are only a few cells, away from the rest, that have this set up. The special place for Traveler guests.”

“Fine, Emess really has it in for Travelers. We clean them up and we can go on with our business.”

“The pots and sensors came from Ap'el and the formulas for both from Lynnucks.”

“Does not mean they knew of this setup. Could be the materials were gotten in trade. Pots have other uses and both Ap'el and Lynnucks were curious about Travelers. Seeking knowledge is not evil.”

I make another pot and hold it up, “Can you think of any legitimate use for a pot this shape? It was designed to fall over easily and being very thin it would also break easily. Far too easily for it to be of any use ordinarily.”

“Special order, does not mean they knew what for?”

“Any possibility that Emess was set up? The others knew of Emess's paranoia, especially towards us. Leave the formula laying around. Offer to have Emess dispose of 'defective' pots.”

“And they learn of what happened when a Traveler is caught in the trap. A Traveler can be killed. Useful knowledge.”

“They already knew that. My gorgeous head is on full display.”

“Could be any Ba head. How would they know it was a Traveler's head? This trap can only be set off by a Traveler.”

“I don't agree.” Pu sets up three bottle stacked and knocks them over with her tail very casual like.

“If you were told that breaking the bottles would kill you, wouldn't you be careful that you didn't do that?”

“Most people would eventually. Enough torture and you do it to stop the pain.”

“Let's assume for the moment that Emess was manipulated into doing this for Ap'el and Lynnucks. Why would they want to know if we can be killed? Not enough of us to be any threat. In fact killing us is likely to bring Enforcers if anything. We don't openly ask or direct them in any way.”

“That's why you get Emess to take the fall. The Enforcers come in and you get rid of a rival at the same time. Probably wondering why it hadn't happened, with Jordon's head on the wall. So, they set it up so they know for sure a TK is killed. If the Enforcers don't show up, then they know they can do a lot of stuff behind our backs and get away with it.”

“There is another who is far better at manipulating others. Has anyone checked in with you-know-who?”

“Om? Not enough time. Only been three years since all this started to get out of hand. Just saying boo to Her can take months.”

“Why do you suspect Om? What would she have to gain by this?”

“Does help advance their tech if they start an arms race.”

“Or she was threatened in some other way and needed the sentients to do a task for her.”

“What could possibly threaten Her except us? And don't forget we are here with Her blessing. Why do you think it took so long to get things started on this continent?”

“Another Om would be a threat?”

“Right. How? Oms are not exactly easy to move from one parallel to another.”

“Actually they are amazingly easy to move. All it would take is a single small seed or spore.”

“Oz is right.”

“Why would that be a threat? We have brought all kinds of species across. What is one little plant going to do?”

“Where you asleep in lecture Pu?”

“Probably.” Oz comments. Pu sticks out her tongue at Oz.

“How could it happen anyway? We all arrive and leave through the Transfer stations, same as everyone else. We all get screened or screen ourselves down to the molecular level.”

“All it would take is one careless event. Pu or Jordon could hide a forest in their fur.”

“That is why I have always advocated that they be shaved just like the rest of us.” Pu looks at Jake in horror and Jordan laughs.

“That is a very scary thought. You saw Jordon wet.” I smile.

“Everyone scan. This is the only place one of these has gone off that we know of. I want to know if there are any more locations.”

“They could have just used this place to test their design.”

“Possible. Scan anyway.”

“Over here.” Bernice is way out in the field on a small hill. She is fast. We pop over.

“Wow, looks like a war was fought here. The field beyond is trashed.”

“A lot of testing it looks like. They only did the one in the settlement to be sure it behaved the same way inside structures.”

“Also explains why the dungeons are solid stone. They wanted us dead, not Emess burned to the ground.”

“It would be nearly impossible to destroy every invading plant. Scan again, this time for anything unusual plant wise. Something that does not fit. Concentrate around the blast areas.”

It takes us the better part of an eighth to find it. The moon is just starting to come over the horizon. Just a crescent sliver.

“So, what is it?”

“I don't recognize it, but then I was born on another continent.”

“A quadracot. Not native to any E65, E35 or E0/1. Has to be from further back.”

“Doesn't matter. It will be hardier than any native. Lock into it's pattern and remove it.”

“How far out?”

“The entire continent please. Our report will tell others to look for it as well in case these fluffy seeds have spread on the wind that far. The Diu landmass is not that far from here by air.”

“If it got there it would be all over without TK help. Why did She think burning it out would work?”

“She didn't. She just used the illegal tech to gain our attention. We are the real ones being used.”

“Ah, life is back to normal.” I would laugh if I thought that was funny. We really need a better way to communicate with the Oms.

The sun is coming up before we are done.

“That still leaves us with the problem of the tech.”

“What about their attempts to kill us?”

“And every other sentient that they don't like the look of?”

“Hey, they were used. Get over it.”

“Even Om can't work that fast. She just used what was already set up and about to happen. There is much more written on that wall than one simple device.”

“And those sensors. Crude. I would never have guessed that they would work.”

“Even in the dungeon it would have taken repeated exposure to psi-otics to make them crumple.”

“Don't need to crumple to be useful. Train a microscope, like in Tor'Vault's offices, on one and measure even a subtle change.”

“Shit, they had several microscopes set up and in use. The apprentices were right there.”

“Probably watching from the other rooms too.”

“I'm bringing the leaders in. Let's prepare a welcome.”

We level the ground, lay a stone floor and make stone benches. Food is gathered, all vegetarian of course.

“You had your fill at dinner. Our turn Pu.”

“I may have to go for a hunt.”

“You can stay here, same as everyone else.” Oz sticks his tongue out at her and laughs. She sticks her nose in the air and pretends to sniff.

Can't believe them, over four hundred and still kids.

In the back of my mind I have another theory, but I don't dare mention it without any evidence. Each species has its strengths and weaknesses. The Dio are the largest, so even though they would normally be more cooperative, they feel the need to assert dominance, when they can. The Dio way or the highway. Di would be next, but none are currently here. Hu, well, are Hu. So much history there that there is no need to repeat it. Ba are rare here and are more a curiosity than anything else. They like cliffs and arboreal areas better. Cats just want a warm place to sleep and prey to hunt. Easy to please and easy to get in trouble. Ceph are only here as the occasional trader, preferring the coastal areas of course. That leaves the Dia. They are highly cooperative, patient and will sacrifice large numbers of themselves for the common good, the Dia common good. Excellent long term planners and not as internally competitive as the Ceph and certainly not the Dio or Hu. Being the smallest they are picked on the most, but I am not sure they are the least in terms of control and actions. Everything they do has a reason far beyond the apparent. I wonder if the two that Pu sent through Transfer reported in yet?

The Dia are well positioned too. Almost all of Tor's apprentices are Dia, but I bet not one assumes her position when she is gone. They will insist on a figurehead from another species and run things in the background. I am willing to bet that Dia are all over the place in Ap'el and Emess as well. This is their world, so I could not very well exclude them. Was it a mistake or will they save this experiment?

Pu takes off anyway. She will return shortly licking her lips whether or not she actually caught anything. Pride demands it. No one tells a Cat what to do.

"A little too nice. I want it to look like something we stumbled on and made use of. Rough up the edges some. Add some cracks, that sort of thing. When they come in, look as surprised as they are that this is happening. I will be the bully. Watch them carefully.

Pu comes back, see the highest area and immediately jumps up and goes to sleep.

"We are ready, the almighty hunter has returned." She ignores us. I catch a soft purr though. Everyone likes to be acknowledged.

I change my robe to add a slight shimmer, everyone else messes theirs up a bit to look like they have all traveled here on foot or paw, such as it is.

"Scatter some so I can place them among all of you. They are just waking up in their respective communities. Here goes."

The three arrive. Jobs is taking a piss and immediately covers himself. Jake jumps back to avoid getting wet, but fails some. *Good look of sur-*

prise Jake.

You set me up. Yep.

Next is Tor whom I have face outside the circle. She turns around and is immediately confronted with Pu's face next to hers. She jumps back, Pu sleeps through it. Or pretends to anyway. Oh, there is a yawn.

I push Gates in front of Jordon, who, naturally overacts.

"I am alive!" Raising his pseudo wings up to look bigger than he is.

"You're dead! I had you beheaded," Gates bellows. Excellent.

I rise from a sitting position and announce, "Good morning and welcome all. Please be comfortable. I see the Cat already is." They look at me and then to where I am looking and see Pu stretching and almost falling off her perch. Tor backs away, comes around and sits out of pouncing range.

"We are here today to decide what to do about a situation that has gotten to the danger point."

Gates grins and tosses a sphere in my direction. I immediately feel psiotic ability rising in her. She is a two definitely. The sphere is interesting. I feel a bit of tingle from it. A crude limiter, enough to limit her own signature. Yet another example of tech that they should not have yet. Even T5s don't get that far.

"That might work to hide your own abilities from us and your sensors, but is ineffective against me." I raise it into the air and vaporize it. I know, that sounds a bit violent, but sometimes a show of ability is the best method to get a point across.

"Most of you have met my assistants, also known as Travelers. There are some differences among us. Do not try any of the tricks you thought worked with them against me. You will regret it. I am not as patient."

"Another bully tactic." Gates sneers.

"You would know Enron Gates III, or shall I say the first, since there was never a first and second preceding you. We can do this the easy way or the hard way. I can call Enforcers in and level this area to start over. Do not doubt me. Or we can work together to solve this impasse. At this point I really don't care much." Gates sits. Good.

"Gates, at the surface I have easily enough evidence to send you to Hell. You would make a good Enforcer, if you survived. One, killing sentients not of your own species. Using sentients to kill their own kind does not get you out, since you gave the orders. Two, prevention of free movement. Third, illegal chemical use in the form of explosives. Any one of which would be enough. I could go on, but there is no point.

Understand this. I have just pointed out Gates' behavior, but I have enough on all three of you. None of you are going back to their own community. You are here to decide what happens to your community and

where you yourself will go from here. That is anywhere but back. Your leadership is over. Done.”

I give a moment to let that sink in.

“I do not believe you have the right.” Tor looking philosophical.

“And why is that?”

“You are not the ruler of us.”

“Ah, so what would you call the one who brought all of your ancestors here, set up all the communities and has been watching and guiding you ever since?”

“No one can live that long. We have been here since before remembering. You pretend to be a God?” They forget that fast?

“I am not a god. And you have only been here a couple of hundred years total. I just want get everyone back on course.”

“What would that be?”

“How much do you remember of the histories Jobs?”

“The Hu were kicked out of paradise because they sought the knowledge of the Gods. That is a myth, of course, but is what we are taught as small ones. Is that what you mean? And why am I here? I have done nothing wrong.”

“You and Tor set up Gates to take the fall, but I know your role in the attempt to kill Travelers by means of illegal explosives. I know about the sensors, the killing of sentients who do not conform, the prevention of immigrants from settling in Ap'el.”

“Interesting. He did all that? I never knew.”

“Ah, Tor, don't push it. It was your group that accumulated the knowledge by ANY means and then supplied it to both Ap'el and Emess. Using Ceph mirror writing to 'hide' it. Right. Any adult Ceph or one trained in Ceph can read it, including any scholar from any community. And what about the hidden materials in your deep archives? The psiotic sensors and limiters? Did you 'initiate' them into the secret knowledge?”

“You know about that huh? Oh well, can't blame me for trying.”

“Picked up some bad Hu thinking I see. Actually you have all been manipulated by other forces. That is not your fault. You are however, guilty of giving into your desires. These forces cannot make you do anything you did not want to do.” I notice Bernice looking at me quizzically. I really hope she did not know and that my suspicions are wrong.

“Why did you do it then? Why bring our ancestors here?”

“The Dia and Dio wanted to gain tech learning more quickly than they otherwise would have. Hu have a special knack to figuring things out. Especially if they are under pressure to do so. Hu went from your current level to people living on the moon and Mars in a little longer than you have been here.”

“I don't believe you. Hu are entertaining, but I have seen nothing to indicate they are creative or smart enough to find their way out of a ter-ratte hole.”

“No one walked in here and gave Tor a sensor or a limiter. I guarantee it. Someone had to figure it out from a small amount of knowledge. Tor didn't do it. She is smart, but more in the public relations sort of way. Have you been to her office? No one could work in that mess. A good gatherer of information, but not an inventor.”

“You are wrong. We did figure out the sensors. You are just biased towards your own kind.”

“Really. Then explain how they work please. I would like to know myself.”

“We figured them out by trial and error. It has taken generations. We first noticed at first that very thin gold foil with certain patterns of carbon on them would react when a Traveler was nearly in contact with one. We worked it out from there.”

“Gates, please tell me why the sensors work.”

“I just use them. I am not a tech.”

“Jobs, you want to give it go?”

He sneers at the others, “Everything that is alive has a special force in them. The simpler forms have less of this force and the more complex have a greater force. There is also a sort of color component to the force. If you design the pattern on the carbon or gold substrate, does not matter which you start with, to vibrate in sync with the color of the life force it will cause a slight movement when the live force is changed. The better you make the pattern, the finer the pattern is, the more movement you can achieve with the same level of force. Here, I will show you.” He pulls out a sphere out of his pocket.

“We have much better made ones in Ap'el than we give to the others.”

“Of course.” Tor and Gates do not look happy.

“If I place this one on the ground and back away, you will see the wings gradually fall.” We wait and they do. Self resetting. Nice.

“We have succeeded in making ones that can even sense the life force of any sentient.” He walks closer to the sphere, but does not touch it. The wings gradually rise again, but do not rise to the same height as before.

“I was holding it remember. The closer I am the higher they will go.” He picks up the sphere and they go up higher. He holds it out for everyone to see.

“Now when I go towards a Traveler. . . .” He goes towards Jake who is closest. The leaves fall suddenly. Jobs looks flustered.

“Jake, play fair.” The leaves rise until they touch at the top. “Thank you. Jobs you have just learned one more thing about us. We can hide

our life force when we want to.”

“Fascinating. That would be very useful.” He looks towards Gates, who ignores his stare.

“One last question on this topic. Who did you learn this from Jobs?”

“No one. We figured it out ourselves, starting with the Lynnucks observations. The problem was that their crude sensors were not sensitive enough to formulate a theory.”

“By we, you mean a team of Dio?”

“No, sorry, no Dio. They don't have the hands necessary to do ah, delicate work.”

“Dia then?”

“A few. We work well together.”

“Hu leadership and Dia workers?”

“No, we are pretty much equal. I am lead at the moment on the ah, limiter project and a Dia by the name of ah, !Kigt is the lead on the sensor project. They are related of course.”

“Who is the lead on the explosives project?”

He laughs, “That would be one hand Mike. You can probably guess why he is called that.”

“All males. No females?”

“Both. They are more interested in other projects. Each person drifts towards interest and abilities.”

“Any Ba?”

“We don't get many Ba, the one we have, an older female named Hiee is our best singer of songs. Beautiful voice.”

“You like that noise?” Gates asks. Jobs looks at her like she is a barbarian.

“You never told us why you did this to us.” Tor asks.

“I had this theory that if I could get the right intellectual types together I could accelerate the tech learning process.”

“I am curious what those types are.” Bernice asks.

I ask her a question first though, “Did you know about the Dia part in the conspiracy?”

She pauses then answers, “They do not trust me. I am Traveler. If you want to know if I think they were working on their own on this? Yes, I believe so. Dia usually work this way. They take lower positions to better observe and influence. Being small has advantages and disadvantages.” She does not see herself as Dia any more. That has to hurt. Am I Hu?

“You can probably guess by their recent history; the paranoid, the curious and the perfectionist. The three 'nerd' states. Of course individuals are usually some combination.”

Bernice responds, “Ah, the parnoid is the easiest, Emess. The other

two are obvious as well. Lynnucks is the curious and Ap'el is the perfectionist.”

“Correct.”

“Why those extremes? In classes we always tried to work towards a Triamid.”

“What's that?” Tor, the ever curious.

“Logic, survival, emotions and curiosity. If you balance those tendencies and abilities then you have a chance at a stable society. If one takes precedence over the others then you get problems. Sometimes you don't have a choice of course and then you have to hope it is temporary and you will eventually achieve balance again.”

“What gives you the right to play games with us?” Gates is fuming. Can't say that I blame her, but I really don't have the patience for it right now.

“Didn't we already have this discussion? By the way, Tor, please throw down your limiter please.” She makes what passes for a Dio smile and complies. I hold it up to examine and then dissolve it. Better made than the one Gates had. Interesting. Gates got the shaft.

“Well that certainly explains why you have no barriers at your community entrances. What raptor would have a chance? I assume you are practiced in its use. Gates I can see just used it as advantage in one on one combats for position and power. You however used it to protect your community.” She nods.

“Now your turn Jobs. Bring it out.”

He looks sheepish, “I would rather not. A bit embarrassing.”

“You are safe here. No one will be allowed to hurt you.”

“That is not the problem. With the limiter I am obviously at a disadvantage. Giving it up makes me stronger, not weaker.”

He is weaker than the others and does not want to admit it.

“This ability is not as common among the Hu as the Dio. I thought that I had chosen your ancestors well and the ability would not show itself. Obviously it has anyway. However, it is easily remedied.” I implant micro limiters in each. Both Tor and Gates show surprise, then Gates get upset again.

“Can it Gates. I can make it stronger and start weakening your life force if necessary.” She closes her mouth.

I then remove the limiter from Jobs pocket so that the others can see that I have it. Much smaller than the other's. Much better made.

“Saved the best made one for yourself I see. Very well done. A work of art in fact.” Honor is preserved. I dissolve it. He is only a one at best. “Just so you don't get any ideas, you will never find the limiters I implanted somewhere inside your bodies.”

“I have a question.” The great and wonderful Pu finally awakens. The three turn to see where the voice has come from.

“It is not that strange. I am a Traveler as well.” Pu sticks her nose up in the air.

“Oh Cat of the Traveler class, what is your question?”

She looks at our three suspects with curiosity and ask, “Why do you hate us so much? We have never harmed you. In fact we usually bring gifts and help. The people living in your communities are happy to see us. Well, maybe not Emess, they are afraid of most everything.”

“We know the legends. We know what you are. You are the Guardians of the 'thn. You have all the power, the immortal life spans, never have to work or toil. You have it all and you throw dregs our way.” Ah, so that is it.

“Jobs, how would you feel if Gates here was a million times stronger than she is now. She could dissolve your entire community, people and all in less than a day. She could travel to other settlements on this world and do the same. Would that make you happy?”

“Even if I had the same abilities I could not be everywhere at once. Soon all life would be gone. I am no saint. I would be tempted as well.”

“Jobs is right. We would not be able to handle it. There is a reason we wore the limiters. It was just too tempting. Apparently a temptation that Gates could not resist.”

“We knew of Gates even before today, that is true. She used her ability enough times for us and others to notice. Given even more power,” I look at her, “you could not resist. That is why we don't give everyone the ability. Very, very few are allowed, fewer still make it through the levels to what you see before you. Some, we fit with limiters such as what you have. Some go insane and have to be destroyed or they destroy themselves. Everyone of the Travelers here, at some point in their training, faced a crisis that could have killed them. For this reason, there are not many of us. For this reason we have been trying to find ways of bringing tech to you faster so you don't have to live in the poverty you do now. All of you are better off now than you were two generations ago. If things work out, your people will be much better two generations from now. It takes time however. We can't just build up a society over night.”

“Don't forget the others out there.”

“You think of us as evil, of withholding from you. We, all of us here, have met forces who would not think twice about consuming you as a snack. I am not talking raptors. Raptors are stink bugs compared to these others. I personally witnessed the conversion of a force so evil it threatened to destroy our entire universe. Two beings gave their lives to neutralize this being. One of them a high level 'thn. I met the Mother creature

you know from legends. She was very real. Your legends are not myths or stories to scare the young, it all really happened.”

“You are being modest honored one. You were the very one who devised the means to bring down Mother.”

“I was part of the team. I could not and did not do it alone.”

“You are the A'mi?”

“My name is Aimee, yes.”

“So, what happens to us, to our Corpses?” I hate that word for a community. What was I thinking?

“Gates, you have shown no evidence of repentance or any good works that I can see. I'm sorry.” The others upon hearing this all immediately look away from her towards the outside of the circle. There is no honor in witnessing a passage. Three Enforcers arrive and carry her away. The smell of sulfur and fire lingers afterwards. I turn back around. Jobs and Tor are on their knees.

“They are real.”

“Everything we have said is real. Why doubt their existence?”

I motion for the others to sit.

“So, what do we do. Emess is a real mess and will need new leadership. I would rather it not be by combat to find the next biggest bully.”

“Request permission to dissolve the dungeons.” Oz of course.

“Get the explosives and other sentients out first. Proceed.”

“I would like to dissolve the castle above.” Pu.

“I would like to help.” Jordan.

“Proceed.”

I look towards Jake and Bernice.

“My favorite was Lynnuks. I will dissolve their archives and the wall of knowledge. This won't remove what is in their heads. They can always record much of it again.”

“Vigilance will be required. I understand. Proceed.”

“Well, my turn. Ap'el.” Bernice turns to Jobs, “I am sorry.”

“I understand. It's all right. Just do it quick.”

“Their knowledge and effort was well dispersed. I have been scanning all morning and I am still finding material. It may be that we will have to abandon the city.”

“Yes, that is sad. Where do you suggest the sentients go?”

“I would like to make a recommendation.” Jobs. I am surprised.

“I would like to recommend that we, the sentients of Ap'el, leave and join the others in Emess to rebuild their community. Many will resist, but seeing Ap'el start to dissolve should be enough incentive.”

“Actually Emess has enough room for Lynnuks as well. Being closer to the farms and herds would make more sense.” Tor.

“There is a much higher raptor concentration near Emess and you won't have your abilities.” Bernice.

Tor looks at Jobs who nods, “We both hereby resign from any positions of leadership, ever. I believe you can easily exchange our current clothing for something simpler. We will be simple penitents preaching the Holy Way.” A pseudo religion based on the tenets of no pollution, population control and non violence.

“But not here. I recommend a transfer. That way no friends will help them.”

“Or harm them. Quite a few are going to be upset about leaving their paradise. Emess is anything but.”

“Please, we are not that limited.” Bernice smiles. Still looks funny to me on a beak.

“Go on please.” I am curious what she has thought up.

“Simple really. We make them male Dia. Males have no power in the Dia community. They can still be penitents. No one will recognize them either. They can say they were witnesses to all that happened here today.”

“And what happened to Jobs and Tor?”

“They went to Hell of course. It will seem that way at first anyway. After they get used to it, it will not be so bad. Dia males are not well placed in their culture, but not abused either. Actually being penitents will get them out of the worst of it.”

“You both actively participated in attempts to kill Travelers. That alone is enough to be sent to Hell. Ap'el actively executed sentients. I suspect that Lynnucks took some shortcuts as well. We can continue this investigation much longer if necessary to find out.”

“No need. I agree. Just hope it won't hurt much.”

“I agree too.”

“Please lie down.” I see Oz and Pu are nearly done.

“Aimee, we have company.” I look up. A 'thn. Shit, now what? Pr'thn. She usually hangs near Silver. Well, sometimes.

“Pr'thn, welcome.”

Emergency. Luna City immediately.

“Pr'thn help us here. We need two Dia male bodies to transfer them to.”

No problem. Two bodies appear. Identical. I smile and laugh.

“What's so funny?”

“You will see. Nothing bad. Ready?”

I nod to Bernice who takes Jobs.

“Close your eyes. It is easier that way.”

“No, I want to see. I need to see.”

I nod to Bernice again. We begin. Jobs closes his eyes immediately,

Tor does not. Ah, the curious, just can't resist.

“Ahmsi! ghit!”

“You will need to learn to speak again. Wait a moment. Lie still.” I transfer the Dia language ability. *Give him a lisp Bernice. I don't want them perfect.*

Understood. They will be more effective with a handicap.

Precisely.

“Thiss iss weerd.” They have sat up and are looking at each other and their now dead bodies.

Do we give them a mirror or wait?

I vote for wait. So much more fun.

“Okay, off you two. I now pronounce you Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum.”

“Mutt and Jeff would have been my choice. Easier to remember.”

“Penitents have renounced names.”

“Oh yeah, right. I knew that.” Did, but it was more fun to come up with silly names.

“Look we know that B and J here are supposed to go to you know where. We can take it from here until you return. Pr'thn looks like she has to pee.” She is moving up and down rather rapidly.

Luna City

I am a gentle being, why is everyone afraid of me? I have been here three years and yet every time I go into the norm section people move away from me. I am just glad most elected to move to Mars hundreds of years ago. Maybe I can get Mars as my next assignment. Terraforming is going well there. There are entire valleys in the low regions that have plants now. Norms only have to wear skin suits and a microcompressor to breathe.

Besides the gravity here is annoying. I am forever bumping my head on the ceilings. Sleeping is easier, too bad I don't sleep. Food is boring. I will have to remember to ask people to bring more seeds up. There is no danger of cross contamination here. This is not earth. Actually the ecology is probably even more tight here.

Enough on this program. I need to clear my head. I need to run!

I reach for the com. TP would be faster, but this lets the norms in on what is going on and they get less freaked by us.

"Spider, up for a run?"

"Always, see you in five."

I close down all the open files I am working on. Mother taught me well. Never leave a work station open. You never know who will be sitting there next. Using Di words means no cracking program is ever going to guess my passwords, but it is good practice.

"Ready to go?" Spider appears behind me.

"Ravi going to be okay without you?"

"We are not going to the other side of the moon are we?"

"Just a quarter of the way." He smiles. We have this banter often.

"He'll live." They are partners. I have to be careful not to upset that. I will be gone soon anyway.

We DS through the nearest wall. Too bad if any norms see us. I insisted on working space that was above ground level. I can't stand being cooped up way below ground. I know the rad level is lower there, but I don't suffer from it, so let me be. Meant I got a much larger space too. They had long ago abandoned the upper levels. All it took was a few mutated kids to show up and a breakdown in the class system where the richer or more powerful you were the lower a level you could live on. Exact opposite of most communities.

No sound in a vacuum so we have to use TP or com. Com everyone hears, so TP is preferred unless we see something we need to report. I still have my unit on of course, otherwise they would not be able to reach us.

We run past the base of the ultra large array telescopes. This was the biggest of the old telescopes. Now we have a much larger one at the L5 Lagrange point. The smaller ground based array we use for high speed laser communications between us and the L5. No one actually lives at the L5. No need. Being at one sixth is punishment enough, weightless would be worse. The large array is made up of seven two kilometer spinning disk telescopes. Spin faster and get shorter focal lengths and a more wide angle image. Spin slower and get longer focal length and more magnification. We can tune each separately or sync them all together for greater light gathering for night ops. Sweet setup.

Over the next ridge is the Alpha site. The first moon base and precursor to Luna City. Long ago gutted and abandoned. We often go there to get some alone time. Being cooped up in a tin can means you can never be alone. Running helps a lot. Spider has been running these hills for a very long time. There is a rut carved for the path we follow.

We get to the top of the ridge and make our way down to the site. On the outside it looks like no one has been here for a very long time. The trail that Spider has made runs past it a few hundred meters out. We are not supposed to disturb the dead that are buried there. Oh please. We DS to the largest tower. Long ago Spider and Ravi had sealed the tower and left a psiotic power supply to keep it comfortable. Since no one could admit to having been here, it is not disturbed.

“Someone else has been here recently. I left tattletales this time. May have to find another site soon. Further out would be nice.”

“You could DS anywhere on the rock, why bother running to it?”

“I like to run and it really doesn't matter where I go. Still, it is best to stay within com distance. That does not leave many options. If I build a new structure, it will be noticed. Like you, I prefer above ground. Old school I guess. I never want to be associated with the old leaders and on principle I won't live in the lower levels. Besides, it is easier to get out when above ground.”

“You are being silly Spider.”

“You are incredible on code Simone. How did you learn to code like that?”

“Mother. Not fun. Hell would have been my first choice.”

“Whatever she did it worked. By your age I didn't know that there were any Dio programmers back then.”

“I am the first. I call Aimee mother. Not my real mother of course. She is long dead. She had a good life. Lived long enough to see far more than any Dio from before her.”

“Yeah, my parents are long gone too. Everyone I knew except Ravi of course.”

“You did not choose to raise any others?”

“Never a need. We get lots of TK visitors. If anything happened, others would fill in. Having generations means we get more variety. It gets rather boring here, at least I can say the people change.”

“How can you get bored having the first look at every new earth?”

“We just maintain the equipment. We have to wait for the analysis just like everyone else. Having you here has been the first time all of us have had first peek. When everyone moved to Mars, the scientists moved too.”

“But Mars is often on the other side of the solar system.”

“The people here rotate through so no one has to put up with us too much.”

“You ever get to Mars?”

“Sure, like it better here. This is where I grew up. Nothing beats watching an earth rise. Besides everything is the wrong color on Mars.”

“I would imagine your shape is not good at two times gravity either.”

“I use TK to cheat of course. Here I am master, there I am just a freak. You should hear the stories they tell. Little kids are afraid of me when I visit.”

“You too. I noticed the same. I will let it be known that more TKs need to visit to expose them to some diversity.”

“When do you think Aimee will be done?”

“Could be years. Nerdvilla is her primary. This was just a special request because Enterprise showed up while Barbara and company were off world and Hashra was not to be disturbed. Don't know what that was about.”

“Barb is working with the Diu I heard. Closest thing to a whale the E65C/D has I guess. Wonder why she didn't just go for the E1 whales?”

“No challenge there. Haven't you noticed we get bored too? Spend a couple of million years with a group . . .”

“That would do it.” He laughs.

“I need to get back. I promised I would not goof off on this one.”

“Bet you never do.”

“You would be right. Just their way of saying this one is important. 13x13 arrays at every point can really twist your brain though.”

“Not something I would try.”

“I would not attempt to tweak the mechs on an ultra array every time the moon quakes, so we are even.”

“Fair enough. Go on. I want to stay here a bit. Ravi will know to come get me if anything comes up.”

Enterprise followed the curves of the two forbidden zones, E0 and E65A. Must be strange for Silver to be in two places at once. Knowing

that a simple jump away and you would meet yourself from twenty five million years ago. Weird. Of course the 'thn would be all over him and he doesn't seem to care. I wondered why they never investigated the other worlds and I had to laugh when he told me. They were already locked out of them. We had been there first. What we are doing right now prevents them from visiting those worlds later. Round and round.

Silver and Rooi took turns at the helm of the Enterprise. They had the easiest time navigating ultra 'thn space. I have a hard enough time with all this processing power behind me. Even still they had to send them out several times to collect missing essential data.

I feel a hand at my back. I smell her.

“What are you doing back so soon? I did not expect you until we had an answer.” Mother looks confused.

“I don't understand. I thought that was why I was called back.”

“I didn't. I was just with Spider and he said nothing.”

“Pr'thn got me. Said it was an emergency. You would have thought her pants were on fire she was so impatient.” Pants?

“I didn't even know she was around. I have not seen her in years.”

“Strange. Wonder what is going on?”

The monitor beeps. “We have an answer!?! I did not expect anything for weeks. How did Pr'thn know?”

“That is not exactly ready for use dear.”

“I still have to run it through the translators. Only take a moment.” I have this routine already done and ready to go. I pass the output from the search package to the vector translator I wrote to give us an answer in our space frame. Froth space that is. The basic idea came from the observation that different earths forthed at different times. Difference indicates a vector. I had no idea when this started that it would be in 169 dimension space. That means to get enough accuracy to pin this down we needed a lot of data.

The hardest part was finding out when the last froth event happened at each location. E0/1 was the most recent event for earth. All the other earths were earlier. We know the history of our own worlds. We could grab a local where sentients existed, take them to the nearest split and ask them what was different. The idea was to find event zero. Problem was, is that except for TKs they don't live long enough.

Our next best method was to leave earth. The froth affected more than earth, so find out when it happened elsewhere. Silver's group before meeting Rooi always assumed that the froth event was local, maybe out to a few tens of light years at most. No idea that it was actually regular and extended much much further. That was another clue, it was not exactly regular, just close. Drove us all nuts. Dimensional space is not the

same as 3D space.

Finally Rooi solved the puzzle with her method of folding cerams in dimensional space. She showed us how something can be right next to something else even when far away. Anyway, it works out when crunched. Just don't ask me to do it in my head.

The universe is a big place. They had to go out far enough and determine time of last froth event from locals. They could have gone to the Regional Center and not bothered with the Enterprise, but we were all suspicious of all things 'thn and they run the center. Now that I have heard of Pr'thn's reaction I am inclined to believe we did the right thing. They would have purposely mislead us.

"Pr'thn thinks there is something wrong. We need to find out what. I have the coordinates. Not surprising it is a froth from the Hell series. We never would have found it, as there was no one to interview and the landscape looks the same on all but Hell itself. No one been able to figure that one out.

I look again at the answer, "That's weird. Hell and this world are linked."

"We need to get this moving, contact Spider and Ravi and get the array redirected."

"No can do."

"Sorry, I did not wait and TPD them."

Ravi is next to Spider and explains, "Scientists are booked on that thing for hundreds of years. Bump one and their whole life flashes before their eyes. Have to find some other way."

"Rooi and Silver would know what to do."

"They just left, you know that. Won't be back for years and definitely out of range."

"Has anyone seen Pr'thn?" We all shake our heads. "I think I know where she went. We may not be able to get to them, but I bet she knows how."

"A twelve could probably do it. They would tap into the 'THN and someone would have spotted them."

"Yeah. That means we don't have much time before we are severely over powered."

"I am not willing to just show up without inspection. Pr'thn got me because of something she perceived as dangerous. Very dangerous. I still want to live a bit yet."

"So why is it dangerous? Don't forget the 'thn are afraid of their own shadows."

"True. Who would go to all this trouble?"

"Who? You think there is a sentient behind this?"

“Think about it, who do the 'thn fear more than anything else in existence?”

“Rooi and Silver?”

“Har, har, besides them?”

“I don't know.”

“Simone, where did you go to school?”

I look up at mother, “Home. I was schooled by the core. How could it have been better than them?”

“Maybe they knew more when we got trained. The First Ones of course.” Aimee pats Ravi on his back.

“But we are hardly the center of the universe. Mei could tell you that, she has been to the edge.”

“Who knew where the center would be fourteen billion years ago? They made a random guess.”

“We are not at the edge either.”

“Now if you did not want to be found you can do two things, hide really well and be very dangerous, so no one lives to tell about it if they do find you.”

“Why are we doing this?” I have got three Hu surrounding me and they are proposing suicide.

“Good question. Basically, we monkeys suffer from Cat syndrome as well.”

“And we know what happened to the kitty.”

“He ended up a pilot on the first earth ship to visit the rest of the universe.”

“This danger is much closer to home. Who would have known.”

“Where was the black 'thn found again? Doesn't it surprise you that both locations are so close to each other? Coincidence? I don't think so.”

“They might literally be right on top of each other. That narrows the search. We go to E1 where the sphere was found.”

“No way I am going in without a thorough search from a good distance away. IF, this is the First Ones and they don't want to be found, this place could be booby trapped up the wazu.”

“I didn't know you knew so much Hu slang Simone.”

“My fault. Though I grew up in Chinatown I did watch a lot of vid while I was programming. Especially the old stuff, it was practically free. She must have gotten it from me.”

“You weren't the only one. I watched a lot when we were archiving E1. They used to tease me a lot for not understanding it. Little did they know that my superior memory would get them in the end.”

“Good girl! I didn't know that.”

“A daughter has to keep some secrets.”

“Wonder what Grass did.”

“I’ll never tell.” I zip my mouth shut. We all laugh.

“We can’t use The Array, but how long would it take to make our own? Put it in geosync above our suspected location and watch for a bit.”

“And I know who just got posted to Farpoint, Jake and Bernice. They would jump on this one just for some excitement.”

“I forgot all about it. How did it go in Nerdvilla?”

“Much better than I thought it would. Only had to send one to Hell. Of course the other two are now penitent Dia twins.”

“There are no twins with Dias. Not possible.”

“Bernice knew that when she proposed it.”

“Neat. Would be fun to hear their life story in twenty years.”

“Indeed.”

“Focus you two. Problem. Spider and I have to stay here to take care of problems. How are we going to do that if we are off playing lookie-loo?”

“I want to know where Hashra and Mei are. This was their project. We should not even be here. We definitely should not be pursuing it.”

“The problem is, is that Pr’thn went for help. We may only have moments. A boat load of ‘thn could cover up a lot.”

“That gives me an idea.” I make data cubes of all that we have found.

“Good thinking dear. First rule of data.”

“What’s that?”

“Back up and then backup again.”

“There is enough for everyone. Hide them where other TKs can find them.”

“We are on the moon. As far as we know this is the only one occupied.”

“Two, E0 has em too. Then we had better get to one of the earths.”

“Fine, I will stay here. I really don’t want to deal with earth gravity anyway.”

“We don’t need you on earth, just help us make the array, then you can come back here. Surely the norms can handle it till then.”

“Make the array above E1. That is close enough to get back here pretty quick. We will move it to the vector coordinates ourselves.”

“Sounds like a plan, let’s do it.”

“We will have to make some adjustments. We need monitors, some serious computer muscle and the proper software.”

“You have two nerds with you. Software is not a concern. Supplies we can get from New Hope. We can make the whole thing there and then move it after you leave.”

“That makes sense. You can turn the rotation on the station down so

we feel comfortable.” Glad I was born on a heavy world. These gray walls are getting to me.

The trip itself took nearly a day. We were not being lazy. Three TK8s can push it. The hardest part and what slowed us down was pushing the mass we needed. Had to boost that to orbit in chunks and then move that ahead of us to earth without loosing it in the ocean.

We went ahead and made the array we needed in route. There were four of us, so we made four dishes following Spider's lead. Ravi was the one who understood the control circuitry. We duped most of that before we left and then made the other three copies en route as well. Being closer to earth also meant it did not need to be as large. Being close to New Hope also meant we did not have to go far to find a comfortable rest location while waiting for data to be collected.

“This is not going to work.”

“What do you mean? We just spent several days setting this up.”

“We need to go back. Four eights are not even a defense against a single 'thn. We are talking about the First Ones here.”

“Why are you so sure they are hostile? Shy doesn't mean nasty. You have been with your Emess ones too long. I am not saying we pop into their living room and take over, but surely being in orbit is not a threat.”

“I would say anywhere a twelve can reach would be a threat. What history the 'thn have told us suggests they don't like the 'thn much.”

“Can't be sure of that. So a nine can reach a million clicks. How far is the moon away?”

“Less than that I think.”

“We're screwed. Sounds like it won't matter. Who creates something stronger than themselves? A Thirteen could reach us on Mars. Can't see much from there even with a ten click wide reflector.” Actually you could see quite a bit with the right wave correction algorithms.

“Then Simone and I take it from here. If we don't check in by the time someone else shows up let them know what happened. You have the coordinates. Seal the place off and prevent anyone else from trying. Oh and let Ozi, Pu and Jordon know. Not been a good day.”

Do I have a say in this?

No.

“The array will collect information for you. You can stay here while it collects. We can even string a com between so you need never enter their space.”

“I like that idea mom.” I emphasize the mom part. I'm just a young lizard who aspires to be a dragon. Put me in front of a term, this field work stuff is raptor dung.

“Okay, we try it. How long will it take?”

“Just a few minutes.” Ravi whispers, “We did it all the time to avoid having to stay in the com tower. Boring place.”

“And I ran marathons in a skin suit. We both did a lot of stupid things back then. Let's do this right Ravi. Lives could be at stake.”

They get to work with Aimee watching every move. I spend my time looking out the view port. Earth is a pretty world. Right there is where Nerdvilla as the other call it is coming into view.

“Let's check this out by pointing at someplace we do know.”

“Like your study site?”

“Sure, makes sense. You know it well. Last thing we need is so poke a hole into some unknown parallel universe.”

“That's what we are doing isn't it?”

“Aimee, your kid is no fun.”

“Simone, be fun dear.” I am confused. Hu!

“We are ready for the test. Sit here please. I rigged up four terms. You can combine the four or separate them. We are not in sync orbit, so you will have to wait for them to come around. What are the coordinates for Nerdvilla?”

I type them in. These keyboards were designed for a Dia. Too small, even for me. Can't imagine what a full size Dio would do here.

“Setting up the field. Pushing the bubble.” The scene on the monitors changes.”

“No longer over the same spot.”

“Very rare that it is the same time of day on two froth sites. If you are not patient in this work you don't last a hundred years.” Another Hu joke right? At least my study site was multi sentient. I hope this does not take long. I don't want to miss another mating season. Not that I participate, but I do like looking over the stock when they come in from the range. How do the Dia handle their males being around all the time? Ugh! I wonder how far they got this year?

Coming up on Nerdvilla. West coast of Australia right?

“Yeah, I needed isolation in case it went wrong.”

“Close call apparently.”

“Real close.” One more Hu cliché and I puuck, aaagh! Another one! I need to spend time in the wild again.

“Up the mag dear.” I zoom in on Emess.

“Looks like they have finished the removal of the castle. Good. Now move over to Ap'el and Lynnucks.”

“I will reduce the mag to get them both into view.” Here is where I feel comfortable, in front of a term. The parabolic is slightly out. Full light means we don't need the gather of all four. I can use the fourth out of focus to adjust the others. I tweak the controls and bring it into better

focus and add the atmospheric compensators.

“Excellent. The main structures are gone. Whoa, they really hid a lot underneath. That goes deep. Imagine doing all that in three years. Jake and Bernice need to go back to school if they missed that much.”

“A simple limiter field you were not expecting to find would be enough. Didn't you say they had working models?”

“You're right. That would explain it. Well, I guess it is my own fault for packing the communities with the brightest. You know, I am actually proud of them.”

“You should be Aimee. A lot of people tapped for expeditions came from your incubator.”

“Thanks Spider.” There is a tear in her eye. I look away.

She places a hand on my shoulder, such as we have. “We can go now. I have seen enough. Let's do it. That means I want you two well out of here.”

“Simone knows how to dial in the coordinates. Good luck.” A happy thought. Ravi clicks his fingers when they pop out. That is so not regulation. Home schoolers are not so rebellious apparently.

A beep from the term. I see their faces waving at us. I signal confirmation.

“They are back under cover.”

“Show offs. Must have done this route a million times.”

“I would like a few moments to kiss my life goodbye.”

“Aren't we being melodramatic? How many worlds have we investigated now? Hundreds at least. Not one was a threat to a TK above a three.”

“And we have always known that there was a possibility of eventually finding one where they were ahead of us.”

“Unlikely. No, I am not being superior. We know from visiting the Galactic Center that sentience is not a survival trait. More an aberration. The odds of any one world being sentient at any given time is low. One being high tech is even lower. Out of the hundreds of living worlds we have been to we now have four species of Di, one Ba, Pi and the Pink.”

“Om on every living world and a sentient fungus on most of those, not to mention the magmotics on every one.”

“They consider us a surface infestation. I wonder why we have never found a world they have 'redone'?”

“Scary thought. E0/1 were the only ones who almost annoyed them enough. Silver says we came really close. Part of the reason we got everyone off. Things appear to have calmed down. Even Yellowstone has subsided. Who would have guessed.”

“Okay. Let's go. No one lives forever.”

“Thanks.”

I retrieve the array from over Nerdvilla and run a system check. Everything is fine. I type in the coordinates from the vector analysis.

“Go ahead.” I nod and hit enter. The array disappears. It takes a moment for the laser com to engage. A second microbubble has to be set up. Thank you Rooi.

“Looks like we are over Russia. It will be forty minutes before we are over the site.”

“Lots of vegetation. No sign of cities. Definitely different the rest of the Hell series. We never would have found this one on our own.”

“Wait, remember this world is a mirror world. Do we have the right one?”

“They should be matched in rotation. Switch it to the twin. See if it is any different.”

I type in the change. This time it will be easier not to bring the array back. Tricky though. The DS translators are on the array itself or we would have no choice. However, make a wrong move and we loose contact forever. We would have to go back to the moon for more mass to build another array.

“Three, two, one, zero.” The image flickers, goes black, and then nothing.

“Shit.”

“Wait. These things are not . . .”

“Picture!” I zoom out.

“God, what a mess,” I hear Aimee say. It is a mess. Everything looks twisted and distorted. Even the continents are not in the right place.

“Guess some things are hard even for them.”

“Apparently. This is only the second mirror world we have found. Coincidence? I don't think so.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Rooi was the one who made it possible for the 'THN to survive the next cycle. She was on that world.”

“Her twin you mean. Or one of them. Though it might not have been her.”

“You don't believe that. How else could it have been? Someone like her anyway. I wonder if there was another black 'thn on it.”

“What else could have caused that kind of destruction? My guess is she tried the inversion right there instead of waiting until she got to end times like our Rooi did.”

“Silver influenced her here.”

“Yeah, I think the same. There is only one Silver, thank goodness.”
Amen.

“Do we switch back?”

“Let's stay until we are over the site. I want to know what's here too. I don't trust them.”

“Neither do I.”

Waiting is the hardest part. I record all that we find. If something were to happen . . . Mom says that I am too negative, but I have been right too many times. I find it better to be prepared. I recruited Jake and Bernice and they have done well, but they should have seen through the deception at Ap'el and Lynnuks. They were there three years! How could they have missed it? They were tech twos. Below us is the work of tech tens at least. If twos can fool us, what can tens do?

“Only a few more minutes. Atmosphere is mostly volcanic products, methane, sulfur oxides, carbon oxides. Stinky, nasty and hot.”

“Any idea when it churned? The surface is solid. You can see that it was not. Infrared says the surface matches the atmosphere pretty closely. Not recent anyway.”

Something about the equations is bugging me.

“Maybe by comparing the isotope ratios with the twin.”

“Mother, why is we are here?”

“The First Ones dear. Why else?”

“There were no cities, nothing larger than an insect on what we have seen so far. They are not here. Maybe they were, but no longer. How were we lead here? How did we find this place?”

“It started with an analysis of the froth. All of the earths we have visited appeared to have frothed at a different times.”

“But on a regular cycle.”

“Variations. Not always the same length of time between events.”

“Dimensional space is not so easy to dismiss. What is the average length of time?”

“That would be meaningless.” I tap into the term using the copy of the database that I brought with me.

“Thirty five point seven seven seven oh six million years.”

“What are you thinking?”

“How long ago was the oldest froth event found.”

She types into her term from her copy of the database. I write something on my term and back away from it.

“An earth! Farpoint found it.” I point to my term. She looks over.

“You knew?”

“I guessed. This is not a mirror world. This IS the same world.”

“It will take thirty five point seven seven seven oh six million years minus the five hundred and sixty two years since E0/1 frothed, then this world will be green and the green one will be fluid. An oscillation.”

“We may be off a bit depending on when the froth started from what we see below us. Looks like a bit. We may in fact be due for another pass soon.”

“Not for a few more thousand years. Why isn't this one green yet?”

“It won't be until just before. Something down there DSs what they need over. Too little time for evolution or even a replanting. Even a few nines could do it now that we know about the bubble. Imagine what they know.”

“That means we are probably safe on this side of the oscillation and there may be something on the other one we may not want to mess with alone.”

“Finally you are coming to your senses. We take back what we have learned and wait for the others. Too big for us.”

“I think you are right Simone. What do we do with the array?”

“Ordinarily I would say leave it, but on the off hand chance they do watch we need to move it, only not back here. Someplace random. We make another if we need it.”

“Do it.” I type in the commands and the terms go black. I collapse the microbubble by making another one around it and sending both into random space. They will both decay with time, especially with no matter going through them. I hate to leave something that dangerous laying around, hopefully it will not cause any harm.

“Do we scrub these storage units too?”

“Unlikely they can read our code any more than we could read theirs.”

“They can read someone's mind though.”

“Simone, you are starting to scare me and I thought I was the one being cautious. Okay, scrub it.”

I remove the physical storage cube, dissolve it and replace it with a fresh one. She nods.

“Let's get. This place is starting to give me the creeps.” I nod.

Back on the moon we check in with Spider and Ravi who are back to their normal tasks at the array center.

“Find anything?”

“Sort of. Found enough to be scared off. Curiosity is not worth dying for.”

“You sure you are not part Dia?”

“Nope, totally different lineages. Um, at least a hundred and fifty million years of separation.”

“I was teasing Simone.” Right. I feign disinterest.

“Anybody show up?”

“Been quiet. Not even a 'thn, though they are normally pretty rare.”

Makes the locals weird when they do.”

“I had not heard of that. How come?”

“The norms feel they are being spied on. Ever try and teach a 'thn to knock?”

“Purring was hard enough,” Aimee adds and we laugh.

“We are almost certain that we have the First One's world. I am still not believing it is in the earth froth. Trillions of trillions of stars, why here?”

“Why Rooi and the black 'thn? Did you see the site?”

“Did not get that far. We have a theory about these being twin worlds at opposite ends of the froth event. They are linked.”

“Wait, there are two of them?”

“I thought that was already known. What you did not know was that one was recently molten, or at least a lot of volcanic flow. The second is a green world, fairly normal looking. No evidence of cities on either, though I would not expect any on the dry one.”

“No oceans at all?”

“None that we saw. Atmosphere is toxic too. Green one is fine as far as we know.”

“What's the next step?”

“Wait for the others. There was a reason Pr'thn went into hyperparanoia. She is a nine, almost a ten. If this place scares her enough to leave town I want more people involved before trying anything.”

“You did at least leave the array in place. We can probably hook up access from here.” Ravi starts typing in commands before I can answer.

“You won't find it. I set it on a random bubble destination. Even I don't know where it is. We lost contact as soon as it bubbled.”

“Ookay. We are getting freaked here. Do you think we need to evacuate?” Spider looks at me obviously frightened.

“I hope not.”

“I don't think we will have any warning anyway.” Thanks mom.

Farpoint

“This place is a dump.” A week of orientation does not prepare you for the actual arrival.

“Now, now Bernice. You knew it was not a luxury post.” Though I thought it would be better than this. Doesn't an orderly nature go along with good science?

“Emess was better than here. They are, what do you call it, ah, priggs?”

“Pigs is the term I think you mean. A relative of Hu known for messy habits. Another analogy would be a rat's nest.”

“That I can relate to, they are clean by comparison.” I have to agree.

“Do I know you two?”

“New arrivals. I am Bernice and he is Jake.”

“Welcome.” He then turns and ignores us, going back to his work.

“I had heard they were a bit introverted. He did not look either of us in the eye.” I whisper to Bernice.

“Rude too.”

I do a quick scan, “I am not sensing TK, so either there are none or they hide it out of courtesy.”

“Courtesy does not strike me as something they are aware of. They do know about TK?”

“Of course. They have to take readings on all worlds. Every living thing they find is cataloged.”

“It will be nice to be on a survey team where there are no known sentients for a change. At least you can know what to expect.”

“Even a beetle can be deceptive Bernice. Let's go find quarters.”

An alarm sounds. Lights flash overhead.

“Off world activation. Incoming wormhole.”

“Wormhole? What's that?”

“No idea.” People rush past us. “Let's follow. Maybe once we meet the others we can get an idea of what we are supposed to do.”

“We are going back the way we came.”

“Excuse me.” A Dia with a cart rushes past. Lot of small cages on board.

When we get back to the transfer station there is no one there.

“Where did they go?” I scan as I am sure Bernice is also.

“They are next door.” We exit and make our way around to the next large room over.

“Barrier. We must have taken a wrong turn.”

“Too many people to phase through without being noticed.”

We walk back down the corridor and find where we missed it. Large bulk head doors in this section. Now sentients are going in the opposite direction. Lots of containers wrapped in biohaz bags. How quaint. Why didn't they just zap everything in the room.

“Sealed shut. I scan only a standard bubble chamber.”

“But with a whole lot of support equipment.”

“I am guessing we came in on the 'safe' transfer station and this is the working one or the Search chamber, for the yet to be verified worlds.”

“Makes sense. I hope to spend a lot of time here.”

“I hope to spend a lot of time not here.” I laugh.

“Oh, I don't know. Scans like it is the cleanest place at the station.”

“Hm, protocols would demand that. Last thing we need is a plague of anything.”

“We have been lucky so far, but it is only a matter of time. Remember Nerdvilla. One little seed got through and now there are two communities gone.”

“Hope we were not the ones. Timing fits.”

“As do hundreds of transfers. Possix is the major hub for the continent.”

“Long walk.”

“Let's find some bird seed.” Cute. Should never have said anything about her beak.

We make our way to the kitchen. No one has done any dishes in eight days at least.

“Close the door before I explode.” Bernice is pissed. I am a little more tolerant, but I do as asked. Instantly everything is clean and put away. Of course the wind from dissolving the food scraps blows the doors open. A Dia pokes her head in.

“Who are you two?”

“Newbies.”

“What happened in here?”

“What do you mean?”

“It's clean.”

“Isn't that the way a kitchen should be? What's the problem?” Bernice is being sarcastic.

“I suppose. Never been tried. Okay if I get something to eat?”

Bernice says nothing, I shrug. She comes in and pokes around.

“Weird, everything is laid out in a logical manner. I had no idea that this would work in a food area.” She gets something. Looks like something really disgusting. Never got used to eating insects. Bernice is watching her like a raptor zeroing in on a prey item. She does not seem to notice. Guess the mess was caused by others.

“Hungry?” I ask her.

“No appetite. Let's find our quarters.”

As we leave two Dio in uniforms go into the kitchen. They are carrying pads held out in front of them. Strange. Well, we don't know the routine here yet.

“I am surprised that security is not tighter.”

“Why? It is not on the normal transfer station maps. No one would get here who does not belong.”

“I suppose. Looks like this is the place.”

“How can you tell? Is it the sens running around naked between the freshers and the sleeping areas?”

“Looks to be as bad as the kitchen Bernice.”

“Oh really?” Maybe we should take the next transfer out of here. She is going to drive me nuts before even a day is gone.

We find an empty room, I think. Lots of old clothing and dilapidated mattresses. The door shuts.

“The air pressure Bernice.” A bubble opens, the stuff disappears, the pressure going out the bubble instead of blowing the door off.

There is a knock at the door. I open it to find the two Dio we saw earlier waiting outside with those pads.

“May we help you?” They look past us in disbelief. I would imagine an empty room would be surprising to them.

!!May I ask what you are doing in here?!!

I answer, !!Just needed a little privacy to discuss a personal problem.!!

He pauses checking his pad. Whacks it a few times.

!!Have you seen two Guardians who were to have arrived on the last transfer?!!

!!Last transfer was in the isolated area. Surely they would not have come in there?!!

He looks at his partner. Ah, TK1s at least. They converse via TP. I don't eavesdrop and wait.

!!Sorry, the transfer before that.!!

!!We were the only two who came in on that transfer.!! Let them figure it out. We have not said anything untrue.

!!Sorry to have troubled you.!! They turn and leave.

“Okay, they are stupid as well as messy.”

“We may have to make some changes.”

“Definitely. I will key in a whole station meeting for two eighths from now. It would be best if we introduced ourselves.”

“Two eighths is not much time for an initial inspection.”

“I suspect it will take no more than one eighth. We are not in Ap'el

any more.”

“Miss it already?” She walks out in a snit. I close the door gently behind me and add a TK lock. I feel several bursts of TK. No point of hiding now. It was not my idea to switch into norm clothing. I make myself a robe and switch to that. The next couple of sens notice the difference and come to attention.

I find the two Dio still looking for us and tap one on the shoulder. He turns to look at me in the robe and comes to attention immediately.

!!You said you were not the Guardians, Sir!!

“No, I did not say that. I said we were the only two who came in on the transfer and that I had not seen two Guardians. Ever try to see yourself without a mirror?”

!!My apologies Sir!!

Understands Standard at least.

“My partner will be calling a meeting for two eighths from now. I would suggest you prepare.”

They bow to me. I return the bow and they leave. I immediately hear them on their coms. Orders are barked back. Bernice has found the control center. All I have to do is look for the cleanest place next to the kitchen.

“All hands, general inspection in two eighths. General inspection in two eighths. We have two live ones folks. This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill.” It is repeated in several more languages. I can tell by which languages who is here, species wise. No Cat. Pity. I like their company. Bernice likes them because they keep so clean. Of course.

Sens start running down halls carrying materials in all directions. Two eighths is not enough time. They will have to stuff it somewhere. Good thing I locked the room.

I decide it would be best to avoid the entire situation and go to the library. I assume that is what it is. When I enter there are still a handful of terms on. I switch them off out of habit and put them away. Oh, this one looks interesting. I decide to watch it for a bit. A catalog of species. I wonder which earth? Plants look almost normal. Lots of arthropods of some kind. Things that swim in water. That is the weirdest flying thing that I have ever seen. More like an ornithopter than a bird. Looks all the insect like things have eight legs. Arachnid nation?

“A random pick. Lucked out on that one. So many are duds.” I turn to see a Diy facing me. Male, healthy, about thirty years old. I must have shown a look of surprise. “I am Kirk, an experiment if you will.”

“I am . . .”

“Guardian Jake.”

“You surprise me again. May your herd prosper.” I place a hand on

his down turned head as he does the same to me.

“Good pasturing. You surprise me knowing the proper greeting.”

“My partner would not have it any other way.”

“Ah the Guardian Bernice. Strange that she accepted her Hu name.”

“If you know the Dia, then you know that once she accepted TK, she was no longer Dia. Loyalty can be to only one whole.”

“We are a little more flexible. The Diy see my time here as potentially helpful.”

“Being a scientist is not the same as Guardian, the Dia would accept that.”

“I suppose it is not the same. Still, I am learning much and am grateful.”

“You are learning to be a uyep?”

“Ah, you noticed a tendency for the natives to be a bit, shall we say, distracted.”

“You speak Standard well.”

“The stretch was too much. I had the language inserted.”

“Then you know how much fun that experience is. So many think we have it easy. Every time we meet a new species it means another terrible headache.”

“I will remember your words, as I will never forget that headache.”

“May I ask of you a favor?” With that goes an obligation in return.

“I would be honored. Of course. You understand that in our culture a favor is paid back proportional to ability.”

“And as Guardian that could be a significant return. Not to worry, all I seek is a tour of the station.”

“I would be happy, is that the correct word, to be of service. I assure you my request will be modest.” I'm sure. I suspect that simply being the one who shows me around would be payment enough. A lot of prestige for a Diy. If I remember the file on Diy, you have to be very careful. They play the favor game really, really well. They even trade them, so it is unlikely that the favor I have to return to him will actually be for him. At the same time, this is my first contact. Not that you can judge an entire species on the basis of one encounter.

The station itself is not that large. Several dormitories. One more than I saw on the specs. That just means the specs are out of date. No surprise there. The labs are where the real business is. They have the best of the best here. I barely recognize some of the equipment.

“And here is our psiotic chamber. It is where we keep the more dangerous species. We can 'slow' them down to a safer level.”

“I'll bet. Anyone get hurt?”

“Occasionally. We have a fully equipped medical facility. We can go

there next if you like.”

“When it comes up will be fine. Don't think that I don't notice we are taking the long way to every location and have doubled back several times. That greatly diminishes the worth of the tour.” I can play too. They are good at hiding expressions, have to be in their culture, so I don't know outwardly.

However, I am not so limited and can see his heart rate and blood chemistry. Not to mention the small device he keeps looking at. Ah, a psiotic sensor. He knows when I am scanning him. I scramble the interior. He notices and drops it in the next waste box without looking back at me. Kid, I have a five hundred year advantage over you. They know we have psiotic ability, but most think it is tech, not bio.

The rest of the tour goes more quickly. I scanned the entire station after missing the barrier between transfer stations. One still sees more when using old fashioned eyes, especially people's reactions to your presence. Sens are starting to slow down from exhaustion. The last scraps are being hidden.

“About a third of the sci are out in the field at any given time. A third of the pop is support staff and lab techs. The sci ones not in the field are doing analysis and in lab investigations. That's it. Where to now?”

“The main control room would be nice.”

“I am not allowed in there. Staff is restricted to the dorms and labs.”

“So, you never go into the field?”

“No. Not allowed.”

“What if you learned enough to become a researcher?”

“Not possible. At least not while here. I would have to go back, get accepted at a university, reapply here and maybe in a couple of hundred years I could come back.”

“I may be paying back that favor sooner than you thought.” A jump in pulse rate, now back to normal.

“However, you would still have to earn it. I will find my own way now. Thank you.” A pulse of acetylcholine. Not happy with that thought. Too bad. You only gave me a tour. We bow to each other and touch heads.

“About time you got here. The files are as messed up as the corridors. I would not trust any research done here in years.”

“The hallways look pretty good right now. Just don't look in the dark corners.”

“If we had not gone to Nerdvilla maybe we could have gotten here three years earlier.”

“So, this is your fault you are saying?” Oops.

“We had no choice dear. The obligation was not something we could

have thrown off.” She would know about that at least. Come hell or high water a Dia will keep an obligation. Gets a lot of them killed. Population control the hard way. Not that Hu are much better.

“Well I intend to fix it.” She is not in a good mood. I would laugh if I dared. She is the smallest one in the room and clearly in charge.

Be careful dear. No one loves a bully.

I don't need to be loved DEAR.

Yes you do. Do you want this to be the shortest posting of any Guardian at Farpoint. They can ask for our removal. Simple as that.

She is silent.

Fine, you lead this session. Show me how it's done. Opps.

“Great job cleaning up Sens. So, what do you do for fun around here?”

Total silence.

“Did I say something wrong? You do have fun at times right? I did notice a snod court outside.”

“We are not allowed outside. Poisonous atmosphere. A safety precaution in case something gets loose. Rumor has it the engineers who built Farpoint did that as a joke.”

“Unless cyanide is your cup of tea. You could wear skin suits with filters.”

“There have been a few accidents. A Ba and a Hu died.”

Bernice is cynical, “And that did not clue you in?”

“Be nice dear. They don't play there now.”

“Shhh!” One says to another, which of course just clues me in to them. I wait. Staring at them. One finally breaks.

“We know a place.”

“I'm listening.”

“We go to a vacation earth.”

Bernice is at it again, “That is against regs I'm sure.”

We will get nothing out of them if you keep attacking them.

“I saw a nice world on a term in the library.”

~Everyone likes to go there. No sens or large carnivores. Perfect temperature, sandy beaches, if you like that sort of thing, brackish water for my kind is wonderful.~ She is one large Ceph.

“Just enough salt to give a little tingle. High mag content too?” She flashes embarrassment.

#!It gets really boring here at times. I am a land arthropod expert, but there are times when if I see another thrip I will scream. Do you have any idea how many worlds have them? Nearly every living one that's how many.#

“Another problem is that the Lunies give us new worlds at the rate of

about one every year and a half. Most of those are dusters.”

^Or pond scum.^

“Once in awhile it gets to be too much. We do a process that randomly selects coordinates. Most are duds as well, but we are not limited to one every other year. We keep trying until we hit something interesting.”

“So, how many worlds have you found?”

“A few hundred. Of course once you find a viable line, it is easy to follow relatedness. So, as far as totally unique lines, maybe five.”

“I want to know why you did not tell Luna City what you found, so they could check it out first. Cooperation might have been a better path.” Bernice, you need to go to your room.

^They tried at first. Long before we got here. The Loonies said that they had a tight schedule and could not afford to chase fantasies. Others tried several times, but they never gave in. Check the logs, you will see all the attempts.^ This does not sound good.

“Paradise, as we call it, is the earth we should have had, if we had not spoiled the one we came from.”

#!But a hell for Cats. They have an animal that runs in packs like dogs do. We all carry a Taz for that reason. Not really a problem!#

“Not quite the perfect paradise then.”

Bernice gives me a dirty look. *Who is being negative now?*

“My fellow Guardian and I just came from an assignment where one of the community leaders was taken away by Enforcers and the other two community leaders voluntarily accepted the role of penitents. Two of the communities needed to be abandoned and returned to soil. So, would you forgive us if we are a little sharp right now?”

~We can forget at times that there are others out there. Most of us will spend the rest of our working lives here, returning home to people who do not understand our role and work either. Maybe we can come to some mutual understanding.~

“And maybe we can help make some changes in procedure. It is easy for us to forget how long a time fifty years is. I am sorry for my rudeness.” Bernice bows to the room.

“Well, on to my second favorite topic. What is there to eat?” I maintain a larger than normal look just for this reason. Makes me more believable and I really do like to eat.

^Did you bring any chocolate?^ A Ba who likes chocolate? I know what to make her, chocolate covered bugs of any kind. I pulse scan her. A TK2. Interesting. I wonder if the others know. I am trying to remember their natural progression. May have to com Jordon and find out. I met Jordon only briefly in school and he was already a five by then. All the

levels above are field promotions. A school trained two would not come here of all places. Too dangerous. Twos tend to have a false sense of invulnerability.

#!How about we bring a desert.#! The other Dia gives Bernice a funny look. I think they liked it better when they could think of her as Hu. There are more Hu Guardians than any other species, though others are catching up. Actually I think there might be more Cat now. Not that they help much. I think the Ceph are probably the most together. They are the only ones who still have an active tech five culture, but they hate change so much it is hard to find suitable candidates.

The meal reminded me of off campus college chow. Whatever you can throw together in five minutes in one pot. They did not seem to mind. Lot of vegie sauces on starch bases and protein cubes of some kind.

I thought we should do something simple to keep with a theme, but Bernice wanted something more elegant. We ended up with milk and dark chocolate bars with fancy designs in them. I think we were the only ones to notice. The milk chocolate went first, only a few went for the dark.

The Ba female approaches. Yep, she goes for the dark. She takes it away though and does not eat it. Curiosity, I follow her without being obvious. She goes to the dip counter and goes for one in the back. A mild grey brown sause. She dips the chocolate into this. I notice no one else is trying it.

I scan the sauce. High protein, chitin based. Insects. That makes sense. Also explains why no one else is trying it. Dio will eat insects, so will Dia, but they don't like them pureed. Must be what she brought.

I approach her, ^Good huh? Did you make this?^ I dip a piece of dark into her sauce and try some. Not bad actually. Next to the bowl is a carved leaf. Considered high art because it takes a long time to do and the leaf will not survive long. Very difficult to do. I pick it up to admire it.

^You are most kind Guardian. I am pleased you appreciate the art of Fukey. Not many do.^

^Even more the work of Master Eeli.^

^I have only been privileged to see her work once, in the forests of Akiifa. Amazing that one could do so much with just simple leaves.^

^Do you practice often?^

^Not much opportunity here. I went once to Paradise. The leaves were excellent, but the bugs kept attacking me. I will never go back.^

^It was an honor meeting you. Good seeing.^

^Good seeing Guardian, and thanks.^

People filter away when the food runs out. Most go back to the lab for the night shift. A few eighths from now they will all be asleep. This is my

favorite time. The quiet time.

Tonight, our first night away from Nerdvilla for three years. A twinkle in TK time, but long enough to get a feel for the place.

“They cleaned up this time at least.”

“With you watching over them how could they do otherwise. It will still take some time for it to be a new habit. Scientists are not good at paying attention to details other than their own research. Their minds are always on the next experiment. Must drive the techs nuts.” I remember all too well my own work. Now look at where I am.

“Can we talk?”

“Sure dear. What's up?”

“Nerdvilla. How did we miss so much?”

“I have been wondering that myself. I think it was because we came in assuming they were just ordinary sens. Emess was a mess of course, but all of that was obvious on the surface. They actually looked the most normal to me. How many medieval cultures have we seen?”

“Ap'el and Lynnucks were a dream on the surface. We were each partial to one of them, but I think you would agree we would have felt comfortable in either. Who would not want the beauty and perfection of the Ap'el community.”

“Or the intellectual freedom of the Lynnucks one. Yes, it was very tempting. Glad we are TK and not transfer bait.”

“How did we miss it?”

“Scary huh? What are we missing here? Got an eighth? Maybe a thorough scan of this place might be in order. I really could not handle another surprise.”

“Agreed.”

We sit in the center of the room in meditation position with our eyes closed and our backs to each other. If anyone should enter we will not look out of place. Strange maybe, but Guardians are weird anyway. All mystical and such. The false information on us is actually quite amusing.

Not everything in the lab is reg. There are specimens that should be in quarantine. They still show life force.

Scientists have a false sense of safety. They figure if it does not kill them the first time, then it won't ever.

They hid all of their garbage in every storage space that would hold it!

I laugh inside, *Of course dear, what did you expect? You hit them like a charging pack of raptors.*

So, how did they get to and from Paradise. The transfer station only goes from here to Hell and back. Can't be reprogrammed. The Search unit's log would show it. Luna should have stopped them from doing free

travel. Surely they would have told us something. They must have put a lock preventing any further unauthorized use. Probably been so long ago they forgot. Enforcers would be here instead of us.

The Search unit's coordinates are set by Luna so they can coordinate observations.

Could they have by passed the protocols?

They were written in assembly language for DOS. A lock does not need much and better an obscure operating system they can't hack.

That means either it is not locked or there is another chamber.

Some place we would not normally think to look. But why would they admit so easily to being to Paradise? Don't they know that we know the regs?

Normally there would be only one Guardian. They were not expecting two. Maybe they thought one would not notice or could be convinced.

There are sens outside! Near the court.

Snod court. I scan them. Under the court is a tunnel.

At the end of the tunnel is a crude chamber carved out of rock. Air tight with an air lock made from scavenged parts. Looks like a door to the med unit.

The door on the med unit is missing. Against regs as well. What's so special about Paradise that they need to go to this trouble, yet are not afraid of our knowing that they go there?

We would find out sooner or later.

If the world truly is safe they probably figured we would let it go. We are not going to shut the whole place down for a harmless act, just add more rules for them to try and find some way around.

The rules explicitly state that the Search unit cannot be used to go to any world not prescribed by Luna. Never mind that they did it for a time. It would not be allowed now surely.

And they didn't break that rule did they?

Technicality.

That's all they need.

Who told you about Paradise?

A Diy in the library, named Kirk or something.

You didn't ask a favor did you?

Yes, but I know what I am doing. Besides we can always promise not to expel them for going to Paradise.

Not until I see ALL of the test results. A favor only has to be done before one of the two dies. I think that may be exactly what he asks of you.

I did not say it was a he.

Didn't have to. The sens, two Hu and two Dio have reached the air-lock to the station. They are coming in. Do you want to ask them any

questions?

Let's just watch them. They will only start trying to deceive us anyway.

We have company. I'll take it. Looks like your Diy.

Only one at the station.

"Hello. Anyone home." Interesting that he knows standard.

"How may I help you?" I hear Bernice say.

"I came to ask a favor."

"I can help you."

"I would rather Guardian Jake help me. Thanks anyway."

"You will have to wait then. Please join us. Only be another eighth."

"I'll come back."

Meanwhile our explorers are through the lock. They have something with them. They are undoing the containers. Looks like they are full of flowers?

They are taking them to the med lab.

Now they are grinding them up in a processor. So, these are not for looks. Must be some kind of drug effect. Might explain why they are being so sloppy about everything.

What could possibly be addictive to every know sentient? Everyone has different metabolisms. But my scans of the 'flowers' show nothing unusual at all.

Nor mine.

Tastes good?

That is a hell of a risk for something that tastes good.

One of us needs to go to Paradise.

We are forbidden from leaving Farpoint station.

We are forbidden from leaving the place without a Guardian. Which seems kind of silly as they have been without one for six months. Probably when Luna locked the Search chamber. Figured they could not get into any trouble during a lock out. Just enough time for them to set all of this up. Who was the last Guardian?

I did not think to ask, I was so happy just to be able to go.

Strange. Why do I feel like we are being set up again?

I will go. I'm not sure I want to stay on this ball another day.

We may have to flip for it.

To see who is the stronger TK?

Okay, you go. I know better that to fight. I will do as much investigation as I can on this side. How soon do you think they will return.

Four came in. That means there are still quite a number out judging from the number of dorm rooms.

Some may actually be out on a legitimate Search.

Probably. They would have to keep up their work load. Gradual slow down would give enough extra time for a few to slip off to Paradise once in a while.

“Are you done yet?”

I had better take this one. He will be back until I do.

“How may I help you Kirk?”

“I am honored you remember my name.” He looks nervous and for a Diy to look nervous he must really be upset.

“You know about the chamber.” We remain silent. “We had no choice. You will understand once you have been there.”

“I will go, but not through your clandestine chamber. We go through the Search chamber.”

“Can't. Locked down. Only Luna can set the coordinates now.”

“How long has that been the case?”

“Six sets of four eight days. Is that right? I get confused by the Ceph numbering system.” Right, I have seen scientists do binary math in their heads. Who is he really?

“I can set the coordinates.”

“Right, you would be able to wouldn't you.”

“But I will be telling Luna where we are going.” He looks nervous again.

We go to the chamber, two others are already there in survival gear. Kirk puts his set on. At least they are not totally stupid. I wait outside of course. Strange that Luna was not responding. All the circuits checked out. Must be off on some errand. We left a message about what we were doing and got a confirmation that the com received it. Could they fake that as well? No, if they could do that then they would not need their own chamber.

I need to do this Jake. Don't worry so much. I need to see this time, not just wait for the mop up team to arrive and tell us how foolish we were.

I just wish I was there with you dear.

So do I, but I don't think we should leave them alone do you?

No. Be safe. She nods and activates the controls. They bubble out. The chamber is empty. All the controls are green. So far, so good. Now the waiting game.

“Farpoint come in. Farpoint come in.” The com next to the controls. I go up to it and hit respond.

“Farpoint here. Guardian Jake speaking.”

“Good, we got you in time. DO NOT go to those coordinates. I repeat, do not go to those coordinates.”

“Guardian Bernice has already gone with three others. Don't you al-

ready know about Paradise? They said they had told you and it should have shown up in the logs.”

“Checking. We have only one report of an illegal transfer to that location. That was twenty three years ago. That was when we changed the protocols to prevent them from setting the controls themselves.”

“Interesting. They have an illegal chamber they built themselves.”

“Impossible, sensors would pick it up.”

“It is outside buried in a hillside. Ferromagnetic rock.”

“That might explain it.”

“What's wrong with the coordinates?”

“Oh, yeah. We think it might be dangerous. Look, Guardian Spider and Ravi are off base at the moment. I will have them com you when they return. I just recognized the coordinates from their last report and thought I had better try and stop you. Probably nothing a Guardian can't handle.”

“Do I need to go after her?”

“If it is dangerous enough to take out a Guardian then you would not be safe either and we would just lose two of you. Better you stay there to welcome her back. Could you know, ah, disable the hillside chamber? Just a precaution.”

“Already done. They have been bringing back flowers and then grinding them up. Nothing unusual about the flowers we could tell.”

“I will let them know when they return. Luna out.”

Shit, now what do I do?

“Guardian Jake, would you please come with us?” I turn to see several Hu, and two enormous Dio fems. All are pointing some kind of device at me.

“What's up?”

“These are limiters. There are others trained on you that you can't see. If you do anything rash Bernice dies. She is fine, but no longer a Guardian. Anything happens to us and she dies, understand.”

“Yes.” Our worst nightmare. I scan the devices. Should work. Figures. If they can make a portal out of spare parts, they can certainly make limiters. How did we miss so much? Never underestimate the determination of an addict.

I wonder if they know what an antimatter grenade is? That would get me zapped for sure and Bernice dead. They would not take a second chance. Best to play along for now.

Kirk comes in, sets the coordinates and activates the portal.

“Thanks for setting this one right again. So much more convenient.” He looks to the others, “Take him to his partner. Make sure they are secure. They will be coming soon thanks to his com. I have to take care of

things to be sure they don't follow.”

Enterprise

I don't know how it started or even when. At first I was just hanging out with them. Both Hashra and I were. I guess it really became formal when we all went out on the Enterprise together.

Mei Ling was in command, but Silver and Rooi were very much in the background. They were the ones who could sense the edge of the froth. We weren't out here just for the froth of course, but it was our main mission and concern. If we happened to run into something or someone interesting we felt compelled to investigate. Goes back to the old 'It's five year mission is to seek out . . .' Only it has taken fifty plus, but who's counting.

Without Mei we would have no idea where we were. She and Ron kept the navigation system accurate. Without the accuracy this whole mission would fail. If we were off by a millimeter a light year it would add up to enough, considering the size of the universe, to mess us up.

We invented new devices along the way. Far range scanners, new com systems, and unfortunately weapons systems. We only had one confrontation, but it was enough to teach us we needed to be prepared. Even a tech six culture can take you out if caught unawares. One good anti-matter bomb can ruin your whole day. We got far enough away to avoid physical damage, but not to avoid radiation damage. Our abilities took care of bio damage, but it took us a month to repair all of our delicate systems, some from memory and some from re-invention.

We did not retaliate, we just left. We are not out here for colonizing and empire building. It was believed at one time that any culture capable of space travel would by its very nature be peaceful. Problem is, is that different cultures define that concept differently. Sometimes they see you as an unwanted infection or threat to their own power base just by the knowledge of your existence. We are the Area 51 aliens now. The Nidar-ians did admit to being the ones who visited us. Primarily a water world, they could not figure out what we were doing in the middle of the desert. As we know, it turned out to be a boring answer and they left. After that it was just imagination not reality.

With our ability to duplicate whatever we came in contact with we did not need to take 'specimens' or artifacts. Most we could do from orbit or remotes. Only the few cultures that clearly had interstellar trade with many species were the ones that we felt comfortable coming out into the open with. When we explained what we were trying to do they thought we were crazy. I don't think they actually believed in the froth.

Sometimes we couldn't take it any longer and we had to go down to a

planet's surface just to relieve the boredom from being cooped up inside the ship constantly. No holodeck for us, though it was attempted. We usually chose systems with no sentients. The problem is, is that it is not much better than facing your shipmates. Slime molds and plantimals are boring, sorry. No offense to Pink. I think it was even bored. Most of us were not patient enough to have a conversation with it.

I am in the observation lounge. We have locator badges so there is never any real alone time. When I am not at a term helping with coding, minor, or working on Silver's schedule, also minor when aboard ship, I am here. I like watching the stars go by in DS space. Pushy Paws said I would go star crazy, but she is often here as well. I thought she would stay with the few UNA settlements, but she responded that she has had enough, she wanted to see the skies. It is beautiful.

“Com coming in for Silver.”

I respond, “I can take it. Go ahead.”

Pr'thn suddenly pops in bouncing all around. I have never seen her that agitated.

Danger! Danger! She then pops out.

“We have a report that Farpoint is gone.”

Silver, Rooi and Hashra pop in followed by Owa a moment later.

I tell them, “They said Farpoint has disappeared.”

Danger! Danger! Pr'thn looks like she is going to explode.

“Does she have an off switch?”

Br'thn one and two both pop in. *Danger! Danger!*

“What do you mean Farpoint is gone? Go ahead.”

“Ah, hold on. Okay, the report says nothing left but a hole in the ground. The report came from Luna. They received a com from Guardian Jake just before it happened. Apparently Guardian Bernice and some of the scientists have gone unknowingly to Coordinate Zero. Spider seemed very upset on the com. Unknown to the Farpoint people Luna had also checked it out from afar and found a mirror world setup. One was green and the other barren. Everyone has been waiting for our return. Go ahead.”

Silver responds after consulting Rooi, “Tell Mei we need to get to E1 ASAP. Can't do much from here. Out.”

Danger! Danger! The 'thn all say in unison.

“Either explain or leave please.” They leave. We don't have much patience with 'thn games any more.

“They are probably telling the rest of the ship.”

“You think we should just abandon earth? All of them?” Rooi has the least amount of patience.

“Knowledge always entails risk. We would have never left the trees

otherwise. Everyone on board has lived long past a normal lifespan. All of this is just sushi." In reference to Roo's food preference. I would have preferred the more cliché frosting.

"Let's just try not to take down all of our sentient brothers and sisters with us. We take the risks, not them." Hashra hits it right.

"That means no contact with anyone else."

"We need to gather ours. At least the available and willing." Silver looks worried and thoughtful at the same time. I know that look and it usually means trouble.

Mei comes in, "That means letting the non TK staff off. Where would your suggest?"

"Most of them are getting on in age even with our help. Maybe Mars colony would be appreciated. The lower gravity would help."

"And it leaves a little distance between us and them should it go solar."

"If that happens Roo, nothing we do will matter." What do they know? The others are all quiet too.

"Graas set course for the Mars Colony. Inform Luna we are picking up Spider and Ravi."

"Confirmed. Course set in. We should be there in a few eighths." Mei growls. I think Graas does it on purpose, though this is not the time to mess with her head. He is a darn good pilot though. It was his fast paw work that got us far enough away to save the ship when the big one lit. Going at full warp speed the message to Luna will only arrive a few arns before we do. Fortunately by the phase shift they will know we are in a hurry.

"We all have work to do. I want full weapon system checks not that I think it will do any good." Will keep everyone busy and their minds off of their own deaths.

"The 'thn have left the ship." Too scary for them. Must have seen their shadows. To think we practically worshiped them at one point. After reading the Rooi/Silver report I am not even convinced that they are sentient. More like highly evolved recording and interfering devices. Coordinate Zero. We will soon find out one way or another.

I spend the next two eighths double checking redundant algorithms for the weapons systems and life supports. With our minds otherwise occupied we don't want to have to worry about air. I have done this so many times it is practically rote, so I purposely slow down and force myself to be more aware.

"Shit. That should be a two not a six. How did that happen?"

"Hashra, do you have a sec?"

"What's a sec?" I am still on Hu time. The Ceph had to switch to met-

ric. The length of the arm of the current queen was not accurate enough. Amazed they never set a more permanent standard themselves. She teases me whenever I slip.

“Check out line 15209 in the reprocessing routine of the aft launchers. The coordinate variable should be set to six right? Not two as it is listed.”

She takes over my term and reduces the window size to cross check against routines she is more familiar with.

“No, it's a two. Six is used on the port side because of the conduit location we had to route around.”

“I remember now. Thanks. Just getting nervous I guess.”

“With Rooi and Silver it is best to always be nervous.” We both laugh. She signs off. I will not be able to do any work until this hits for real. I pop back to the observation lounge.

Silver, Rooi and Pushy Paws are in conversation.

“Sorry to interrupt. I will go to the port side.”

“Please join us George.”

~I will call Hashra in.~ Hashra appears almost instantly.

“Oh, there you are George. I double checked the routine again just to be sure and you were right. I changed it to a six. The error cascaded. I repaired those as well. Would have only meant a slight deviation at three light years. On the close stuff other routines are used. I don't expect we will have a chance to test it.” I hope we don't have to test any of it, close or far.

“We are approaching Mars Colony. Norms are ready to disembark.”

Elizzak pops in, a Dio female with gorgeous blue feathers. “Whoa give us a break. How about lowering the gravity a bit for us weak kneed.” She concentrates. Probably telling the bridge. The gravity lessens. We were running at half, so this is only a third lower than that. We will adjust quickly.

“That's a low as I go. I will not have everyone bouncing off the ceilings.” Mei coms us. Too bad Spider and Ravi.

I sense three more TKs pop on board. Elizzak pops out of the lounge with a bow.

I have to ask, “Why the gathering?”

“Remember New York? I want as much of us there as possible. I feel this could be hundreds of times greater.” Great.

“Why do you think there will be a confrontation?”

“We found Farpoint. It was on Disaster. Right at the edge of the abyss.” Our name for the Ceph failed froth.

Spider and Ravi pop in a little bewildered about where they are.

Ravi zeros in on us, “Glad you got back so fast. We told Pr'thn to find and tell you. It was she who warned us of the danger.”

Graas declares, "We are around E1 awaiting orders. Everything quiet below." It is never quiet with all the dog packs. Wouldn't it be fun to let a few of the improved Cat have a go at them?

"Gather them up. Go to every froth we have a log of TK seven or above. Alert Hell first." Our trump card and the most dangerous weapons are on board the bird of prey they have put together. I can't even pronounce the name in proper Klingon, Paw in Standard. Sci-fi addicts are incorrigible. Rachael, James, Q and Hei Long of course.

Ozi and Pu are picked up, "We volunteer for the Disaster expedition."
"Too dangerous."

Ozi just smiles and pops out. Pu licks her behind and follows.

"Youngsters. You can never get them to behave." Silver laughs and Rooi shows disgust.

Mei coms Graas, "Take us to Disaster."

"Aye Captain." Said with a pirate accent. Mei rolls her eyes.

On the view screen the abyss comes into view. Not obvious. I scan, we are close enough. Farpoint is unlike anything on a Ceph world.

Rooi comments, "This has become a garbage pit. I do not approve. Looks like everything everyone wanted to get rid of ended up here including quite a few sentient bodies. Hmm, lots of illegal tech down there. Why not just dissolve it? Why dump it here? Hu are pigs!"

"Most of it is ending up in the magma field. Might even serve to help heal the wounds to the Magmotics. Even Farpoint will help. I am sure all that metal will be very tasty to them. Those two had better hurry." A magnified field appears on the term. Not needed, but still appreciated. Hard to see in color with TK.

"There she goes!" A impressive splash of fireworks. Still may be many minutes before the 'thn shield material succumbs to the heat.

Pu and Oz appear suddenly smelling of sulfur and a little singed at the edges.

"We found Jake's log, we think." Every TK has a different method to keep it private normally.

Oz holds out five spheres. Ceph spheres.

"Five?"

"He wanted to be sure one was found. There were probably hundreds actually."

"They are identical but the writing at the nano level is not Ceph."

I laugh, "No, it is Standard!" I rig a magnoscope and transmit the image to the screen. Upside down. I right the image. I never get it right the first time no matter how hard I try. Frustrating.

Hashra touches my shoulder and points, "A plant that affected their behavior. We have seen that before in our own culture."

“But it did not show up in any scans.”

“We are talking about the First Ones. Who knows what they are capable of.”

“Or it could be simply a diversion. It may be they just liked the smell. A sample of one is not valid.”

“She is right. It may or may not mean anything.”

“How did Farpoint end up at Disaster and where are all the people? We found no bodies, desiccated or otherwise. At Farpoint itself anyway.” So, they noticed as well.

“Scans confirm that.”

“Paradise apparently. They were willing to burn all bridges to get there. Probably hoped we would be satisfied with either the hole or the wreckage on Disaster.”

“Our scans of the mirror world fit with the froth flux pattern.” Aimee jumps in. “Spider, Ravi, Simone and I calculated that the next froth event is soon. Maybe another thousand years at most.”

“On thirty five million, that is close. It has only been about six hundred years since the E0/1 froth event, the most recent we know of.”

“That means we are at the opposite end of the cycle. Coordinate Zero is the other. Interesting how that worked out.”

“And the black 'thn was on E35A. The second most recent frothing.”

“Frothing? Do we need to keep inventing new words?”

“On another subject. How do we rescue Jake and Bernice?”

“Without killing ourselves and everyone else.”

“We don't even know Paradise is dangerous.”

“Oh, three 'thn going ballistic does not give you a clue?”

“'thn are afraid of their own shadows.”

“Or Silver and Rooi, which ever is closer.”

“Ar, ar.” Rooi needs to develop a sense of humor.

Silver is intent on the log, ignoring us. He then exclaims, “Ah!” and pops out.

“I hope he is not consulting the Magmotics again.” That should be funny, but right now it could be real.

He pops back in, “Reading. You should try it some time. They did not use the main Search chamber for their trips to Paradise after Luna banned it. They built their own chamber from spare parts. If they could do that, they certainly could have reprogrammed the main chamber, so why do it?”

We look at him with blank expressions on our faces.

He holds up a 'thn shield enclosed device with something all over it.

“When the portal was open to Paradise the chamber itself was reachable from Paradise by anything capable of movement during the time it

was open.”

“Sure, true of any chamber, that is why there are safeguards built in. Psiotic sensors, disinfectants, multiple airlocks, etc.”

“That would take a lot of spare parts. So, what if you could accomplish the same thing in a far simpler way?”

“You mean like a very poisonous atmosphere. That's why they always went into the atmosphere to get back to the station. It would have been far simpler to make the tunnel go all the way back and avoid the danger of a suit leak. What do you want to bet those sens who died were not playing snod, but going or coming from a mission.”

“Precisely. Now what could be so dangerous that they needed to do this?”

“I suspect the chamber part you are holding is a clue.” He nods.

We all scan it of course.

“A dead psiotic power supply. Must have used it to power the portal. A lot of debris with it. A catastrophic failure? Surprised the chamber is intact.”

“A hint, there were seven dead power supplies on the chamber floor.”

“A closer look at the debris then. Hmm, strange, bugs.”

“More precisely arthropods of the eight legged variety. Ah, something different though. A very high silicon content. Silicon instead of calcium carbonate or phosphate. On a land species? Gravity is not different on Zero is it?”

“Look at the silicon matrix. A highly complex nano structure. That can't have evolved naturally.”

“With a little help it can. I made similar creatures with OM's help on E0. Owa can attest to their effectiveness.”

Pu looks annoyed, but goes back to sleep when no one comments quickly. Poor baby.

“There are dents on the power supply. Impressive. Why though?”

“Shit! Get those things out of here now!” I don't wait for an answers I pop them outside the ship and then annihilate them in a blazing blue white fireball. I am shaking afterwards.

“Over reacting George. They were all dead. The clue was the reaction of the TK2 Ba. She hated going there because the bugs kept attacking her.”

“TK2s are bad at hiding themselves. Psiotic parasites! That is what you are talking about. How did you know George?”

“I studied the histories of my counterpart carefully.”

“And of course Silver knows them intimately.” Rooi adds.

“That would also explain the 'thn reactions. 'thn hell if there ever was one.”

“TK hell as well.”

Graas coms us, “The Bird of Prey Paw is off the starboard bow.”

“Took them long enough.”

The screen comes alive. “Hiding in the lounge under these conditions. You lack courage or are very stupid.”

“Rachael, good to see you.”

“How did you know?”

“All in the inflection dear. Besides it had to be either you, James or Q.” Hei Long likes the game, but not enough to dress up seriously.

“Ron is here too.” Engineering of course.

“Like I said, either you, James or Q” They both tip their hands and smile in the background.

“So, what is the mission? Planet destroying maybe?”

“Maybe, but I want you as backup for now.”

“There is no honor in backup!”

“We are going to Coodinate Zero. The entire planet is full of psiotic parasites. Billions of them.”

“There is no honor in suicide either!”

“Dear, would I ever do that?” She laughs a full hearty Klingon laugh.

“Today is a good day to die. We are in! Kaup la!” The screen goes blank and then flickers back to the view from the bridge. They have to work on that.

“I have a question. How do we avoid suicide?” Pu asks. Scardy cat. I smile, even as I have the same question.

“Worried your precious coat will be harmed Pu?” Ozi gives her a hard hug. A good pairing.

Silver smiles and offers, “I thought we would just wing it.”

“Shit, I was worried he would say that.” Rooi turns white. She has heard the stories and all of them are scary.

“Don't worry. He never actually wings it. Just that if he told us what he was really thinking we would all pop out of here so fast even you two could not find us.”

“You are not helping Jordon.” He must have read the journals well.

The ship is very full. Fortunately we can all create our own air and with no sleep except for Pu we don't need much personal space. That puts a lot of the TK7s and above on two ships. Too many eggs on too few baskets.

Mei pops in, “Where to now? We have all of the TKs that felt they could participate.”

Rooi looks annoyed. Hashra mentions to me, “She always wants complete compliance. She will remember those who did not help in our time of need.”

“If we do not survive it won't matter.”

“Such an optimist.”

“On the surface it looks like overkill for an investigative survey of a new world.”

“We know nothing about the First Ones except what the 'thn have told us. The fact that they fear them is really all we know.”

“Other than they created the first 'thn, which as we know means the One 'Thn.”

“And they are likely to have existed before our big bang.”

“IF these are the First Ones. Could just be copy cats.”

“Explain Coordinate Zero then?”

“Explain a psiotic power supply to a tech one culture.”

“I am not denying that we are facing tech in advance of what we know. I am suggesting that we could be wrong. This may not be Coordinate Zero and it may not be the First Ones.”

“Think about this. We are beyond the time period on E0 that Silver faced the parasites. We have no idea how long they have been on Paradise. Could it have been that this is where the 'thn brought them?”

“These are not dimensional beings for one. There are normal 3D creatures.”

“The precursors to the dimensional ones?”

“Or the descendants. Or maybe just related. Or even parallel development. If Silver could make them, certainly other cultures could have.”

“So we really know nothing.”

“Except they are very dangerous and two of our own are down there.”

“Doesn't appear to hurt the norms any.”

“They do know more than we do. Maybe those portable limiters also work on the bugs.”

“Rachael, is Ron over there?”

“Affirmative. You want me to send him over?”

“We need a portable projection limiter. If he can make one we can dupe it for as many as we need.”

“Gotcha. I'll get him right on it.”

“One more thing. It can't run off a psiotic power supply.”

“Good thinking Aimee. Of course they would just attack the weapon and whomever is holding it.”

“That changes it completely. This may take some time.”

“We are late already.”

“Wasn't there something that helped protect TKs from the parasites on E0?”

“They weren't on E0, they were in DS space. Could have gotten any of us a few years back. That is why were all wearing those special collars

for awhile just to be sure.”

“We never saw any though. They were definitely attracted to E0, not E1, which is strange considering how close together they are, relatively speaking.”

I look at Silver, “A hit?”

Rooi asks, “A what?”

Jordon answers, “An agreement between two parties to have one of them kill a third party. Usually in exchange for a favor or remuneration.”

“I am impressed. Someone paid attention in class.”

“Not the 'thn, they are afraid of the parasites. Do you think the First Ones know about us?”

“We are in their backyard. Considering the length of time they have known about psiotics I am sure they knew.”

“IF they are real and not just a 'thn myth. IF they are still around and IF they are on Paradise.”

“We are not exactly the center of the universe, even given random movement since the beginning and the inaccuracies inherent at being at the beginning.”

“They may not have cared. Or given the diversity imperative they may have wanted to try it differently this time.”

Jordon comments, “Not every species desires symmetry.”

Silver jumps in, “Artistic compositions are almost never symmetrical. You never place a sentient face right in the center of the image.”

“Ah, so they are artists then.” He shrugs.

“Ravi and I had the theory that they would place their headquarters at the same location as where the black 'thn was found. Unfortunately, we chickened out before the scans reached that far.”

“To the Array then.”

“Ah, problem there. We sent it to a random location with no com link.”

“You are paranoid.”

“Considering the culture they grew up in can you blame them? Might have saved our butts, haunches, whatever.” I smile.

“We make a new one. To Luna. Certainly with two hundred plus TKs it should not take long.”

“Where to you want the Paw?” Mei asks.

“What do all of you think? I don't want to play our hand too soon.”

“Leave the Paw around an earth. Doesn't matter which one. Since Luna is of E1, keep them there.”

“Yeah, but if you wanted those limiters to be non psiotic, so should all the rest of their weapons.”

Rachael answers over the com, “Already are. Our source of recruits

are the brightest more ruthless sens in the earth complex. No way could we trust them with anything psiotic, except for their life pods and those are VERY carefully sealed and monitored. Even their psiotic sensors are passive and sealed. The only other psiotic source is the power source for the Paw itself and the only way into the power supply of the Paw is by DS and there are no portals on board. A Guardian has to do the duty.”

“Now who is paranoid?” I wish I could laugh, but I am glad both groups are on our side.

It does not take us long to reach Luna. We could have been there in seconds, but we all needed time to think. Charging in and losing everyone would not do justice to whatever has happened to Bernice and Jake. Especially if they are already dead.

“Just to humor me, could we run it first from here?”

“In orbit or on the surface.”

“Solid ground sounds good. Maybe they can knock out TK from a distance.”

Silver raises an eyebrow but says nothing.

I notice and ask, “Paw will be more in harms way. Do you feel good about using them as bait? We get the Array at least to an L5 point.”

“Agreed.”

We move the structure by linking all of us together and Dsing it there in one piece. Talk about a strange feeling. Having a 256 TK7/8 array with Silver and Rooi steering felt like you were falling forever. Those not in the TK array felt the whole of existence shimmering. Once the Array is at the L5 point in E1 space moving it to Coordinate Zero was trivial. Any one of us eights could do it. The honor was left to Ravi and Spider. It was their design after all.

We positioned the Enterprise nearby, moved the Array into place and set up a com channel.

“Let’s look.” We had set up multiply viewers, visible, infrared, radio and psiotic.

Not surprisingly we decided to investigate the most desolate of the mirrored worlds first.

“Look at those flows. Wish we could determine when it happened.”

“Water is nearly absent, but there is some. There is some evidence of water flowing. Figure one good storm every century or so. Compare to E0/1.”

“Well nothing like the Grand Canyon down there.”

“But given the lack of water it could be millions of years. There are some cuts. I am not seeing anything that does not have cracks and cuts in it. No recent flows anyway.”

“There is no water except at the extreme poles, but there is wind.

Look how smooth everything is. Nothing above a few hundred meters high. No world is that smooth that has volcanic flows. It has been sanded smooth for some time. Given the nature of our worlds, I would expect to see some evidence of more recent volcanic activity.”

“This is not like any other earth we have seen with the possible exception of Hell. Given the approximately thirty five million year cycle Spider and Ravi appear to be right. We may be very close to another cycle about to begin. IF this really is Coordinate Zero.”

“You doubt?”

“No, but best to keep an open mind and not overlook evidence just because it does not fit our conclusion.”

“Magnetic data coming in. It has a core just like every other earth at least. Now the lack of volcanic activity really does not make sense.”

“Not really. The magmatics must have a very stable society on this world.” No one doubts Silver's statement. Not something I intend to ever try.

“Correction, the core is spinning. Whoa, at several times per arn! Three point five nine times per arn. That is not normal.”

“Now this is interesting. The surface should be molten with that kind of convection going on. Ah, the mantle is a hundred times thicker than normal. Very strange.” Aimee exclaims. She continues, “I believe we have been too centered on ourselves. Not unusual really. I'll put it on the left display. This is how we have been ordering the earths as we find them. Sort of a kinky tree with long branches.”

“I have seen this diagram before. Though this one has more points on it than the one we had in school.” A young TK7 comments. I don't know her.

“Yes, but now look what happens if we orient on the mirror worlds, place one at each end of a line.”

The figure slowly moves and reorients. At first it looks even more chaotic then it quickly snaps into focus. A spirally symmetrical form with ridges spiraling slowly around a central axis. A bit hard to discern as there large gaps and holes.

“These are the worlds we already know about. Now if I extrapolate based on the pattern we already know we get this.”

“It's gorgeous!” Indeed.

“There is more. We can color code based on parameters such as no live, plantimal and dibio, sentient gradients, etc.”

“This is beyond beautiful, this is scary.” I agree.

“Is this going ship wide?”

Mei answers, “Of course. Is this a problem?”

Rooi, “No. Perfect. Thanks.” She goes over to Aimee and shows

some thoughts she has of her own. Aimee rapidly types into the keyboard. Surprised she still uses that old tech. Guess it has become the way she thinks.

The shape changes again. The two ends come together. Very pretty, but what does it mean?

“Whoa!” A perfect sphere. The sentients are perfectly distributed like a dodecahedron.

“This is the perfect map. Even if we leave now, this was all worth it.”

“Jake and Bernice would not think so.”

“I meant no disrespect. Of course we need to rescue them.”

Mei orders, “Move the Array to Paradise. Let's do this.”

A blue green world comes into view. It does not have the usual continents of a wet earth. Depending on how far from our earths it would look somewhat different. Since we are at the end of the line, near the one of the poles in the sphere model, we must be more like the anti-paradise version. It has obviously melted so many times there is no way of knowing what its continents would have looked like.

“Where would Farpoint turn up and where would the black 'thn orient to?”

“Two ends of a sphere. Coincidence? We did pick the Farpoint location at random didn't we?”

“Not really. It is based on the Hell station so we had a secure place to pass through. Hell is based on what we found. The city that should not be there.”

“Won't be there long either.” Aimee again.

Both Rooi and Silver turn to look with concern and I think curiosity. Rooi could never play poker. The sphere appears again with the annoying sound of keys being hit in the background.

“Here comes trouble.” A low growl ensues. Pu is winding up. Owa comes into the room walking upright. Pu hisses.

Ozi goes over to her and tries to calm her down.

“Ah, I don't think the kitty likes the changes I made. No problem.”

Owa slowly morphs back into the more traditional shape. No big deal to her. I think she even likes to upset other cats. Silver had better watch out though. There are now two in the room who owe him pranks. I can't believe how patient they have learned how to be.

“Now if I may have your attention.” Aimee is upset. We all snap to attention.

“Paradise and anti-paradise at the poles. Here is Hell.” Not on the sphere, but in a direct line between the poles.

“We have not talked yet about what exactly happens during a froth event. Rooi, who understands one hundred and sixty nine dimensional

dynamics better than I found this one.” The sphere actually pulses! And when it does it, it looks like the core between the poles compresses. When that happens Hell overlaps Paradise in the sixth dimension, as seen on the monitor. No way I could comprehend this.

Here is the current position. The cycle stops. Hell is in some sort of shadow of Paradise.

“It is sort of like a reflection. It will disappear soon as the reflection passes through to a world closer to Paradise itself on the secondary core line of worlds.”

“This means that the city complex exists on Paradise.”

“I believe so. Only it will not be just a trans-dimensional reflection. This one will be alive.”

“Got it. Sens are all grouped within kilometers of each other, but not at the Hell city location. They must have purposely moved from there. No TKs showing up.”

“They won't. Jake's report made it clear that expressing TK down there can be lethal if one is not prepared and annoying even if you are.” Being covered in bugs would be annoying.

“The Array just went off line. No com.”

“Not surprised. They must know we are here.”

“We are ready to proceed.” Rachael of course. One of these days they will run into something that bites back and then where will that expression be?

“We don't know what weapons the scientists have made for themselves.”

“They have quite a few actually. Never know what you will find on a new earth. Most are of the stun variety. They would rather bring the specimen in to study than kill it, though they can use deadly force if they feel threatened.”

“Great.”

“If the First Ones have taken out the Array, how long will they tolerate a ship before they take that out? When we go in, everyone has to get down as fast as possible.”

“No, we go to any earth other than Paradise and then portal over. The Klingons can go first, but I don't want to be on a ship a long way up when the TK goes blank.”

“Not a living world, but one that can support us without TK. I don't want a trace back that can hurt anyone else.”

“I have one. Sending coordinates to Rachael.”

“Got it and on our way. Meet you on the ground.” The Paw pops out.

“Last chance to bug out.” No one does. We can be incredibly stupid sometimes.

Paradise

They hit me with the limiter as soon as we were through. I suppressed my TK signature and feigned surprise to let them think I was under their control. I could always pop out if need be. We had extensive training on limiter designs. Any TK above a three can scan one out. Of course they could not stop a well designed one. Norms however really don't have any idea how strong an eight or nine is. Exponentials are like that.

Paradise itself was pretty plain for a green world. A dibio setup, which is standard for earth, but rare in the rest of the universe. Lots of bugs. Eight legs easy enough to see. I pick a few up as we walk to where ever we are going. They have strange mouth parts. Lots of ones with sucking equipment. Huge sucking equipment. So where are the suckies? Nothing larger than the bugs themselves.

Well, except for the trees. These reminds me of the one Jake called monkey pine. One of seven varieties of Illia tree to me. Smells good, wood burns bright. Scales on the sides are a pain if you need the wood for anything. Some artists make use of the designs made by the scale roots.

Dirt underneath us looks normal. There is a clear path. I am guessing it was made by them. How long have they been coming here? Looks like some time.

“Your partner will be along soon. They have a few tasks for him first. When two Guardians showed up we knew we could not keep it a secret any longer. We were ready, so it doesn't matter.”

“What happens to us?”

“After we show you what we need for you to see you will be free to go.”

“And that is?”

“You will see.” They look more tired than annoyed. They have gone over their scenarios many times to refine them. Do I upset that or go along. Probably have contingency plans thought out as well, up to and including removing us if necessary. Playing along for now sounds the best. In fact the longer it is before we check in the more likely this will attract the attention of the other Guardians.

We walk for several eighths. The day is clear and bright. Must be late afternoon now. We have been walking west north west. They don't talk among themselves nor ask me anything, so I remain silent. We do not walk particularly fast and take frequent breaks. They drink water from the streams without any apparent ill effects. I am refraining for now. They don't force the issue. With my TK this low I would be just as sus-

ceptible to any drug or parasite effects as they are. TK keeps your body in excellent condition and health, so I can go for some time before I need to worry.

I noticed at one of the breaks a group of bugs all sucking from a leaf edge. Later I find one bug infested with many smaller ones. Is this how they feed their young? Literally of themselves? Or is this one species feeding on another. Only DNA would tell me for sure. Or TK. This means the ecology is plant up like any other dibio world. What about rotters. I dig under the soft soil under some leaf litter and come up with the expected fungal hyphae. These are not white though, but rather jet black. After a careful search I find the fruiting bodies, also black, cup shaped. I gently blow warm moist air across them and am rewarded by a cloud of spores. Then the cups promptly wilt. One shot wonders. I am surprised at the speed this happens. Next a swarm of very small flying gnat like arthropods swarms in to try and catch the spores I would imagine.

“You are a biologist Guardian? I have noticed you are very curious about all the life forms we pass.” A small male Dio asks me. He speaks Standard and not Dio. Are they afraid we would talk in a way to hide something?

“The other Guardian is more the biologist. I am more into tech. Just curious and it gives me something to do. Tell me about the flowers you collect. I have not seen any yet.”

“You will learn later.” He stands like I have offended him. Forbidden subject? Is there any such thing with scientists? Strange.

We cross over a ridge and go down into a valley. There is a noticeable temperature drop as the warmth of the sun on us ends. My Dia body adapts and my metabolism slows. I notice the Hu add a layer of clothing from their packs. I lose the advantage of a fast response time, though my mind will still be quick.

It also becomes much darker. The trail is well maintained and there is no apparent danger. They have even made well constructed log bridges over smaller streams. When we finally come to one that is too large for an easy bridge there are boats waiting with pull lines stretching across. The small river is slow moving and does not present a threat either.

Halfway across we stop. Everyone looks down stream waiting for something. I look upstream and see nothing, then turn and follow their example watching and waiting.

As the sun sets a swarm of larger flying arthropods come skimming past us going down stream. They ignore us. Suddenly there is a commotion on the water and huge fish like creatures jump out of the water to grab the flying ones. There are too many bugs and not enough fish, so most make it past just fine. We watch as several more swarms pass us.

Each time I see more of the fish even in the failing light.

Near dark now they pull their way to the opposite shore. It is only once we are on dry land again that they light lanterns that are placed there. Smells like they use oil from the trees. Smoky and sputters much. Effective though.

A short time later we enter a clearing. Around the edges are various habitats. The ones higher up in the trees at opposite ends of the clearing are for the Ba and Cats. I had seen no Cat at the station, but can see eyes peering out at me here. Into the side of the hill are Di and Dio. Dia and Hu share cabins made from local lumber. There are a few fires lit for light and sens are preparing meals.

“All of the work appears to have been done by hand tools.”

“Yes.” Nothing more is offered. They will have a low eco footprint at least until their community gets bigger. If they are smart they will spread out to avoid problems.

A large Hu male followed by a smaller Dia female walk towards us. She remains behind him a pace or two. I know she is the real leader, he the figurehead.

“Welcome Bernice.” He spreads his arms wide in greeting. Awfully familiar with calling me by my name without the title.

I remain silent.

“Yes, well, all will be explained soon. You have had a long walk, come and eat with us.”

“Thank you for your hospitality, but I will pass as you Hu say.”

“Actually only the American Hu ever used that term.” I am surprised he remembers such ancient history. The others pass by me and enter the fire circle to be handed food and drink after they remove their loads. Not much discussion. At least not around me. I sit a ways off and wait. They watch me waiting. What fun. I am so happy I took this assignment now.

We were supposed to be here six months ago, but the Nerdvilla assignment was extended because Aimee could not make it back in time. The last Guardian here was a Ceph male. Not exactly an ideal location for a Ceph. I certainly did not scan a pool at Farpoint. That means showers and sponges. No wonder he finally called it quits and left after repeated pleas. Farpoint had run more or less on its own for so long no one thought it a problem that they had no Guardian for awhile. Wrong.

I look around me. Harder to see in the fire light of course, but I have seen enough to know there is no way they did this in six months. This has been going on for years and years. Question is, did the Ceph know or not know? How could he have missed the extra portal and the sens coming and going? So, he was in on it.

Being here would certainly be more to his liking. The small river was

certainly large enough to provide relief. And where there are rivers there are almost certainly lakes as well. Lots of soft arthropods to eat. This would be a Ceph paradise at least. Well, we are a long way from the ocean, but other than that it would be good. Is that the surprise? He has taken up residence here instead?

A much larger group is coming in judging from the number of lanterns. I think I see Jake's silhouette. His disguise has now become a handicap. That is a lot of extra weight to push along the trail. He is set down on the other side of the fire circle with several body guards holding devices on him. The leader goes up to them and they lower the devices and put them away. Jake gets up and comes over to me, but is blocked by several others and turned back.

I micropulse him, *You okay?*

He pulses back, *Don't! Danger!*

There are the usual assortment of bugs attracted to the fire. I thought I noticed them twitch out of their normal pattern when we Tpd. The Ba TK2 was right. These are not ordinary arthropods. I think back to the classes so long ago. There were those dimensional parasites, which these are clearly not. Besides they looked a whole lot different and much, much larger, vestigial wings and very large swollen abdomens. Nearly the size of a male Hu in fact. The largest I have seen of these might be a hand and much lighter weight. Besides, by now the 'thn would have cleared them out of dim space. I assume they did it for all the froth variants. We do share dim space after all. Is this where they ended up and what they look like in 3D space?

Hated wearing a gold collar for the year in school. Even then it was past time, but they made us do it so we would remember it is not always safe and could happen again. I bet Pu really hated that part. I smile at the thought.

A Dia female comes up to me, *#!We sleep now. Follow me.#!* I follow her to a log structure roughly rectangular. An accurate rectangle would have been bad luck in Dia culture, so I am not surprised to see it is only Dia females inside. Every length being different and nothing square would be uncomfortable for Hu. Nothing in nature is true, so why do Hu insist on it? Maybe because they seem to need to dominate nature instead of live with it.

#!Unpaired ones quarters.#! I am very surprised they would allow me to stay with them. I am not tired, being only about noon Farpoint time and early morning Nerdvilla time. Besides it will take up to a week for the effects of low TK to get to me in terms of sleep need. I am brought to a simple sleeping hallow and left. She goes on to her own. There are no empty hallow near me. Now I feel more normal. I am still not accepted.

Good. I also note it is in the lowest position, honor wise. Even better.

No way of knowing what time of year this is. Could be anywhere from three to six eights of darkness. I decide to spend the time in meditation for lack of anything else to do. A Hu habit that I have chosen to adopt. Can be useful at times.

“Did you sit like that the entire night?” A Dio is facing me. Surprised she is allowed in here. I open my eyes to see all of the others have left. The Dio looks uncomfortable. I rise without comment and follow her out.

“There is still some food left and water is over there.” I decline politely again in sign language.

“Dying of starvation and water lack sickness offers honor to no one.” A typical Dio answer. Pride would be the real reason. I see Jake eating and drinking with a few other Hu. I go up to him and no one stops me this time.

“Is it safe to eat?” Meaning no flower extracts? I make the hand sign for flower.

“I don't know, but you know how our friends are. It could be several eight days and in this form I will get very hungry before then.”

“You could fast for twice that long and show no change.” He laughs. Hardly the situation to be laughing in. I see the Diy, K'rk comming with the 'leader' and his Dia. He looks towards us several times. So, he is the one who does the dirty work. Never to be trusted for any reason. Even the leader would be wise to follow that counsel. At first I was overjoyed to learn of another sentient on my world. Not any more.

“Ah, but you have already eaten of the food of Paradise. Most of the dishes at the welcoming party came from here. Or at least the ingredients did.”

“Then I was a Guardian and could filter them. Now I am not.”

“They have you limited? Why? They did not tell you did they?”

“Tell me what?”

“Here I will show you. Come follow me.” Jake moves away from the others to a stone structure. Inside there is an altar or memorial of sorts. On top of the memorial is a strange shape. He leads me up to the shape and waits. I examine it.

“Shit, as you Hu would say. This is a Ceph beak.”

“Our predecessor. You have noticed the bugs outside of course.” He does not wait for my answer, “They are related to the TK parasites that attacked Silver. This may have been their place of origin. I think the First Ones took a naturally occurring creature and adapted it to DS space to help guard this world.”

“Guard it from what?”

“From whom. Us, or rather Guardians and possibly 'thn. Though from

my understanding, the First Ones and the 'thn were on good terms. At least at one time.”

“So the Ba female really was a clue. These bugs will attack anyone showing TK ability.”

“Yep. Killed the Ceph Guardian before anyone could stop em. They all knew that there was a problem with them from the very beginning. Standard array of tests which even they followed on their rogue world. They were fortunate in that where the portal from Farpoint is, they were low in numbers. Here however it is really thick with them. Show any TK at all and they will be on you in a less than a nano arm.” No such measurement and nothing can travel that fast on wings.

“So why did he do it?”

“That they have not told me yet. I was hoping you knew. You have been here a few hours longer than I have.”

“They have told me almost nothing. The fact that they honor him with a structure dedicated to him means that it is likely an act of heroism not terror. From their perspective I mean.”

“Makes sense.”

“What did they make you do?”

“Destroy Farpoint.” He says it so casually.

“Fail safe?” He smiles. That means he made it look like a fail safe device, but not what he really did.

“How long do you think?”

He shrugs, “They operate in mysterious ways.”

“What do we do now?”

“First we leave here. We have been in here too long. Makes them nervous.” We go outside into the main open area, upon which two Dio who were heading towards us stop and change direction.

“They think we are plotting? How? Without use of TK we are only two in number.”

He opens his robe to show the bio attached limiter on his belly. Mine is more obvious.

“They are not worried about our plotting with these things on us.” If we try to remove it, it will explode. Not enough to hurt anyone else. It is a shaped charge that will remove our guts quite effectively however. Probably has crude psiotic sensors to do the same as well, though that would be redundant here apparently.

“You said First Ones. What does that have to do with Paradise?”

“After you left we got a com from Luna. This apparently is Coordinate Zero. From what I remember we are very close to the same position on E35A where the BT was found as well. Assuming there is a connection of course.”

“Holy Syluk.” None here fortunately. A sacred tree in Dia beliefs that I would not want to offend.

“Out of the pot into the fire as I always say.”

“Nerdvilla is starting to look downright fun. Maybe a term in Hell could be our next assignment. I was going to have a nice quite TK existence too. Not a big scary one like Silver and Rooi.”

“Surprise. Do you know what's going to happen?”

“Apparently they are waiting for some others. I thought they meant your group.”

“We did evacuate Farpoint. Everyone is here now as far as I know.”

“No one was out on assignment on some 'legal' world?”

“Guess not. Nothing to come home to if they were. Maybe they were the ones who did not want to play along.”

“They would be stranded now. Considering that most of the worlds that Farpoint was investigating were dust bowls, that would not be nice.”

“No one was stranded. We are not evil, appearances not withstanding.” K'rk.

“I am afraid you are the one sens I for sure do not believe or trust.” Jake says.

K'rk bows and backs away. He goes back to the leader as expected and makes his report.

“You two look like you could do some work instead of standing there imagining plots and counter plots. Maintaining this site is no picnic.” Where did she get that phrase from? A middle aged Hu female. Bad choice of colors. But then Hu have no sense of color anyway.

“What do you need?”

“That's the spirit! Come with me. Newbies start in the kitchen.” More food great.

It is a short distance to an open air shelter.

“It never snows nor gets very windy here. The rain is gentle not harsh. Most of the time the weather is perfect.”

“Like it was designed for us.”

“Maybe.” The first clue.

We are each given a station, a bowl of vegies I have never seen before and a knife. On the other side of the counter she takes out her own knife grabs one from the bowl and proceeds to trim the stem, peels it, cut it in half, scoop the seeds and peels into another bowl and then slice and cut the remaining to go into yet another bowl. The bowls look to be wood or gourd. Same with the handles of the knives. The knives themselves are metal though.

She notices me looking at the knife.

“You have never seen a knife before?”

“Everything else looks like it is made from local materials. These vegetables must be local as well? So, where did you get the steel?”

“That’s all you are worried about? It came from Farpoint. We hope to eventually get a proper ceram setup going, but we have not been able to do everything. Only the kitchen and carpentry gets steel, so be careful with those. Now you two try it.”

I put a piece into my mouth, bite and immediately spit it out. She laughs, “Has to be cooked first. We use these sweet berries to cut the bitterness.”

“Can you tell us anything about the flowers?” I have to try.

She laughs!

“Okay, that was not what I expected.”

“Every species has its peculiarities. TKs have their own traits too. This is interesting to us because you come from nearly every sentient known and yet your curiosity never fails us.”

“Does this mean we can stop cutting up these things?”

“You want to eat, you work.” She smiles and leaves us to the veggies.

“So the flowers were all a ruse to get us to investigate.”

“Apparently. It worked. We are here.”

“But why?”

“Precisely.”

I did start eating and drinking the water. There was really no point to dying before anything happened. They did not seem at all upset by the wait. We know no more than when we got here. Nothing has happened to us and apparently nothing will as long as we don’t use our abilities.

“Did you ever think that what they are waiting for is for one of us to use those abilities.”

“So the others can watch us die? Why? Why go through all this trouble just to have us die like Uncle Ceph.”

“He did have a name you know.”

I flash my hands in Ceph to show that I know it.

“Now try saying that in Standard or even Dia. I don’t care which. All they needed to know was that he was a Guardian.”

“Yeah what is it with everyone hating us lately.”

“Maybe our time is over.”

“A short run then. Silver’s gang went on for millions of years.”

“Their subjects did not know as much as ours do apparently. I think we made a mistake letting them know so much.”

“Rooi was right. You can’t rush it. I suppose we can always start over. Find a nice ripe new world and set up a new colony.”

“This is a nice new world you scalawags.”

“Where do they get their vocabulary?”

“Probably other Guardians.”

“That fits.”

“As to your proposal, I am afraid this world is the last place in the entire universe any of us should be.”

“So you are believers in the First Ones. Myth I say. Nothing to them. Old 'thn tales is all.” Mary, a bright young lab tech a few days ago. Now likely to be wed in the Hu custom and soon after with egg. A waste.

An eight day comes and goes. I have graduated from the kitchen to the carpentry center. Jake has taken to gardening. The other Dia will not work with me and my 'bed' which I do need to sleep in now is still the same. I understand now why. They are afraid I will slip and bring the bugs down upon me. They don't want to be nearby when it happens. Understandable.

Out in the field they are far enough apart that they don't worry about Jake all the time, but he sleeps alone too. In the carpentry shed they keep the doors and windows shut so even if I were to go off the bugs would just bang themselves to death against the windows. I don't think they have thought out for how long that might go on. The few who fly in once in awhile sniff everyone out as if constantly asking. Serves to remind me of my position.

We work seven days and get one day off. They hope once things are going well to extend that to two days. I never thought of my life before as easy. Now I do. Maybe they are right. Maybe we have become the bullies we all fought against at first. They work just as hard as I do, if not harder, being more accustomed to it. I am not mistreated in anyway.

“Have you noticed certain, ah, urges, have returned Bernice?”

“Yes, but we can't give in. They have to come for us.”

“It has been three eight days now. They must know we are in trouble.” Sens pass and just smile at us or shake their heads. All our suspicions of their plotting and we are the ones forever talking in whispers in corners.

“Maybe they are too afraid. The place certainly scares the 'thn to death. Even mention the place and they immediately left the room.”

“Sometimes it is the only way to get rid of the pesky things.”

“Wish they were here now.”

“Last place in the universe they would be, given the parasites.”

“Do you honestly think those bugs could penetrate a 'thn shell?”

“They don't need to penetrate to feed psiotically. They could get enough just sucking at the surface of a 'thn. It wouldn't kill them either, just drive them totally nuts.”

“DS into space and be done with them.”

“You know as well as I do a bug can handle vacuum for arns.”

“Not heat though. Go down to the magmotics.”

“No 'thn has ever tried it that I know.”

“Skim the sun. That would be easy for them.”

“Anyway you do it, they won't come back. So the end result is the same, no 'thn.”

“True.”

“Well, back to the field. Have fun!” Actually I do like making things with my hands. Always have. Most Dia do. I especially like figuring things out. Probably why I did as well as I did in tech classes even though I came from a tech two culture.

Wood and ceram are the two staples in every one of the cultures I have helped with. In spite of all their tech knowledge it is the same here. Oh, they play more games with it, but the result is the same. It is interesting that in the years they have been watching this world, they have not found any sources of metals. Have the First Ones done the same thing here we did? Disperse metals to prevent a high tech culture from forming?

Nothing close to sentient though. The best they seem to have in this area are the 'fish' which are really arthropods shaped like fish. Thin exoskeleton with a pseudo skeleton of branching exoskeleton intruding into the middle and linked internally. All of this makes them practically worthless as a protein source unless you boil them to a broth like consistency. We eat a lot of boiled bugs here.

I am drawing out a new design for a water wheel. The axle is the hardest part. I need to make it easy to replace the ceram bearing when it inevitably fails. That means making molds to form the bearings and a way to adjust and center the bearing once it is in place. And do all of this as quickly as possible to keep down time to a minimum.

Paper is still scarce, so I draw out my ideas on a sand board. We sift the sand to get the smallest particles and use this for a thin layer over a dark slate background. Draw a line in the white sand and see dark gray below. Shake to start over. Simple and effective. I love it.

“Looks good. Glad you are here. Any ideas for saw blades? What we have from the lab will not last forever.”

“Axes and shapers are easy enough with cerams, but not saws. A crude blade can be made by embedding broken ceram bits into a hard wood backbone.”

“Don't the bits break off quickly?”

“That is the problem. We don't have the necessary glues. I wonder if we can make a solid ceram blade with the necessary bits built in.” He smiles at me but does not say why.

I think about what I have said. We have been working on the saw

problem for some time. Shit! I keep using the pronoun 'we', that was what he was smiling about. Of course as TK I could create all the metals they needed. I could even create the saw blade themselves complete with bonded diamond teeth. A bug smashes against the window. Even thinking about it seems to draw them towards me.

There must be a way. If I had planned for this I could have built a special chamber that looked psiotically neutral on the outside and allowed me to do whatever I needed to do on the inside. I need to find Jake. No I don't. This is silly. I am not part of this community. I am a Guardian.

Now I know why the Ceph went crazy. Both Jake and I figured out our limiters quick enough and removed them. No explosives. That was just a ploy to prevent us from doing anything too quickly. The bugs are always around us. No explosives needed. It would be simple enough. I am sure I could go for a walk, grab enough mass, DS to high orbit, make what I needed and return with the proper shielding. Gold if I remember correctly. Assuming they work the same way as the ones that haunted Silver's group.

Better if I do this alone. If I am wrong then only I die, not both of us. This is crazy! I am not going to make it. I yawn. Time for evening meal soon and to bed. They are at least conscious of pollution and are keeping fires and other toxic activities to a minimum.

The dinner bell rings and I put down the stylus. Ceram of course, and the bell, the stylus is wood. Beautiful sound. I am amazed at how fast scientists who were used to the highest tech our cultures could produce so quickly have adapted to such low tech. Actually, thinking about my plans, they haven't. They are trying to get back as fast as they can. Without the aging treatments the clock is running.

We eat in a common room. Jake and I eat near the exit. If one of us goes off we are to both get out as fast as possible. We are bonded. I could never abandon Jake, nor he abandon me, all thoughts of going crazy aside.

"We have an announcement to make. K'rk if you will." I make a low growl that only Jake is likely to hear.

"I have good news. We are being watched." A cheer goes up from the others. Huh? By whom? Why is this a good thing? God, I hope it is not the First Ones.

"Is it the First Ones?" Someone asks. All that gets is a resounding laugh from the others. They really don't believe in the First Ones. That leaves only Guardians.

Jake holds me back as I think to stand up and whispers, "Watch and wait." Our normal way. I relax.

"What is the evidence?" Ah, a scientist for sure. Now we will get my

answer.

“An Enforcer has been seen. Where there is one there are many.”

“Just like rats.” More laughter.

They would know what an Enforcer looks like. Everyone came through Hell to get to Farpoint. Why are we not already surrounded?

“How long ago?”

“Took Asan two days to get back here. No evidence they are coming this way any time soon.”

“Two days. Asan, were you visiting the ruins again?”

“I can't help it. I am an archaeologist. It is what I do.”

“We don't know they are safe. Wait for the others. They will be here soon.”

“I know, it is just so tempting though.”

Jake and I look at each other. We don't need to be able to read minds to know what the other is thinking.

Jake stands up, “Bernice and I would be interested in participating in any expedition to these ruins.”

“Oh, don't worry. You will definitely be invited.” I don't like the way K'rk says that. Well, if they were going to try and kill us they would have already done so. This means they have some need of us. I just hope does not involve sacrifice. I have read Hu history. Sacrifice the virgin to the Gods. I am probably the only virgin TK in the earth froth system.

Enforcers

I have been every imaginable creature. I have traveled the galaxy and seen almost everything there is to see. And yet, I still love being here with good sentients, a good ship, and a suicidal mission. Does not get any better.

“Mind if I join you?” Owa pops in.

“Thought you wanted to stay around Silver when Roo pulls her prank.”

“She promised I will be there. Right now is not the best time. We may need him concentrating completely on the problem.”

“Watch your back.”

“Indeed.” She transforms her costume into something more authentic to the Klingon style. On a Cat, even an upright one, it does not quite look right. But, it is still better than what Mandhi had to do. There is no way to make a Ceph look Klingon. So, we pretend she is an allied species instead. They let her off the hook of being authentic. Her weapon in particular is classic steampunk. Spent a lot of time finishing it herself. A work of art.

“I heard from Edwin. He is fine. Still wants to be left alone.”

“After Covenant who could blame him. Why did the council put him in charge of a religious community?”

“I heard it was because he was so not religious. They wanted him to learn and understand what is very important in nearly every sentient culture we have found and experienced.”

“Nearly destroyed him. I led the Enforcers that day. There was no dignity in what we had to do.”

“So here we are about to land on Coordinate Zero. Will we be treated as well?”

“I wondered about that. Are we the ones they want to send in first? What culture responds positively to force?”

“A Klingon diplomat?”

“I am not Klingon and neither are the ones who follow. It is interesting that by practicing all these years to be violent it becomes the last thing any of us wants to do.”

“That's a good thing. Cats have a rep of being mean, but really, look at us. How else could we have survived? We don't have hands. We have to do most things with teeth and tongue. Not many options.”

“Now the Ceph, those are mean hombres. No compassion. Oh hi Mandhi.”

~Today is a good day to die!~

“Let down your guard Mandhi. No Enforcers here yet. Just us three?”
~Hell plus two do for our task?~

“Should work. Tell the bridge. Best get this done.” I double check my own weapons. No TK is going to be harder. I have kept in shape and my knives are sharp. Disruptors are charged. Spare power packs. I finish in time to see the others doing the same. Mandhi will use ceram blades of course. I still prefer something with a little more give.

I can feel the ship make the move to H2 space. From a blue green jewel to a waste land. Hard to believe the same earth can be so different. They separated over a billion years back. A lot can happen I guess. I am trying to think what I was doing on E0 right now. Too far back. Getting into trouble no doubt.

We transport down to the surface. Can't breath the air of course, so we all wear masks to filter out the nasties and compress what we need of what is left. If I am not to use TK I figure I should start now. Mandhi has it the worst. She absorbs so much through her skin that she has to wear a full suit. Actually makes her look even more horrific. I smile.

A group sets up a portable portal at the proper location.

“This should put us just outside the ruins, if they exit on Paradise.”

“Let's make this quick. I don't want to poison any more of the life there than we have to.”

The portal activates. It is green on the other side. A rush of insect like creatures comes in the portal towards us but is immediately taken out by our atmosphere. Must have been attracted to the psiotic power supply. Their warnings appear to be real.

“Go! Go! Go!” Several hundred Enforcers file through. Mandhi, Owa and I are last. I close the portal with a remote.

I wait a moment before announcing, “The air here is breathable, but keep your helmet on until further notice. We don't want any surprises. Secure the perimeter.” They fan out in groups of three. The ruins are before us. Initial surveillance was correct. Very strange. They have looked at scores of Hell worlds and only Hell itself had the ruins contrary to everything we know about the froth. Now they show up here. I guess technically this is one of the Hell series, there are thousands of them. The image that Roo showed on the screen with Aimee is still fresh in my mind.

I did not get a chance to say goodbye to Daniel. Thank goodness he has not sought out the ! again. Once was enough.

Edwin is the only one I worry about. He took the failure of Covenant hard. We had just gotten him out of his shell again. How did he end up being the one with competing groups of fundamentalists. The one group split into three almost immediately. No one saw it coming. Then they proceeded to undermine, deceive, feud, whatever until we had an all out

three sided war going on.

I volunteered to be part of the Enforcement action. It seemed right that it was one of the original team. Now Edwin in on some lichen world. An entire world without sentients or any chance of any sentients for a billion years. No one to hurt another, to cause and fight wars without purpose other than pride. Stupid Monkeys.

“Commander, perimeter is secure. One Hu was seen returning to the encampment forty clicks from here.”

“The Farpoint scientists?”

“We are not sure, but that is the suspicion. We do not have files on all that were there at the time of take over.”

“Any idea why they are so far away? The portal should have been only a few clicks from here. They must have purposely placed their encampment away from the ruins. Yet, they obviously know about them.”

“Your orders Commander?” They are not paid to think, but we know they do plenty of it. Usually plotting against each other for position. I had hoped that by the time they became part of my battalion this would be worked out of them, but I still catch glimmers of it from time to time.

“Ignore them for now. They are unarmed. Maintain a watch though. I want to know if they start coming this way. Our main focus is the ruins.” She salutes me and leaves.

Mandhi comes up, ~Tight band radar scans show the layout is exactly the same as the ones on Hell, right down to placement of bowls and artifacts.~

“That is creepy.” She shows affirmative.

~It would appear that the reflection theory may be correct. There is more. The ruins are changing.~

“Changing?”

~They are becoming un-ruined.~

“What?!”

~Come see for yourself. We don't have to go inside. It is clearly visible from the outside.~

We walk past the scanner units towards the ruins. Mandhi motions me to stop. We then watch the walls. Even without TK, which I dare not use here, I can see the seams and cracks slowly filling in. The color is coming back to the surfaces. Even the roofs are starting to reform. I wonder what is happening below ground where most of the structures are?

“Is is safe to enter?”

Hei Long comes up, “Let's find out.” He motions an Enforcer forward and motions him to enter and turn around and face us. He does it without question. Pain is a wonderful training tool. Nothing appears to happen.

“Looks safe. Shall we?” Don't judge too harshly. They are all under a

death sentence. Each day that they live is a blessing and a gift. We make sure they all understand that in no way do they deserve it.

Just as we enter there is a scream from the outside. We rush out to find an Enforcer covered with the insect like creatures. It is as if he is on black fire, dropping and rolling on the ground trying to crush the creatures with them flying off just in time and reattaching themselves again.

The other Enforcers look on without emotion. I reach in with my gloved hand and remove a device from his belt and turn it off.

The insects lose interest and disperse.

Hei Long steps up to him, "I said no psiotic devices. I meant no psiotic devices. Confine him for later punishment." Two Enforcers relieve him of all weapons and take him away.

"Report sent to the Paw. They are relaying it to the Enterprise."

"Then we sit back and wait. Break out rations as guards rotate watches."

"That wall gives me the creeps."

~What is happening on Hell? Are the ruins there changing as well?~

"Excellent question."

I go to the portal unit which I had shut off. It has a com unit on it keyed to Hell. I type in the question and stand back.

"Sending now." As soon as I push the remote a swarm of bugs attacks the unit.

~They do not know when to quit.~

Hei Long looks at the damage done before they dispersed and adds, "It will not take many more attacks. Best use it sparingly."

Just as he says this it activates with another swarm attacking it. A message cylinder comes through. A large one in fact.

"If that thing is psiotically powered we will never retrieve the message."

~I have never seen one this large. May I open it?~

I stand back from it and show her to go ahead. It opens without incident.

~Interesting. Apparently this is a power supply for the portal that is not psiotic. They want us to send the Enforcer who tripped the bugs back ASAP. They also report that the ruins on Hell are disappearing at about the same rate you reported their healing here.~

Mandhi then pulls the battered psiotic power supply and pull a cord on the new one to attach to the portal. It clearly would not be a direct replacement.

Hei Long notices, "Rad symbol on the sides. Fusion or anti-matter."

"Fusion is my guess. Otherwise it would be much larger."

~Does not matter if it works. Bring the prisoner over. I do not want

this to be open long. Best not to waste the resource.~ She would have no problem just eliminating the nuisance here and now. I on the other hand feel the battalion is already on edge. I don't want them to be worried about battlefield recriminations.

The portal opens, the Enforcer walks through on his own accord. Good boy. It closes. No bug activity this time.

“Is we needed any more proof of the bugs attraction to psiotics. Who sent the orders?”

~James. Q counter signed. They also want us to proceed slowly. There is no rush on this.~

“If they are correct that it will be another thousand years before turnover. I don't think I want to be here when that happens.”

“I don't know. I have done everything else. I am here because I want to meet a First One.”

~I would be happy experiencing more of life first, but am accepting of my fate.~ How stoic.

“Let's get back inside. We are not going to figure out anything outside.” Wasn't there a seem there when we came in? Is it accelerating?

The two Enforcers who helped with the one who could not obey orders post themselves at the entrance to the cave/ruin complex. We switch on lights and recorders as the light from the entrance fades.

“I want to go straight for what we thought must be a the meeting room.”

We all know the route well, as we have been using the same room on Hell for that purpose. The route is not logical, at least to me. Mandhi says it makes perfect sense if you look at it as a seven dimensional projection into three dimensional space. I just memorized the route.

“That's strange, there is a light already in the chamber. Has the healing gone that far?”

The main door is large enough for all of us to enter together. There is an altar of some kind set up in the center and it is there that a large glowing sphere is sitting. Not floating, so nothing psiotic at least. Do the bugs come down this far? No plants for the larvae to grow on. Might take them an arm or two to get here at maximum speed.

As we enter I feel a sharp pain in my side. I instinctively put up a shield.

We don't have much time. DS to Hell 5 now!

I am the first one there. I check out my armor to find an Enforcer blast. Our armor is more hardened than the Enforcers wear for this very reason. I knew we were in trouble when they learned repeatedly we could not use TK. One of the reasons I wanted to get to the inner chamber as soon as we did.

Mandhi pops in second and raises a 'thn laminate geodome over us large enough to give space to set up a temporary command center.

Hei Long pops in last. He has marks from several blasts and some blood spattered on his back. All if it quickly heals.

“So much for loyalty. Five inside. They got out before I could do anything. It is likely the others know we have been hit. I heard explosions to seal off the chamber.”

~We knew it would happen sooner or later and likely on Paradise. Just too tempting. Shall I send the self destruct?~

“They have certainly failed the test Rach.”

“They have, but I feel this is Enterprise's decision, not ours. We were under their orders this time.”

~Understood. Sending report now.~

“Do we go back and clean up at least? I am sorry that it went to the point where they destroyed parts of the ruins.”

“Will the healing undo the damage? That would be interesting to know.”

~Send in remotes. We don't have to be there.~

“Good idea. Ask Enterprise though.” She works the com sending in what we are thinking.

~Enterprise likes the ideas of the remotes and will be sending us a package shortly. Aimee wants to tweak them. They have many more TKs aboard to do the dupes. Shit that was fast!~

Just outside our dome the package arrives. I scan it to find thousands of modules. Reminds me of Pokeman and something else.

“These things are based on the tech they used against us on E0 when we were going from California to Arizona.”

~You mean the part near Lake Tahoe?~

“Yeah. Best get them set.”

“Strange shape inside the spheres. What exactly are they?”

I DS one into our dome and let it fall to the ground. It immediately opens itself up to an insect like creature that climbs my leg to the top of my shoulder and unfolds to a sensor array.

“Many different types. We just need to randomly distribute them. They will sort themselves out.”

“What fun.”

~Are they armed?~

“They can be. We don't have time to scan each one. Let's get these set. Distribute them here.” I show a map mentally, “We know where we are in relation to the chamber. Then DS them to Paradise.” We sort out a swarm in the air and rush them to three overlapping clouds. They are gone.

“What about us Mandhi? Back to the Paw?”

“If the ones who betrayed us are in league with them I don't want them to know what's going on. Let them continue to think we are dead. Set up a com to the Enterprise. I want to know what those things are seeing.”

Mandhi starts to set up a terminal from memory. Amazing. I can pattern anything that is in front of me, even make changes, but I can't remember something that complex. One device among many too.

The term comes up with a map, ~We are seeing what the Enterprise has calculated from all the data received.~

“The Enforcers are avoiding the city. Interesting. They are going towards the scientists camp.”

“We need to pull Jake and Bernice. Without TK they are helpless.”

~Like we were?~

“At least warn them. Hide gold suits nearby. Something.”

“Also remember they are in the wild, not in a nice safe underground city arns away from the bugs.”

~True.~

“Come in on the bot in the cavern we were in.” A black screen.

~Switching to IR.~

A brief flash of an image then blank.

~Bot is out. Here is the last image recorded.~

The cavern where the entrances were bombed by the Enforcers are showing signs of healing. Not surprising. The glow sphere is gone. That must have been from the Enforcers. Rigged with scrounged components no doubt.

“First the Array and now the Bot. They apparently do not like to be looked at.”

“At least by tech.”

~The ones outside the city are still functioning. Anything in the city is out.~

“The Enforcers are nearly at the camp. Get those two out of there!”

“Those bugs are fast and it only takes one firmly attached to do them in. We can't help them from here. We need to be on planet to help.”

~Bug zappers!~

“What?” I turn to Mandhi.

~Set up psiotic power supplies with electrodes pushing high voltage. If a sen touches one they get a nasty shock and back away, but a bug will be drawn to it so hard they can't leave and will be vaporized.~ She immediately forms the necessary hardware and demonstrates it. It is small enough to dupe easily.

“Okay we dupe this like crazy from the soil here. We then take these

to the inner chamber and then push them to everywhere we can around Jake and Bernice. We send them gold suits to get into and TP them what is going on. Hopefully we will be able to do all this before they get it.”

“Or we could just DS them to us in the chamber and then all of us to here.”

My mouth falls open. Hei Long grins at me.

“Not as much fun I suppose, but easier.” He grins again.

“Mandhi, bring that thing along. We may still have a use for it. Everyone into gold suits now!”

~The Enforcers are starting to kill the scientists!~

“I know how to stop that. So stupid. Let Enterprise know we are going in.” Mandhi makes the com. I move us to Paradise. I would rather be in Hell.

“We don't have much time. I am sending the autodestruct now.”

Into the Maw

“The Enforcers are coming! Positions everyone.”

I have no idea what that means or what I am supposed to do. Knowing what an Enforcer can do and will do there is no place to hide. They violated the law by kidnapping us. There is a heavy price to pay for that act, even if done by our prized scientists. I realize that I look no different from anyone else here, so I try to appear as non threatening as I can. I set down all gardening tools, get down on my knees with my hands on the top of my head.

A few running past me look at me weird, but keep going. I can see them near the cook house passing out weapons they have made from spare parts. No idea what they are capable of, but it will be no match for whatever the Enforcers are carrying. They will know their prey well. The only Enforcer that will die will be one who disobeys orders. My only hope is that a Guardian recognizes me in time. Bugs or plasma rifle. Some choice.

The screaming starts before I see anything. Hope Bernice is alright.

Finally I see them coming out of the forest. They are not bothering to hide any more. They don't wait for this to be a fair fight. They fire at anything that moves. It dies instantly and horribly. Should only take them a few minutes to kill everyone. I catch movement out of the corner of my eye and see Bernice slowly walking towards me with hands raised. She sits next to me.

“I love you Bernice, but I am not happy to see you.”

“Understood. It has been a fun ride as you Hu say it.”

“Indeed.” I want so much to give her a hug, but don't dare move.

There are several Enforcers looking our way.

They raise weapons to point at us. I see several of those bugs crawling on my body. No easy choices.

I hear a scream from behind me. Something shoots past us to stick on the front of the Enforcer's armor. It fires at us with a horrific sound. I can feel the heat from the plasma stream as it passes overhead and the scream stops with a gurgle.

Suddenly the three Enforcers, including the one I saw get shot, drop to the ground. I wait a moment then turn around to see what happened. There are charred remains uphill from me where someone was. Can't even tell what species. There are simpler ways to kill of course, but terror is part of the equation. Any survivors will tell tales to make your hair, feathers or scales crawl.

“I want to know what stopped the Enforcers. I don't think it was our

group.” Bernice rises and moves towards them. I wait where I am. There may be more about. The smell of burnt flesh permeates the air now that I have time to notice.

“Jake come here.” She is stooped over one of them.

I rise and walk over. She is next to the one that was hit by a local. There are bugs all over it. They are repeatedly trying to attack the surface of the armor with only minimal effect.

Bernice conjectures, “I think the device makes the entire suit into a bug attractant. Question is, is this what stopped it?”

“We would need to do an autopsy to be sure. What about the other two?”

We move over to them, one of us to each. Enforcers never travel bunched up into battle. If you can take them out, it will be only one at a time. You can use up most of your ammunition that way. They even know to fake being slowed down so that you pump more at them. Nobody is chosen for Hell and survives this long without a lot of smarts.

“Mine has no device on it.”

“Mine either,” Bernice yells. We meet up again.

The bugs on my clothing suddenly take off at high speed. Bernice notices too as they leave her as well.

“Just when I have sort of gotten used to them. Where are they going?”

“All over it looks like. They are swarming like crazy. Look at them all. Never realized there were so many.” I shudder involuntarily.

“I just saw a flash. I can also smell burnt bug.” The smell of silicon carbon matrix is unique to say the least. Not pleasant either. I catch the smell a moment later. Her sense of smell has always been better than mine.

Following Bernice, we step past a scientist distorted beyond recognition. Glad I do not know who it is. Other than being here against our will they have been kind to us.

We reach a spot they are flying to with reduced numbers now. The charred remains of thousands of bugs are in a glowing ball around the device.

I reach in to brush away some of the bugs with a stick and the stick goes up in flames. I continue with a new and larger stick. I manage to get some of the bugs away from the surface of the device. A few more bugs quickly fill the gap and go up in a puff of smoke.

A new voice says, “I can see why you damped your sig so far we could not tell you apart from the plant life around here.”

Bernice answers, “The smallest ones feed on the plants at first, we obviously were not doing it well enough.” She rises and turns. I do the same. A Guardian covered completely in gold stands before us. A few

bugs try to attack it anyway without success and are then drawn to the zapper instead.

“Bernice and Jake I assume. I am Hei Long.” He pauses. Using TP to tell the others no doubt. A smaller Hu female and a Ceph female pop in. Both dressed in gold.

“Do you have suits for us?”

“Not here. Can't take the chance we would miss one. Hold your breath and close your eyes. Where we are going will make them sting.”

As soon as I do so I can feel the change in temperature and light direction. My clothes disappear and I can feel the rough texture of a Guardian robe being applied. It feels great! Next comes the gold layers, I assume from the weight increase and the plunge into darkness as my eyes are covered as well.

You are sealed. Safe to use internal breathing and TK now.

Thanks. No response. I scan about me and only Bernice is next to me. *Where did they go?*

No idea. Did not have a chance to scan before they left.

I feel a DS shift occur. I scan about us and find we are in a structure. I scan further and find we are in a sphere about ten meters in diameter. We are floating weightless. The gold disappears and I can open my eyes to see the sphere is lit from the surface.

A speaker tells us, “You two are in quarantine. I hope you understand. Anyone who has been on the surface is being treated this way.”

Bernice asks, “How long do we remain here?”

“We could not hold you of course, but we would like it if you remained for at least an eighth. We have full sensor arrays focused on you. Use what mass you find loose in the chamber and do as much TK activity short of leaving as you can. If anything is going to attack you it will likely do so when you are lit up. See you in an eighth.” The speaker goes dead with a click.

Amazing how long an eighth is when you are forced to endure it. The only loose mass was our robes and the two spheres of removed gold floating around with us. Nitrox atmosphere at least.

“Two in a row is not going to look good on our records. Best get started on our reports.” Always practical Bernice.

I sigh and make one of the gold spheres into a Ceph sphere and start another account of what has happened. Do I assume they found the other ones or do I start from the beginning? Would take much more than an eighth. I will assume they found one. Otherwise how would they have known where to look for us?

Finally Bernice chirps in frustration, “How long are they going to keep us here? Surely it has been an eighth by now. We have both been

using TK. Your sphere looks more complex than one of those egg sculptures from your history and if I have to morph my shape one more time I am likely to go mad first. No bugs, no ill effects. I sense nothing on us or in us.”

“They said they could not keep us. So, where do we go?”

“We need to finish our job. We need to find out what is going on down there.”

“Agreed! Is it worth another round in this sphere though?”

“We will not go unprepared this time. You don't see the other three here do you? So, it was only because we were silenced for so long that they had to be sure. Leave your sphere and I will leave my mem cube. Reports are done.” She almost whispers. Makes sense.

“I am worried about the others too.” She nods in affirmation.

We first clear the quarantine sphere to see where we are. An unrecognized world is below us. Never having seen Paradise from above I don't know if this is it or somewhere else. Nor can I figure out where we should be on the surface.

They did not make it easy.

Or they were in a hurry. When in doubt start over. We all know where Hell is.

We DS to Hell. Still in orbit, but at least the continents are recognizable, sort of. Nearly no water and what is there is very poisonous. Next we find where the Hell colony is. Some TK thought very early on to make a big red circle cross near the site so it can be seen easily from orbit. Down to the surface. Bernice is in a hurry. All I can do to keep up with her.

Night with no one about. I scan for life forms. No one is here. That's very strange.

Breach in the life support system. There is a makeshift tube to the transfer site. Open to atmosphere now.

The ruins are gone! The entire city structure for as far as I can scan is gone.

There are bodies in a cavern. Some did not make it out. Looks like Enforcers in full gear. Explains why they did not make it out. Too heavy to move fast.

What could destroy all the ruins though? They were planet wide.

And where is everyone? A few Guardians could rig temporary structures real fast. Put them in orbit or something. I would hate to imagine those things loose on a sentient world.

Let's just hope they did not all end up on Paradise.

Our next stop. Ready?

Gold suits and weapons first. I like those bug traps. Looks easy

enough to make. She attempts one. It sparks and nearly blows up before she dissolves it.

Maybe we don't have to kill them, just attract them so they don't go after us.

Yeah. A dozen or so very small psiotic power supplies float near her. I dupe hers so I have some as well.

Thinking out loud she TPs, *The secret appears to be in the ruins, but I want to be sure we have done what we can for the scientists. I remember well where we were in relation to the transfer station up on the ridge there. How come that is still there but the ruins are not?*

No idea. Let's bug out. Bernice gives me a dirty look.

On Paradise, next to the transfer station, or at least the wreck of what was a transfer station, we DS into Paradise.

"First the scientists."

"Right." I get side tracked too easily. I was already trying to scan for the ruins. The city is here, but is different, I think.

"I will transport both of us this time. At least that way we will end up at the same spot."

"Thanks, I really don't want to be alone right now either. Don't forget to cover your mouth with the gold." We should have been doing that already. The bugs were lower at transfer though. I remember that much. I place my hand on her shoulder and she moves us.

No bugs coming for the lights. Are we on the right world?

There were none at the landing point either. That was why the TK2 could visit without being killed right away. Did you see her at camp? I would hate to wear a limiter the rest of my life just to survive.

I have the camp on scan. Going in.

I soon locate it as well and follow. We are just outside the camp so as not to frighten anyone.

Bernice, if the bugs like psiotic energy so much, they must use it in some way. Wouldn't limiters affect them as well?

Probably, but at what level would the limiters have to be at? Probably too strong for us to be around. Good idea though. Maybe we can fine tune one to just their frequency later. That might work. Should be different from us. Each life form is different.

We walk into the camp. Of course being covered in gold is a giveaway that we are not your normal being, but they already knew that. At least they should recognize us. Our shape is the same as always.

The bodies are all gone at least.

We were in the decom sphere for at least an eighth. They did not waste any time. Even the Enforcers are gone though. They did not do that. Rach would have left 'reminders'.

If all were killed and not just the three near us. But where are the other TKs? Would they remove the Enforcers to remove all weapons from the scientists?

They were coded to each sentient. No use to them.

These are scientists. It would not take them long to bypass any security protocol.

Looks like a group meeting. They are together in the central space.

“Bernice and Jake! We thought the Enforcers got you for sure. We could not find your bodies anywhere.” Several run up to us like we are the same as always.

“So nice new look. What's up?” Like being gold is a normal thing for us to do.

Bernice answers them by broadcasting to all of them, *We have full use of our abilities again.*

“So the gold protects you huh? From the journals. Silver was the one who got it and barely survived. The group adapted by wearing collars. Here you have to be covered. Maybe over kill, but then again, any bite must be painful. Glad I don't have to wear that getup. Surprised you two did not do it right off though.” Talks a lot for a nerd.

Another adds, “Not much in the way of bugs left anyway. Those units the others left here have done their job. Have not seen one flare in nearly an eighth. Even Xixic has removed her limiter. Ah, keeps it in her pouch though.” Good idea. I am not removing my gold no matter what.

The entire planet is infested with the life forms. It just means it will take time for them to move in and fill the gap. Nice thought.

I ask, *Have the other Guardians shown up?*

“I saw the three that were with you two. The others did not believe me. Gold Guardians. Right. Have not seen anyone else. At least your appearance confirms my story.”

That means the ruins. I do not scan them, but they are no doubt hiding as well as they can to avoid bugs.

“Can we come too? We know we are in the dog house. What more could we do?” Not much.

You would be safer here.

“We know, but our curiosity. You understand?”

I sigh inside, *Of course. Pick two.* I don't want to be outnumbered again. He runs to the others where a discussion ensues. Two finally come forward. I recognize them, an archaeologist and a exo-biologist. Good choices. Farmer and kitchen help of late of course.

Both of us scan them thoroughly. Bernice TPs me, *No more surprises. Have to make sure they don't have something buried or hidden near the ruins.*

One hop then?

We are there in a flash. No patience. Not that I am feeling much either, I just have the need to check in. Gun shy.

The archaeologist, Hissup. Honest. I did not name her. Anyway. I see her jaw drop. Not a normal action for a Dia. Using a smaller scientist makes sense if we find a tight spot. Of course our scanning should do. Shit, I need to concentrate. We need to find the others.

#!The ruins are not ruins any more.!# She walks up to the wall and places a hand on them in disbelief. I never got to see them when we were here the first time. No bugs though. I see Hermes checking behind leaves on plants near us. I scan and notice there are traps nearby. They were here anyway.

Shall we go in?

“There is a door now! It wasn't there before.” He tries it. No go.

I DS all of us inside. Dark of course. Both Bernice and I make glow spheres. Which disappear almost immediately. Makes me wonder what will work and what forces are at play here. I try making an old fashioned LED light with chemical power source. It works. I wait. Still working. I make three more.

How did you remember those?

Had them as a kid before they were banned as being too energy inefficient.

I play with the design and make a hanging lantern variant. Easier to handle and lights up a larger space.

#!Where to?!#

“The ruins cover the entire planet.”

#!Let them find us then.!# She takes off at random down some passage way, pausing to examine walls and artifacts. We follow. I peer into rooms as we pass. There are tables and artifacts, now in their proper place as if they just left an arm ago. Very eerie. There are colors too. Can't make sense of the patterns though. Writing?

We all had to spend time in Hell of course. If I close my eyes and try and remember how it looked there. The pattern matches. Interesting. I have the feeling that we have been left out of the party.

This way! I TP.

Hell.

Precisely. Going to the main meeting room Obvious place to set up a command center.

“You two know the layout of Hell?”

Required we spend time there as part of our training.

“Shit, and I thought my training was tough.” You have no idea. For two years we had to pretend to be one of the prisoners. The expected life-

time at the beginning. Things have improved, but if we 'die' after two years it does not arouse suspicions among them.

Walking with an archaeologist is likely to take us two life times to get there. I am tempted to DS us there. The room scans empty. I am hoping that we will find some clue that scanning does not see.

Bernice comes up behind her, Dia to Dia. Hissup looks back and sees her expression. She picks up the pace. Hermes is not finding much to see and is up next to me, Hu to Hu. Or is this a gender thing?

We finally make it. Hissup moved faster but still could not help but stop at anything interesting. An eighth in the decom sphere does not seem so bad now. There is not even any dust on the floor. Not sure I am going to find anything here.

#!This does not belong.!# Hissup is standing over something on the main table, altar, whatever. Both Bernice and I immediately go over. There is a pattern on the surface that sort of looks like writing.

Nanobots!

The pattern changes. Those things are hard to program properly. Ron maybe? Looks like something in Hopi now.

#!A Hu language most certainly. The First Ones would not use it would they?!# She tried to brush away the pattern but it is not affected by her hand. Latched onto the surface well.

Two point five seven two kilometers below. Glad they kept to numbers. I learned Hopi, but have forgotten most of it. Silver's group may have used it more extensively, but it really did not catch on with us second and third gens. Maybe because we have to learn so many other languages just to com with each other. I learned Dia first of course.

From here we go alone. Sorry. Bernice nods and I DS the two to outside the city. Can't call them ruins anymore. No dust means not a ruin.

We dissolve the lights. Not knowing what is down there don't want to attract any more attention than I have to. The chamber is huge. Amazing architecturally. There are sentients arranged in a circle. Everyone is quiet and motionless.

Now what?

Slow time I assume. I sense very little psiotic activity.

I hate slow time.

So do I, but what choice do we have?

Let's look around some more. I don't recognize anyone here. Where are Rachael, Mandhi and Hei Long? Anyone from the Enterprise would do, Silver or Rooi?

Looks like we can lose the suits.

Unless the bugs are what caused them to be like this.

Scan around us. There are hundreds if not thousands of sentients all

like this.

More than that. I think this is world wide. Still lots of space though. Are they expecting more?

They are all in this suspended state too. There are sentients that I have not even seen at the Center. What the freep is going on here?

Found them, I think. She taps me on the shoulder and we DS to another chamber.

Rachael, Mandhi and Hei Long at least. Don't know the rest.

A creature I have never seen before PSs though the wall. About Dio sized, insect like. Eight legs with some nasty mouth parts.

Is this the mother of all the others?

Not going for us and we are using TP to com.

Another sentient coming in for the big sleep?

It has just seen us, or scanned us. A seven at least.

Honored one, maybe we can work together to solve this mystery.

Nothing. Is this a First One? This is their world. Usually life forms are similar. Certainly looks related to those outside.

Our sig is low. Lose the suit and manifest fully. Show our colors.

Right. Of course. We look like pests here, not TKs.

I dissolve my suit and come out of my cocoon. Feels good to be fully alive again.

Nothing. It is simply not interested in you or us.

"It's leaving"

Changed it's mind when it heard you speak. Sure enough it is now facing us, I think. Those eyes do not exactly track.

"Hello, my name" SPLAT! My face is covered in some kind of gooey substance. I scan it. Mucopolysaccarides. Bug spit. I dissolve it.

I open my mouth to say something else and I hear a very loud chittering sound from it. Okay, it does not like the sound of my voice.

I TP to it, Hello, my name is Jake.

Shut up and keep quiet. It looks like it is going to goo me again. Sentient anyway. I dampen my TK and wait.

It goes up to what looks like Rachael. Now what?

Shit! It is removing psiotic energy from her. It is FEEDING!

She dissolves the mouth parts of the creature, but new ones grow back instantly.

I DS the creature to the surface. It comes back and resumes instantly. I DS it to a random world. A block of stone appears where it was in its exact shape. It appears again a meter away and approaches her again. I DS Rachael to the surface and it goes to the next victim.

Shit this thing is persistent.

Move everyone in the room.

Then it goes to the next room.

I TP it after making a full strength shield around myself, Last warning. *Stop or we apply lethal force.*

Rachael pops in looking better and very much alive.

“What are you two doing?”

I answer, “Trying to save everyone this creature is feeding on.”

“Did you ever think to ask if he had permission before attacking?”

My mouth drops open.

Bernice comes up without her suit, “Okay, did it have permission to stick its mouth parts into your skull and extract psiotic energy from you?”

She smiles. The creature stops feeding and straightens up. It then changes shape.

“Jesus!” I exclaim.

“At your service.”

The others stand up.

“Glad you made it. We were getting worried when you disappeared from the decom sphere early. Thought something was out to get you.”

“Why? Why the game? We could have killed you.”

Jesus laughs, “Oh that has been tried before. You were outnumbered ten to one in this room alone. I was perfectly safe. As to why, it is required. Come I will take you to our sector leader. All will be explained.”

Jesus leads the way, the others stay behind and resume their sitting. Who could be called leader to Him? You can bet I was totally weirded out meeting Him for the first time. Let's just say it paled compared to meeting him here.

We DS to an even lower chamber. The crust is thicker, I have already scanned that, but this chamber is much warmer than where we were. Maybe the sector leader is used to a warmer climate.

“There is light ahead at least.” I comment. Jesus turns and puts a finger to his lips.

Do not ask questions. Only listen and answer if asked. No more.

We enter a room with a cloaked figure in the center and no one else apparent.

Jesus motions us to sit. He then leaves.

The figure turns around and the cloak falls. It is another one of those creatures that Jesus pretended to be. Is this a real one?

My heart is pounding. I reach out and takes Bernice's hand. She squeezes me tight. One thing our species have in common.

You will excuse me, I am not good at sounding your languages. I understand you have more than one?

That is correct, Bernice answers.

Forgive the silence, but we are sensitive to certain frequencies in

your soundings.

It does something with a container that appears before it. Smoke comes out of it. It breaths through spiracles in its abdomen.

We are an old species. Even with psiotics we have needs better met by physical means.

The container disappears. The creature seems to slouch.

The demonstration was necessary as your species has an aversion to species different than yourselves. We used to be the same. Much time. So much time.

A creature appears. Bright green feather like projections and an unusually high psiotic field. Three arms and a head with three ears on top? It bleats and the larger creature immediately plunges its mouth parts into an opening on top of the creature's head. Both of us squeeze harder for a moment. The smaller creature jerks rapidly and then becomes still. The sound was in our frequency range. Probably why our voices bother it. Probably sets off an instinct to feed.

This is how we feed. We are psiotic creatures. These beings were bred to have no sentience. There was a time when that would not have mattered.

I want so much to ask, but we were told not to. Patience Jake, patience.

You will remain here. Not a request. It PSs out of the room. Similar TK abilities anyway.

We wait.

We are always waiting.

We waited for an eighth, then a second eighth.

“How about we split? Nothing is happening here.”

“To where? I am guessing most of the others are here some place and we are waiting for the final group to go through 'processing'.”

“Then why are we here? At least we can move to a cooler chamber.”

“I thought it was just me. I am using a lot of psiotic ability just to maintain.”

That's because you are in the wrong room. We have been looking all over for you. DS to my location and keep quiet.

“Whose that?”

“Don't care it is above us and must be cooler.”

Still holding hands we DS to the higher chamber. There is a glow ball in the center. Hate trying to guess colors based on chemical composition. Not reliable. Too many ways colors can be formed.

Pu and another Cat are next to each other towards the edge.

Sit on either side of us.

We sit together or we leave. Ozi PSs in and sits next to Pu. We walk

to the other side of Oz and sit. Slowly others come in, Jordan, Spider and Ravi, George and Hashra, Aimee and Graas. A Dia I don't recognize. Bet she is known by the others. Simone comes in and completes our small circle.

Where are Silver and Rooi?

Shhh! The other Cat must be Owa. She is wearing clothing. Only Cat I know who would do that. Must piss off Pu to no end. I smile.

We are to form one mind. Once we have done this, we will link with the other one minds around us and so on.

Will the First Ones then feed on us like they did the other creatures?
Glad I am not the one who asked this time.

They do not feed on sentients. What you saw was a process that is used to align the thoughts of an individual to fit more effectively. If this happens to you, do not resist. Do not be afraid.

How come you know this?

Those of us who first arrived received additional instruction. Now please begin. Just like in class, clear your thoughts and reach out to those around you.

Class? Am I with beginners? I don't think so. A creature comes into the room. I am not convinced they are the First Ones. It comes towards me. I shut up my thoughts.

WE ARE ONE.

Still gives me the creeps and I don't care that everyone knows.

My mind feels ten times larger. I can see what look like memories, only they aren't mine. I know Bernice well enough. Being so close, you can't help but pick up things. Leakage. Owa! Eeuu! That's gross.

I feel a presence near me, but locked in One Mind mode I can't wake up to scan near me. It enters my mind and I find myself drifting back to Unity.

I AM THE WORLD.

I AM THE UNIVERSE.

!PUSH!

Rejects

We were once such as you. To us you represent immature forms of ourselves. Grubs really.

It cleans an antenna with a foreleg.

Maybe in a few Cycles you can join us. I don't think so. This whole set up seems wrong.

We delivered the Black 'thn to the end of time.

Ah, when will that be this time? The cycle is defined. Rest will come. You are only attempting to interfere. Be gone!

So the Diversity Imperative is a Lie.

We each have our roles. Yours is elsewhere. Ours is here. Be gone!

Don't play with us, we know the secret of the 'THN.

We teach that to our grubs the first year of their existence. You know nothing. You are interfering. Firetime draws near. You are distorting the alignment. You must be intelligent enough not to wish destruction on the innocent. Leave now!

It fusses with something. Not tech. Not 'thn.

How come the 'thn fear you?

They are servants nothing more. They are created beings just as you are. If a machine malfunctions do you feel for its loss? Your sentience is a mockery of our own.

We are not level nines.

It cocks its third arm. Of course you are. We made you that way. The limit for your kind.

And the limit for your other servants, the 'thn?

Twelve, you know this as nines.

The 'thn fear us, even the twelves, especially the twelves.

Impossible. Now be gone. Firetime is near.

I have never been with a 'thn, yet I scan nine. Explain that?

Rare, but possible. My patience is at an end.

I are suddenly on an unknown earth alone. Like I don't know my way home or the way to Paradise. I float to avoid running into anything, then go back to E35A and then to Paradise. Silver comes in a moment later.

He shows, ~I stopped off at Mirror. The magma is nearly to the surface.~

~It will not be long. We need to get the scientists off of Paradise now.~ He acknowledges. We DS straight to the camp.

We first work to DS all of the living to the clearing.

~Where do you want to send them?~ I think about it.

~No time for a judgment call. How about E1? No infrastructure for

them to mess up. Should be pretty clean by now.~

~One change first I think.~ All of their clothing and anything they were holding disappears. Of course some of the sens don't wear much to begin with. I am sure they will miss their precious tool belts though.

"It would appear that you don't need tech to do your tricks." It would appear not.

#!I got a psiotic reading before they removed our tech. They are both off the charts.!#

#Were you using one of the newly recalibrated versions?#

#!Affirmative.!#

"Then I would suggest being very nice to these two."

These are scientists and creative. Maybe we should use them to our advantage.

Indeed.

"Sit." After the shock of a Ceph who speaks Standard, they sit in a circle around us.

"Here is the situation." Without the Enterprise I have to make do with local mass and TK to make an artificial structure representing the froth earths.

"This is us or rather E1."

"We are on E1! I thought that was only a myth. We need to spread out and investigate."

"No you need to sit and listen. Otherwise your next stop will be Hell. You REALLY do not want to be there right now." I acknowledge Silver.

"This is E1. I am afraid we are not the center of the universe." I light up the E35s through E105s.

Silver helps, "Our other inhabited worlds are not of any particular interest either. This is probably why we were ignored for so long."

I continue, "Here is Paradise and its Mirror. They are currently moving rapidly towards each other. There will be over a million Guardians from all around the universe accumulated in subterranean caverns on Paradise when this goes off."

"On Mirror the magma, Magmotics if you know the journals, are spinning at an ever increasing speed. This will soon melt the crust."

"Once that happens the two worlds will merge in the one hundred and sixty ninth dimensional plane."

"This will result in a breach in the time space continuum."

!!Starting another froth cycle!!

I told you they were good. I show corrected.

#!This representation then is also a dimensional projection.!#

"Yes."

#!Note all of our worlds are on the surface of the sphere formed.!#

“And all the dead worlds are near the core.”

I did not show them those worlds! He smiles.

!!It is obvious then!!

#!Yes. It all makes sense. This is how they reproduce!#

“Why?” Silver asks. I think he already knows, he just wants to see if they do.

A small Hu with gray hair comes forward, “The First Ones are a very old species. Their genetic diversity is very low and degree of homology is very high. They can't reproduce by any normal means any more. Since this apparently has been going on since the beginning of our time, they are survivors from before the big bang.”

^We need to stop them.^

“We need to rescue the others. I will not have anyone sacrificed for their sake.” Silver is particularly sensitive on the topic of sens dying unnaturally before their time. Cultural differences.

I just don't like bullies. Problem of starting out under a matriarch.

^Should be the same thing.^

#!Yes. If we remove the psiotic and control circuits, the Guardians, then their system collapses!#

!They are in deep by now. This will be a very delicate operation or many will die.! She throws a rock at my model and worlds crash into each other. A sixth of the model is destroyed. That is a lot of sentients, even as dispersed as they are now.

Silver smiles, “Fortunately they have just started. They are in slow time. It is the only way to link that many minds. The breach will not occur for hundreds of years at the earliest.”

#!But the earlier we move the less damage we do!#

~Unless we want to damage something.~

The Ba TK2 shows back to me. *I am impressed.*

~To prevent them from even attempting this again. Harmonics would allow them to try again in approximately two hundred thousand years.~

^That would be tricky, but then they have been around for awhile. Things must have gone wrong before. They have long memories.^

“Set up the display again. I love playing with multidimensional manifolds.” I am surprised. The larger they are the more likely they avoid the delicate mental gymnastics.

I do so.

!We will have to remove all of them at once or they will figure this out.!

^It is the timing that will be critical.^

#!It would help to know the full extent of your capabilities. Otherwise it would be easy to make a mistake or chose a path that is more haz-

ardous than necessary.!#

They all look at us.

Silver comments, "Moving a large ship cannot be done quickly. A million Guardians when they reach full capacity all in slow time is the largest ship ever devised. But we have the advantage of being in fast time."

I add, "And they don't believe we can do anything. They will try and stop us if we try though."

!Their attention will be elsewhere. Are all of the Guardians in place yet?!

"No. More will be arriving. They do an orientation for new arrivals."

#!And this orientation is in our time frame?!#

"Yes."

^You will need to wait until they are linked into the slow time as well.^

"They may not ever link. They move from group to group aligning sentient's psiotics to some standard."

#!That means they will die in the process. These few will be sacrificed for the good of the whole. The others will be at the edge of the green zone awaiting the front.!#

"The old and the sick are the ones usually sacrificed. The old will have much wisdom."

!Both will be slower to react.!

"Hey!" Silver exclaims.

"How old are you?" All eyes on Silver.

"Not a day over twenty five," he hesitates and then in a softer sound, "million years."

^^A baby then,^^ someone in the back exclaims. This gets the humor response from most. Actually compared to the First Ones he really is a 'grub'.

^Okay, out with it as the Hu say.^

"Demonstrations would not be appropriate. They may have watchers."

!We are on the outer edge. They will be preparing closer to the green line. They will not bother with us until much later or if we come in closer.!

^Is there no reason why they not cross the front many times? They could reproduce many, many times in one cycle. It would be characteristic of a spawning species to want to continue in a similar fasion.^

"That would be very easy actually. Even we had to be careful when we mapped the front to find Coordinate Zero, what you know as Paradise."

!We are at the outer edge of the galaxy and apparently the froth also. Makes one feel insignificant.!

“That is our strength. So, what can you do?”

We both hesitate.

~We actually don't know. For all we know we may not have any limits.~

“Bad, very bad. Untested abilities. Very bad. And we can't afford to test them.”

^^The conservative approach then.^^

#!How many Guardians do you have with you then?!#

“Just the two of us. If we are infinite, then more would only be harder yet to control in a coordinated way.”

!Ah, but more could be used as a distraction. They would expect all of the Guardians to be with them except for the two of you. If more show up after they have begun then they would be thrown off. At the very least these Guardians could walk among them to assess.!

“You are proposing that we make Guardians of all of you. Even after the fact that you kidnapped two of us for your own benefit.”

“We were trying to draw your attention to Paradise. We knew even then that there was something special about the place. We tried for years to get Luna to investigate, but they would not deviate from their precious schedule.”

“The Guardians who ran Luna are among those trapped.”

^You realize that if we fail, they will die. I see no way that any of the worlds below the green line will have any survivors, even psiotic ones.^

“They do have a point Rooi.” A very good one.

However, ~I just don't like to reward rule breakers.~

“They could easily die in this project. I think that risking their lives counts as a way of saying they are sorry.”

I counter with, “The First Ones will expect just this move from us. There are millions of sentients we could raise to TK8 at least.”

!For some reason they do not fear this. That scares me. Me too. Me too.

“We will let you know our decision. Make yourselves at home. It will be dark soon.”

^^Wait. They fear tech! The answer has to be in that.^^

“True. Every form of tech more advanced than a chemical powered light they removed. Even the Enterprise itself from one world over. They moved all of us straight to the caverns.”

“Also illustrates that they are watching at least nearby worlds.”

#!That makes sense actually. Not every Guardian will get it right. They must need all of them, not just the ones that figure it out exactly.#!

We should at least make them some shelters.

I hate to mess up E1 so soon, but under the circumstances.

Silver stares into space for a moment and then structures start to form. They look very much like the surrounding rock. Even scan as the same substance.

“Caves?” I ask.

“A little better than that. Foamed to provide better insulation and sealed to prevent water from getting in. Why don't you work on the water aspect, that being your forte.”

I acknowledge and begin. Water table is high enough here to form a spring most of the year. Then cisterns for the rest. I tie those into catches I make in Silver's structures. Baths next. I have been among Hu too long. I should have started with the baths. Grrr, soakers. I am even starting to think their way.

When I am done I scan that Silver has added floors and compartments for storage. Clothing and food fill them.

They start to move in and we leave without comment.

“So, we have reinfected E1.” Silver looks sad. He spent way too long alone with OM.

“This time for the better. There are more than Hu this time. More are needed though. Not enough genetic diversity to sustain them for more than a few gen.”

“How many do the First Ones need to accomplish their task?”

“Unknown. Not even sure how much time we have. Hard to be accurate over thirty five million years.”

“And no Enterprise and crew to go over calculations again. I don't see a particular problem with getting our own sens out, but I have no idea what that will do to their setup. Will they just wait until enough other sens show up and continue or will they come after us?”

“This would not be a good time to come after us and their own waiting at the green line are not going to risk it. Dangerous even for us this close to inversion.”

“I am still not comfortable with using the scientists. Even if they did wrong, their intention was right. We need sens with their thinking for the future if we are to have one.”

“Agreed. We may not have enough time to act as it is, much less spending a few years minimum training them for a suicide mission.”

“Well, it is time I introduced you to the other side of the equation, what we call fast time. Most psiotics learn of slow time by interfacing with OM.”

“And we need tech. Lots of tech. How did you say it, ah, the more Rube Goldberg the better.”

“With ultra 'thn laminates and quantum structures. Something that looks like a 'thn, but nearly indestructible.”

“Very scary in other words.”

“Exactly.”

“Indestructible should not be a problem. Folded into one sixty nine space should take care of that. They would have to practically tear apart the universe to undo that.”

Silver smiles, “Similar to the 'THN and that would not be wise so near to their project. Glad you are on our side. Make it so!”

It still took us nearly four eight days. We made hundreds of them. They looked like level 13 'thn would on purpose. If the 'thn were afraid of them, then chances are they would be afraid of the 'thn, just more knowledgeable. Most creatures have an instinctive fear of something that is bigger than expected. Though not intelligent or alive like a 'thn, they were huge psiotic energy sucking devices all the same. That alone should make them sick. We both got good readings on the First Ones while there, so we adjusted these to their frequencies, but not limited to. They may be able to mess with themselves in ways we are not aware of.

We planted very tiny passive data collectors of the lowest tech we could think of on both Mirror and Paradise. The ramp up was proceeding, but not as fast as we first thought. We did sense others coming in and debated on whether or to tell them. Figured our plans would work or not work. There was too much chance of a spy or leak, intentional or otherwise. Most came in as singles on their own abilities. A few, very few, came in on structures in groups. Nothing as large as what we did and nothing even remotely similar in design. Not surprising.

All of them ended up in the caverns. All of them ended up in slow time helping to accelerate the Magmotics underneath both Mirror and Paradise. In dimensional space the two were getting closer and closer. It would not be long now. If we went too soon then they would find them in time and learn they were really nothing. We needed for them to get worried at just the right time.

Of course that was when it all went wrong. Not something we did exactly. The systems actually sputtered. The worlds both suffered terrible earthquakes like something was horribly out of balance. The currents below were starting to slow.

This did not seem like a normal part of the procedure. We waited and watched. Nothing happened at first. Maybe they were just tired and everyone needed to take a rest. A few days off and then push again. Or maybe there were phases to the process.

“Shit. Something just happened.” Silver is upset. He continues, “There is a change in the overall psiotic signature. We need to get closer.

We won't be able to tell from the remotes.”

“The packages are ready. This may be our only chance. They will be distracted by whatever happened.”

“Or hyper aware and vigilant.” True.

“We still need to know what is going on. We just need to go in with all eyes open.” Physical and psiotic.

“Amen.”

We arrived at the old scientists camp near the now dead portal. It has been a couple of years since we moved everyone. Surprisingly, nearly all traces of their existence are gone. Just a few stones and rusty places where the metals they had brought with them had fallen.

All of our sensors are in place, but you could not tell from the looks of the plant life that this entire place would be burned to a crisp soon. In fact the plants looked like they had grown too much in the time. It is like everything above ground is going faster. Must be all the extra psiotic energy. It felt electric.

The 'ruins' were still there, sealed tighter than a vault. We could not sense anything below the ground level. Not a good sign. We could go beyond our 'expected' abilities, but we would most certainly be noticed. Not yet time to show our arms.

“I want to know why we have never felt the tug that all the other psiotic beings must have felt to be drawn here. None of our group did either.”

“Did you ever ask them?”

“No, never got the chance.”

“Then maybe you should. They are right behind you.” How did I miss that?

I turn around as fast as I can and there in front of me are several hundred sentients. Faces that I recognize. Jesus is in the lead.

They come up to us like it is a normal spring day.

“Good day Rooi. How are you?”

“What the hell happened?” Silver practically shouts.

Jesus turns to Bernice and Jake. They come forward.

Bernice answers, “It was not intentional. We really didn't mean to do it.”

The sensors respond.

“It is starting up again. It will take a few days to catch up to where they were before.”

“Looks like all of you got yourselves kicked out of Paradise. I am especially surprised at you Jesus. I thought you are one of the First Ones in disguise.”

“We don't have much time. We need to act if we are going to.”

Jesus asks, "What do you mean?"

"This whole set up will result in the death of everyone below. They lied. They are using the psiotic energy to cause another froth event. Everyone who is here dies in the process, including the First Ones who are here."

I add, "It is how they reproduce. The others wait for the froth front to pass them, then they move onto another world and wait again. For all we know they used E0 the last time."

Jesus answers, "We know. You can't hide many secrets in One Mind. At first they were not linked in, just aligning everyone. But when it started to go wrong they had to link in to figure out what was going on. They traced it to those two." Jesus looks amused rather than upset. Not much upsets him.

"We felt something wrong. It just didn't taste right. Taste is not the right word, but I don't know how else to express it. We tried to fix it along with Ozi and Pu who were next to us. We tried to make it taste right. The First Ones tried to intervene. They tried hard, but in One Mind, it is hard to locate where exactly a problem is. As more and more sentients joined in, it became even harder. By the time they did our entire group of sentients were 'contaminated' and their only choice was to stop the presses and let us out."

Bernice adds, "They took away our psiotic abilities and from what you say and we felt in the One Mind that would mean they intended us to die on the surface in a most horrible manner."

I ask Jesus, "You too apparently. How do you feel?"

"Naked for the first time in my life since you know when."

"Gather everyone close. We will take you to E0 where the scientists from Farpoint are staying. They will take you in. It will be tight, but if we don't come back it will be a good life. If we do, we will repair the damage." Jesus shakes his head and steps away from the others.

They gather close. Silver will have to take a couple of steps because of the ripples starting to form around us again on Paradise as they ramp up their psiotic motor.

Jesus says, "Take me to Jerusalem. I know where."

"On E1?"

"No, E0. We will not affect anything in the time line. They were not there at this time in their history."

"Silver was TK9 by then. He will notice us coming in."

"Not if you are careful. You are the only one who can do this. I am not the same as all of you. The only way for me is to return to Jerusalem."

I move us in several hops to my home world, E35A. From there we

go to where Jerusalem would be. Underwater here. We are in a bubble for Jesus' sake.

"I can feel it, even on your world. We are near."

"Wait, on E0 Jerusalem is radioactive slag. You will be killed almost instantly by the radiation."

"You're right. It will affect you as well. You cannot go. You will have to DS me there. At least we can be sure no one will be there or notice me. I will be fine, what I have to do does not take long. Trust me."

"Silver trusts you completely. Therefore so will I." I remember some of Hu history and his role. I add, "May the Lord be with you."

He smiles and responds, "And also with you. Go in Peace Rooi. Do what you need to do. We will meet again." I DS him to E0. I wait a few minutes and then leave to return to Paradise.

"What happened? When I returned you were not here. It is not safe to hang here." I DS both of us to a related dead world. I don't want to be too far away.

Jesus had to go home to be healed. He said for us to do what we had to do. He does not ask any more questions, but does look concerned.

I tell Silver, *This is a little tricky. I want to pull the devices there then DS them into solid rock on Paradise in precise locations.*

He thinks about it then says, *We need to go to a world that is not in the actual location around the sun that Paradise is in. We need to do an absolute DS rather than the more usual relative one. We set up your array in space. It will be easier to align and check. Then we DS the entire array at once to Paradise.*

It will have to be one of the dead world froths. The green ones are too far away. The ripples are getting to be really hard to work with further out.

He disappears for a moment. When he returns he comments, *Okay. I know where we are in relation to Paradise. Bring the devices here. Let's do this.*

I bring the spheres here in groups. He DSs them to orbit. Once all of them are there, we go up and move them to the proper location in space that corresponds to Paradise in absolute coordinates.

Are these solar or galactic coordinates? I ask. The sun seems much further away by the time we arrive.

Totally absolute. He grins. *They will not expect our being able to do this.*

I hope not. These things will need to be folded into the right dimensional space once they are placed. I dare not do this ahead of time. Once unfolded I will not be able to move them. I hope they can't either.

He nods his understanding.

Rooi, this goes beyond the original thought doesn't it?

I acknowledge affirmation. It takes me several eighths to align the spheres. There will be no second chances. I suspect Silver is getting upset, but he never TPs anything. Instead he appears to be learning the arrangement as well as possible.

He finally comments, *I will DS them into place.*

I sigh inside, *I will push the button, the unfolding.*

We will be in Paradise space when this goes down.

I know. What ever happens we need to share their fate.

We back off from the array to a location that seems important to him.

We are ready. We grasp arms and he touches his head to my mantle.

Both of us close our eyes. This will be hard enough with TK without normal senses confusing or distracting me.

We are playing with fire, a universe sized one.

I feel the transition. I PUSH the unfolding. It snaps into one piece in one hundred sixty nine space. They will not be able to move this without destroying the entire world. Maybe more.

Beautiful, absolutely beautiful.

I had the 'THN as a model.

It shows.

I open my eyes. We are in orbit above Paradise. We DS down to the camp.

Jesus is waiting, "Did you know there are fish on this world?" Smells good. Three are on spit above a fire. The sun has long set.

"Everything apparently went fine at home." He nods.

"You are not a First One then. How did they convince you otherwise?"

"They knew some keys words and thoughts."

"Ah, so at one time they did have a spiritual side."

"But have lost it, yes. The Buddha said it before I did. We are born, we grow old, we get sick, we die. All of us will eventually suffer that fate. Some later than others, but no one is immune, not even cultures, species, worlds or universes."

"They forgot that. Not surprising considering how old they must be."

"This will stop the frothing won't it Roo." There is sadness in Jesus' eyes.

"Yes. The question is, did we have the right to do it? We have interfered with what was a normal event for a very, very long time."

"The Diversity Imperative. We have restored the Diversity Imperative."

"They will die now won't they?" I ask. No one answers. They don't have to.

Silver asks, "How long will it take for your device to work?"

"It already has, they just don't realize it yet. It works slowly, gradually. All the TKs in all the froths would not be able to supply enough psiotic power now. It would only accelerate the end actually. The harder they push the faster it will end."

"What will happen to the TKs below us?"

"They are starting to wake on their own. That is what this does. It simply disconnects them from the First Ones network. They should still have their abilities as well. I did not jerk them free like the First Ones did to our sentients. They will also be immune now. The First Ones will not be able to touch them."

"Will they adapt?"

"No, it has already removed their psiotic abilities by matching their frequency. They are no more powerful than the bugs around us. They can still suck psiotic energy from others, but it will not gain them any abilities. They will live out a normal lifespan for their kind. They will not die in fire on the surface of this world as they intended for us."

Jesus asks, "Which begs the question. Why did they let you two go?"

I answer, "They said it was because they did not believe we could do anything."

Silver answers, "No. They lied. A nine could have simply have DSd the planet to empty space using Roo's method, even in this froth any misalignment would prevent the froth breach from occurring. Granted, it would have destroyed Paradise and Mirror instantly."

"So, we were actually kinder than they expected."

"Or hoped for. These were already under a death sentence, so if anything we have extended their lives. There are others out there unaffected though."

I show a sigh, "They will come here to investigate and be caught in the trap. Once here, they will not be able to leave or even warn the others."

"Coming home will have meaning again. I wonder if what they really intended was to eliminate the Guardians below. Genocide."

"Speaking of which, Guardians are appearing on the surface. Some are already leaving."

"Small groups are gathering to discuss what happened. I am feeling a psiotic sigh of relief, thankfulness and wonder." Jesus smiles after he says this.

"Some will not know how to get home. We did not really understand the froth in the twenty five million years before we merged with the Magmotics."

"The bugs here will start to attack those who come to the surface. It is

likely the First Ones will feed on them as well.”

ATTENTION ALL SENTIENTS ON THIS WORLD. COVER YOURSELVES WITH GOLD TO PREVENT ANY NATIVE LIFE-FORMS FROM HARMING YOU.

We repeat this for over an eighth. By the time we finish there is a crowd around us. Easy enough for a TK to figure out where the message was coming from.

“They are so quiet.”

Jesus smiles, “Now you know how I felt.”

“Some have died.”

“Yes. The First Ones got desperate.”

“We have sentients of our own to take care of. Even if we have to return to help, it will be easier with helpers.”

Teller

A tall thin old male is walking down a mountain trail in the early morning. He carries a beautiful hard wood carved staff made from the heart wood of a walnut tree. The staff is in the traditional eight fold pattern of a Teller.

On his feet are shoes made from soft leather with intricate bead work of sky blue, white, red and black. The patterns are from sentients from this world long gone.

His clothing is made from flax cloth. Filigree of silver and gold is finally woven into a pattern long forgotten and known only to the Trader's Guild. Embroidered symbols of many colors help illustrate the stories told by a Master Teller.

In his pockets are left over bread and cheese given to him by the sentients of the last village he passed through. He left at earliest dawn before others had risen, preferring to avoid a scene.

The forest is mixed oaks and pine. He passes an orchard cleared into the forest. Nothing large, but he notices several persimmons forgotten on the ground. As he passes he scoops them up without stopping.

At a stream he pauses to drink of the cool clean water and notices a newt foraging in the leaf litter for worms and insects. Fish are in the stream and one jumps to catch a low flying midge with a loud splash.

He has a long day ahead of him and continues his journey. Most communities are at least a day's fast walk away. There are dangers for anyone alone in the woods, but it is not from sentients. More danger from the near sentients; cats, bears, and dog variants. Of course the small ones; snakes, spiders and poisonous plants take their toll as well. A Master Teller would be well aware and trained for most possibilities. He sees deer droppings and finds a cat footprint further down the trail.

A growl alerts him to a cat in the bush. The smell of fresh blood tells him she is protecting her kill and not interested in him. He continues on. Up a steep grade, over a craggy crest and down the other side. This side gets less rain and shows a higher percentage of oaks to pine. Signs of a fire a year or two ago with small oaks appearing at regular intervals now that the brush is gone.

He follows the contours down slope to another stream. Lots of rocks and good flow, but a well built bridge allows him across. He looks up and sees midst around the peaks above. There will be rain later today. He hurries his pace.

Without stopping he consumes the persimmons and the last of the cheese and bread. In a rain the bread and cheese would be ruined. The

persimmons he eats because he likes them. Seeing a pile of acorns he fills a sack with them. A good harvest this fall. He will tell the others when he arrives.

Late afternoon the rain starts with mostly drizzle. Fortunately he sees the village ahead. They are farmers. Their stock are a small breed of ungulate, a deer variant. Smaller animals are easier to raise. They do not require as much space at night. They are fortunate in having found a cave complex to house the animals and not had to dig one out as most communities do. Not large, but enough to serve the village's needs.

"Teller, over here. You made good time. We have warm food ready and a dry bed later." Young ones of several species stream past him on some playful enterprise. He smiles.

"Much appreciated. The next valley over has an abundance of acorns. A sample." He hands over the sack of acorns and makes his way towards the village complex. The houses are linked together for security with three sides into the hill as well. Keeps out the mid sized predators. Doors stop the cats and the fact the non TK versions really don't like sentients too much. Vigilance for the small ones of course, ever vigilant.

Sens are gathered around tables helping themselves to food. The Teller gets in line and does the same. No one comments that most have never seen him before. Being a Teller is enough to vet him. Anyone pretending to be a Teller does not last long or ends up in the Teller Guild if found out by another Teller and is good enough. Most decide differently when they find out how long the apprenticeship is. There are no 'young' Tellers seen by the public at least.

The more normal route is for a community to nominate a likely candidate and a Teller to make an evaluation. It takes the rec of at least two Tellers to gain an interview and then at least a years wait after that to be sure this is what you really want to do for the rest of your life. No going back for any guild really. All of them have similar requirements. Few get turned down after their walkabout, but the rest of your life is a hard decision. Best to be sure. He rubs his Teller's brand on his forehead. Small but noticeable if you know where to look.

Our Master Teller made that decision himself a long time ago and has never regretted it. Being more comfortable outside than inside, yet enjoying a good meal prepared by someone else and a warm, dry place to sleep. Who could ask for anything more? The food here is warm and good. Must be close to final harvest. Scattered orchards, not the rows from the Hu past, small multi species vegetable plots, some grains and of course the deer. The cooks combine what they have to make for a good stew. Hopefully the bed will not disappoint either. Not that a leaf and pine bow bed has not been used when between villages. Freedom has a

price, but it was worth it.

The group quiets down. Soon he will earn his keep. What tale for tonight. He looks around. They are not well off, but not hungry either. Comfortable, but not a lot of reserve. Something to make them feel good about their choices then. Doing the right thing is often under appreciated.

A Health Guild member comes up to him, "Master, how goes it in Green Leaf?!"

"They are still under quarantine, but it looks good. No more deaths. The Dio and Dia have been a big help in caring for the Hu and Ba who were affected. Being multi sentient has proven to be stronger yet again. As soon as a vaccine is developed they will be opened up. A few more moons is my guess. The chip I left with your reader has more details." She nods and lets a Hu elder with a child in tow approach him.

"Master Teller I would like you to meet my grand daughter." She does not need to say any more. The Teller knows what this is about and why the child is here.

"You will set next to me tonight. May I have your name?"

Very nervous, they always are at this age, she answers, "My name is Vella. I want to be a Teller in the worst way. I have been practicing all year and I know that I will do well and not embarrass the Guild." She pauses, "I'm talking too much aren't I?" She is finally quiet.

The Teller smiles. A few years and no one would recognize her. Confidence comes with practice. The most important trick of the Teller Guild is to learn how to slow down and draw out the story, without putting anyone to sleep of course.

"Sir, what tale will you share tonight?"

"Ah, maybe the Toad and the Meker Vine."

"That old thing? What possible relevance does it have to this community? We have no bullies here, nor do any threaten from without."

"Ah, so you know about all the surrounding communities and travelers on this road? You are well traveled then?"

That got her. She is quite. You can see the neurons firing all in succession.

"Then why do you think it would be the right tale to share tonight?"

"Any tale can be told at any time. It is not the tale itself, but the telling."

With a flourish she bows, "To the Master then."

"If you two are done comparing notes the rest of us have work to do in the morning." That gets a sound of amusement from everyone.

He stands, "Then I shall begin." He arranges his cloak and ponders a moment as if deciding what he has already decided to share.

"As part of a lesson to Vella I will tell the tale of the Toad and the

Meker Vine.” He pauses, “Or maybe not.” He turns and smiles at Vella. Many Tellers use props, such as musical instruments or puppets. Our Master uses only his voice. The purest of the Teller traditions in his opinion.

Toad

Most think of a swamp as a horrible stinky, even dangerous place, at least most dry land creatures do. But to many it is paradise, it is their home. The stink brings food. The waters provide easy transport and hiding places from predators. For some it is even necessary for survival and reproduction.

Toad was one of these. She had a good life. Lots to eat, clean water, by swamp standards and lots of places to hide in the meker vine that lived at the edge of the swamp.

For generations Toad had lived in the swamp, some shorter than others. Birds were the most important threat. The meker vine saved them most of the time. It also provided food for the tadpoles that lived on the algae that grew on its roots. Toad could not imagine life without the vines.

Time went on, time went by, time was, is and will be.

Until a new creature arrived. This creature was different. It did not respect the creatures that lived in the swamp, but saw the swamp instead as a threat that needed to be removed. Ah, but the swamp was vast and well fed by underground streams and they soon realized there were easier places for the new creatures to use.

For a long time only an occasional visitor came to the swamp to skip stones, hunt for snakes (which was fine with Toad who hated and feared snakes) and occasionally take a few extra young home in clear ceramic jars. Out of hundreds most will not survive, so these few are of no importance.

This continued for more generations. Life was good.

Something changed. It all happened in a single day. Noisy creatures flew in the sky and sprayed nasty waste over the swamp and surrounding land. Worse even the crows and jays do to us now. It killed the insects and made Toad and her young sick. Only a few survived until the next generation. Some of these were deformed and sick. Many starved.

If this was not enough a renewed effort was made to remove the water from the swamp. Huge monsters came in to move mountains on top of the swamp. Sucking monsters tried to drink all of the water in the swamp. Nasty waste was spread on the waters to kill the plants and creatures.

Toad somehow managed to hold on and survive all of this, but the meker vine was severely damaged and shrank to a small portion of its original size. Only the smallest puddle of a spring remained. A remnant of the vine and a single Toad remained. Together they lived for a long time waiting for the return of the swamp.

One of the creatures came and took a sample of the vine for study.

Months came and went. Toad and vine struggled and survived. Toad learned to eat snails and slugs from the simple grasses all around the spring. She had to be careful of another monster that came by and cut down the grasses on days when the moon was high.

One day a large number of the creatures arrived and built a wall around the spring. They made a lot of noise, angry noise, like the cats that sometimes hunted in the swamp in the past.

Time passed and more monsters arrived, only this time the water returned. Swamp plants arrived, trees suddenly were there where not even saplings had been a day before. Oh and lots of bugs. Mostly crickets at first, but others arrived soon. Birds returned, and so did the snakes unfortunately. The good news was a male Toad. She could lay eggs again.

The meker vine started to thrive. The creatures seemed to be particularly interested in the vine and its health. They fused over it all the time, even to the point of chasing Toad away and putting her in danger.

The algae started to choke off the roots of the vine and it started to die. The creatures noticed this. They grew very agitated. They tried scraping the algae off themselves, but the vine was too complicated for them to reach into all the small roots.

Finally one of them noticed that Toad's tadpoles were doing this service to other plants. They scooped up the young and brought them over to the vine roots. The tadpoles immediately went to work cleaning the overgrown roots and got very large and fat. This would be a good generation of Toads.

The vine made a come back and thrived as never before. This made the creatures excited. They took cuttings of the vine away with them and also took some of Toad's tadpoles each time as well. Soon Meker vines and Toads were growing all over the country where ever there were swamps.

Hoarders

“You did not do all of the sounds that most Tellers do. Look the young are asleep even. The monsters are supposed to shake the ground. How else would they be monsters?” She is not much older than they are.

He motions to the adults who collect the young ones and take them off to rest. He sits quietly paying no attention to Vella's repeated attempts to engage him.

“Time for you was well Vella,” an adult says to her thinking that she is pestering the Teller.

The Teller raises his hand, “This time she should stay. I have more to say.” This gets everyone's interest and they lean closer. Even Vella looks shocked. She is surprised that he has finally noticed her.

“Vella, tell us the moral of the story.” On the hot seat now, but she is confident. Everyone knows this story. Usually only told to the young ones.

“The story of Toad and the Meker Vine is an old story told many ways.” A polite way of saying she does not like his version, “Basically it tells us that we all have a place in the scheme of things. No one item can be removed without affecting the whole.” She sits back satisfied with her answer.

“Who were the creatures?” He asks softly.

“The story does not say. Could be almost anything. Just bullies really. They are not described because stories are purposely kept vague so they can be used in many communities and circumstances. Any one of us could be the bullies or the victims.”

He does not let her go though, “There are many clues. There is only one creature that this story fits. Some of these creatures, or rather their offspring, are in this very room.” She opens her eyes as wide as her mouth. Everyone else is looking around wondering who he is talking about.

“All of the stories that a Teller shares are based on truth. There really was a swamp that this happened to. Of course it was not just one toad, but many. Similarly there were many meker vines. The meker vine was not even native to this swamp and unlike most invasive species this one did not adapt well to the swamp and overgrow it's place. The original meker vine came from many thousands of kilometers away. Wild in the swamp it hybridized with some local varieties in its new home and developed some interesting properties that the creatures found could help extend their lives. That was their motivation, not that they had seen the errors and stood to correct them.”

“This sounds too complicated to be of any use as a moral teaching.” One of the adults adds.

“Which is why I don't normally share this aspect of any story.”

“So which one of us was the evil creature?” He smiles.

“There is only one species among the current sentients who polluted their world. You have to know more to understand how this happened. They really were and are no different than any other sentient in intelligence or average abilities.

“Vella, can you now tell me who the creatures are and why they are different than the other sentients? Why did their culture hurt their world instead of live within it?”

“Well, I think the creatures are Hu, but I know lots of Hu who would never behave this way, so it is very hard to believe. I certainly would never do such a thing. However the Histories do mention the difficulties they had long ago. As to why they are different. That is hard. They certainly look different.” That gets a laugh. “But I don't think that is what you mean.” He shakes his head.

She starts to get nervous and anxious. Interesting that she does not see herself as Hu. That is good.

He answers for her, “There was one, an ancestor to the Di series. No one is off the hook here. I could also tell you stories about the other sentient ancestors given another visit or two. This ancestor was named Sauron. He had some unfortunate experiences with a solid sentient and made the mistake of trying to get even.”

“That's silly. You can never truly get even. It just goes back and forth until someone breaks the chain. Both lose.” Vella looks disgusted.

“Correct. He had not learned this lesson and being very powerful he did not think he needed to. Anyway, he poisoned the Hu into using behaviors unbecoming of a sentient.”

“Could we still be called sentient then?” A nervous Hu asks.

“The Guardians have been working hard to undo the damage. I personally think they have done a good job, at least judging from everyone in this community.” That makes everyone self conscious. A good sign. Pride would not have been a good sign. Not to mention that he is Hu as well.

“I never met a Hu I did not like.” One comments seriously. The Teller smiles at the old cliché that in old times was told with humor instead of nervousness.

“Let me tell you a little about how bad it got. The Hu were trained to be extreme examples of what we now call hoarders.” Some of the sentients start to look sick. The Hu look nervous.

An elder states emphatically, “NO ONE hoards in our community.

Every thing is held in common. Even my cloak has been worn by many.” That gets a laugh and everyone lightens up.

“This was a different time. I only share now so you can understand the past.”

“To prevent mistakes in the future.” Vella adds smiling. He nods to her.

“Hoarding got so bad that some Hu had accumulated so much that entire countries of tens of millions served them as virtual slaves. These slaves starved and died of sicknesses even though food was plentiful and health care within reach. Finally the population of slaves grew so much that their the entire world was at risk.”

“What about their leaders?”

“Hoarders controlled everything, though they had token elders these elders made no decisions themselves. The main problem was the hoarders never thought long term, thus chaos and anarchy became the rule.

Contrast to our system. The first level is the individual. We know and decide for ourselves right and wrong and are most accountable to ourselves. Next is our circle of friends. They make sure we keep our promises. Elected elders help manage the communities, regional councils and world councils next. Finally and ultimately the Code.”

“Do not produce more waste than Gaia can absorb.” Vella chirps in.

“So what happened next to the Hu? The plagues spread right?”

“Worse than that. The plagues were created by the hoarders. At least the first plagues were. The best hoarders realized that they could not support the number of slaves they had. The solution was to reduce the population. Wars broke out at many times in their history. Always with hoarders pushing the normal sentients to do their evil work.”

“How did the Hu survive? How did their world survive?”

“It almost didn't. The population reached over eight billion individuals. The plagues reduced the population to about about ten million. Their world could now be evacuated and with a lot of work restored to health.”

“That's how it all started and we all met.” Vella is nearly asleep now.

“Yes. There are now over thirty sentients in the league. Five in this room right now. Some species have requirements that prevent living in the same environmental conditions for long periods of time, but there are no single sentient communities any longer. It was found that we all complement each other and make up for each other's deficiencies.”

#!And even I get tired of looking at Dia faces all day long no matter how beautiful we are.!#

^And a little horror to stir the blood huh?^ A Ba makes a face and everyone laughs.

“It is difficult when you work so hard and it seems life never gets any

easier. You have done well here and this year's acorn harvest will give a brief rest. Your efforts do not go unnoticed. I am authorized to tell you that your community can raise three additional offspring."

An elder rises, "An awesome responsibility we will try not to waste. Time to rest folks. Thank you for your sharing Teller. You have given us much to think about." Everyone rises and bows to the Teller, who rises and bows in return adding a traditional Ceph salute as well. Vella tries to copy this.

"Takes practice. Thank you for your help tonight Vella." She bows again trying to do the Ceph addition. He bows again correcting her.

After she has gone to rest an elder approaches.

"Do you have room to take a transfer chip to a com array?"

"Of course Elder. I would be honored." He places the chip in a safe water tight holding pocket made especially for this purpose. Letters mostly, with occasional reports to councils and such. He cannot read the contents and being able to use the chips over and over means nothing is wasted.

"All of you remaining are Elders?" They nod.

"Great. Weather coming in, but mostly wind. You won't get much rain until turnover."

"How much can we expect this season?"

"A good amount, maybe fifty centimeters. The dry period is over for now."

"Good news indeed."

"We don't know how long it will last yet. Store some extra this next season. With new mouths to feed it would be prudent. I also have a new method of removing the toxins from the acorns that is less labor intensive." He holds out a chip. "Thought because you have a good harvest you might want to take advantage of it. Other communities may also need some. This is not hoarding if you store for the benefit of others."

"We have been experimenting with Ba art forms using acorns. Looks promising. We may have some trade items next time a Trader comes through. At least enough to test."

"Any particular designs?"

She smiles, "Tells." Their word for stories. She hands him one.

He laughs, "Toad! Perfect. The detail is magnificent. You may have something. I will enter your idea so you will gain a five year. Can't prevent others from using something other than acorns though."

"Takes a lot of time. Most will not have the patience. We have a winter to do complete sets. We think it would be a perfect thing for Tellers to carry to pass out during a story.!"

"Sentients, at least the young ones will want to collect complete sets."

This may lead to hoarding.”

!After one year we will relinquish rights. Each community really only needs one set to help remember the relationships between the stories. We don't have to make that many sets. Not every community will even be interested, especially when other forms similar to ours appear. Most communities will use local materials to make their sets more personal.” Actually they have many times, just not here in awhile.

“There is a concern growing about a rock outcrop north east of Owl Ridge. Tests are being done, but it appears they may be a high concentrations of copper and arsenic.”

“The trees and plants will concentrate it, the herbivores will eat the grass, seeds and nuts and concentrate it more. Carnivores will consume them. An entire ecosystem can be at risk.”

^Is this a problem? The rocks are natural. No sentient placed them there. Maybe we just need to prevent anyone from using any of the life forms affected. Besides the copper at least is needed downstream by the Ceph and many other invertebrates.^

#!Also, the effect will be wide spread, diluting out with distance. Do you have projections of effects? Maybe the effect won't be that bad.!#

“On the chip I gave you are the projections. It has not reached the danger level yet. We are just being cautious. It might be possible to remove the affected rocks or seal them in permacrete. I bring this up to let you know what is going on and maybe to avoid eating any materials near by.”

!We don't normally gather up that far. Good to know. Please keep us informed.!

“We always do. I think that is it for this trip. You should have a Trader of Tools coming in an eight day or so. I think she might even have some Ba implements.”

^Excellent for me, but we need something a little bigger for the Dia and Hu who are participating. We could get more teams working. What do you think the Trader will take in exchange?^

“I would say the fresh cheese you served me at meal would do. If you have small portions that are easy to carry they would be best. She will be heading inland from the shore, otherwise I would say the acorn cakes which are also excellent.” He licks his lips for effect.

!We would need more salt then as well. Good cheese needs salt to form the rind.!

A cook comes in, #!Sorry to interrupt, but it is getting late all of you. I have prepared a sack for you Teller.!# This will be food for his trip the next day.

^We have a good harvest of oak gall this year. Let the tanners know

that you meet.^ He nods.

Everyone then bows and he is led to a dry room to rest. The smells from the sack are wonderful. He will have to be careful not to eat the meal too soon.

Scents

A typical community consists of eight guilds of eight members each. Add in young ones and the community reaches close to a hundred. More than that requires larger and larger amounts of tech to compensate for the waste a group this size produces. Spread these communities out and waste absorption is spread out as well. No more than a world can handle.

Smaller communities are ones in a growth or death phase. Larger ones are near splitting, called budding. A community reaches the budding state through permission to breed or because of two smaller communities merging to avoid collapse.

All sentients work together but for purposes of organization there are eight guilds. It is important that their knowledge is not lost to a community. They are:

Management: raising the young, housekeeping and resource accounting. In Oak Creek, they will be the ones who decide who will breed the additional offspring. Sens will be chosen depending on skill sets needed. Breeders are not necessarily care givers and come from all guilds depending on what traits and skills are needed.

Builders: stone, wood and ceramic, small amounts of metal. They build most of the cave homes and large structures.

Waste: Also known as the Pollution Guild. Keepers of the Code and the most important guild authority wise. The life of an entire community is dependent on their decisions. A community who has lost their waste guild is considered ripe for dissolution. Waste guilds have been known to leave a community to force their demands.

Arts: music, crafts, engraving, etc. Without art sentients die. They often work with Builders to add flourishes to tools and such.

Food preparation: meals, storage of food stuffs, allocation of portion sizes and they also help decide what needs to be planted or harvested over and above sustenance crops.

Farmers: in charge of where and how plants and animals are cared for. Everyone participates in the actual physical work.

Healers: mental, physical and community. Holistic in the old way of practice. They are also in charge of criminal justice, as this is seen as a disease, not a choice. When a criminal act is found the entire community is treated.

Traders: without units of exchange, they handle whatever can be carried by one sentient, the most important and lightest weight item being information. This also means that rarely are pack animals used and then

only in emergencies to get supplies to a disaster area. Down side is that they can never have a permanent residence. The temptation to become a hoarder is too great. Limited by what you can carry slows down the disease, but does not prevent it entirely. Stashes have been found. Frequent transfers to other worlds or regions helps and shunning as a last resort until a sentient is healed.

Tellers are not part of the Arts Guild, but the Traders Guild and are keepers of the Histories. They insure that the stories remain faithful to the truth and doesn't change over time. They also do the more traditional Trader duties when needed.

Transfer chips can move information too, but the personal touch with hands on help is worth much more. Traders thus end up learning most of the other guild's methods, but never well enough to become masters. Still, it is better for a Trader to show a new method than to suffer a master guild member being gone for long periods of time teaching others.

The Master Teller rises from his meditation early before even the herders have risen to tend the flock. He slips out the main gate without letting any geese out. They are used to Tellers and do not raise an alarm, especially if they bring nice crunchy acorn bread nuggets.

The rain from the night before was light, but enough to wet the ground. Soon mushrooms will start coming up. Not much nutritional value, but enough flavor to brighten any stew. Acorns get old after awhile especially unseasoned. No more exotic spices from around the world. Herbs and an occasional chili pepper are all most get. Salt is a necessary and major trade item and used sparingly as well.

In spite of the lack of luxury characterized by height of the Hu hoarding, general health is higher and sentients are happier than in the past.

He makes good time and arrives at a small Traders meet before the sun is high in the sky.

“Pass?” Everyone is tested to be sure they are not an impostor, though most here know each other.

“Enterprise C” They let him through. Only Traders know the story of Rooi, Silver and the First Ones.

You may wonder why a Teller's name is never mentioned. Tellers give up their names so as not to make a name for themselves. The sens in the stories are the only names they need use.

He goes up to another Teller he knows, “Master Teller, we may have a live one. Oak Creek Community. Her name is Vella. Too young yet, but keep an eye on her. Pass it on.” He does not show or tell them of the

acorn sculptures, far too easy to duplicate.

“Sure thing Master Teller, sure thing. Where are you headed next?”

“I was thinking about the ocean. I have not been to the seashore in awhile and miss it.” He pats the chip pocket so she knows that he also has the responsibility to make a visit to an array soon.

“I thought you said you were from the desert?”

“A Teller is from nowhere. I just need a change.” He smiles.

!!Sure. Got a sweetie out that way?!! A Dio Trader can carry more than other sentients and he is fully loaded.

“At my age. Right.” They all laugh. A Trader can't afford a partner. Their profession comes first. Not fair to anyone they have to leave. Not that one night stands don't occur, especially among the young who have not gotten used to the damage this can cause and hormones still run swift. Does help to add variation to the gene pools. Of late, interspecies liaisons have become more common. Can't get pregnant, but the practice is looked down upon by more communities than not. Also dangerous in some cases, as a some reactions during coitus are reflex, and need to be unlearned.

A Trader comes up, “If you are going to the coast, could you take a small package?”

“Of course. Which community?” No one ever asks what the package is.

“A Ceph community. It does not have a name. Not old enough yet.”

“Has to be at least a thousand years old for a name.” The other Teller adds.

“Yep.”

“So, how do I find it?”

“Only one for a couple of hundred clicks if you are following the straightest path to the sea.”

“My intention. Who is the package for?”

“A Dia by the name of Apprentice Karjk who wants to impress a Ceph Master is my guess.”

“Ceram Master?”

“Yep.” They all laugh. Good luck Karjk. Ceph think that no one can possibly know more than they do about ceramics. Well, not all apprentices make it to the journey level.

“Pass?”

“You will like this, the pass is #!Rooi!#.”

The second Teller asks, “Isn't that a little obvious?”

The Trader, “A little? We can't force them to pick a good pass, try as we might.”

“No. Hope he gets the package.”

“You knew that Karjk was a male? How? Their names are gender neutral.”

He winks, but does not answer. The other Teller smiles. They know something the Trader does not. All part of the game.

He accepts the small package and it disappears into a pocket.

“I best be off. Don't want to be out when the dogs roam.” The Trader shudders and the other Teller smiles grimly. They both nod and turn away as well. Traders and Tellers have a sort of morbid humor among themselves.

From here to the sea is primarily downhill, which can be as bad as up on old knees. In sight of the others he pretends to be having a harder time than he really does. Once out of sight he speeds up. Our Teller is not what he seems? Or do all Tellers use misdirection as part of their talents? Maybe it is just a Hu trait. Not the first time that observation has been made.

He speeds up again. He is nervous that someone or something is following him. A partially decomposed bridge ahead. Moss covered and missing some supports. Evidence of a recent break through. He decides to forgo a repeat performance and walks further down the bank. All streams lead to the sea.

Further down there is a series of stones crossing the stream. Most are dry. He tests one and then another. He is committed and makes his best attempt to cross.

Almost to the other side a large mountain lion casually comes out from the bushes and is startled by his presence. He is at a strong disadvantage. The mountain lion snarls and jumps instinctively. He waves his staff and the cat swipes at the shiny section on its head. He steps into the water and gets wet up to his knees, but the cat falls straight into the deeper pool. He makes his way to shore while the cat pounces the water in anger and then dog paddles to the opposite shore.

He continues on as if nothing has happened. Apparently not his first encounter with this kind or the hazards of the road. You don't get this old without gaining some experience.

Acorn cakes, cheese and apples for lunch and a sip at a smaller creek. The trail goes up over a small hill and back down to the same stream.

“About time you caught up.” He says out loud.

“You didn't have to force the bath.”

“Won't kill you. Now get lost again, there is a small group of travelers ahead.”

“I can hardly wait until you are in my realm and it is you who has to hide.”

“That will be the day. Your realm does not care if I hide or not. They

always know where I am at all times. Want some?" He holds out some of the acorn cake.

She disappears into the brush without even a sniff.

"Suit yourself. Stay way from the flocks. We don't need all the locals hunting you."

A small group of Dia and Hu come around the corner looking for whomever he is talking to.

"Teller, who are you talking to?"

"An old mountain lion here abouts."

#!Eeli! A cat? Are you sure?!#

"Yep. Tried to jump me at the last stream. Best be careful. Too many of you to cause trouble if you stick together. Good day."

You just ruined my fun. I love lizard tartar.

Remember, sniff only, don't eat sentients.

Prefer dog anyway. I sniffed a pack a few clicks away.

Good hunting my friend. He knows she does not eat them, just likes to tease them. Old animosities die hard.

He makes the Ceph community an eighth after nightfall. A full moon mean some of them will be occupied. He avoids the mag bath and goes straight to the hall.

He shows to the guard, ~I have a transfer chip and package to deliver.~

~The chip goes to the com array which I can take you to.~ Ceph communities can be hard to navigate if you are not used to them. They also like to show them off by taking the long way to any location. The com array is usually at the back of the hall itself, being the center of all things official.

~I know the way, thank you.~ The guard passes him through probably thinking about how rude Hu are, never mind 'know it all' Tellers. However his best chance of a meal before dawn is if he gets his assignment over with.

The hall itself is empty at the moment. Most have gone to rest or to celebrate the moon. Only guards and unseen are about. Suits him fine. He has always felt more of an affinity for the unseen than for any one in authority.

Don't you think you are laying this on a bit thick?

My story, let me tell it my way. So, what happened with the Dia group?

More interested in the dogs. Let's just say they will not be terrorizing the locals for awhile.

They are part of the ecosystem as well. We would be knee deep in rodents without them.

More for me. Besides they are still part of the ecosystem, just helping in a new way.

“Sleeping behind the throne again?” She yawns wide.

“No one ever thinks to look here and it is the warmest spot in the place. Don't they believe in heat?”

“Just not as high as a Cat. No one does, come to think of it. Cats are the last hold outs in terms of sun worshiping.”

“We don't worship the sun, just adore, pray to and plead with it.”

“Right.”

He ducks into the portal for the array and drops the chip into the incoming hopper. All the information needed is on the chip itself. Every community has the necessary hardware to read/write it. Instant communication was tried for awhile, but people found it was too much and went back to waiting for responses from distant friends. The anticipation was half the fun of a letter.

“Won't be able to find Apprentice Karjk until morning. Looks like we are staying here for an entire day at least.”

“Food.”

“What about the dogs?” She turns up her nose. “Okay, which way to the kitchens?” She takes off at a trot. He sighs and follows.

At the kitchen, “Everyone has gone home. Nothing but scraps the unseen will eat or dispose of.”

“Good enough for me.” She digs in with enthusiasm. He feels a tug at his robe and looks down to an unseen pulling at him.

He shows to it, not sure of the gender, not that it matters, ~How may I help you?~ The unseen is taken back and freezes.

He blinks, ~Sorry. I keep forgetting. How may you serve me?~

It thaws and quickly moves to one side of the kitchen. Reaching into a compartment it pulls out a bowl of raw fish. It then takes it to the prep area to add various herbs and some salt. The bowl goes into an oven and the unseen leaves the room.

“Guess it is up to me now. Scared the poor thing.” He looks around for something and finds it in a dusty bowl in a corner compartment. Hot peppers. Not the same as herbs that grow in the desert, but hey, better than the bland herbs that most Ceph here like.

“Not all of us like bland herbs. Try this.” He turns to see a large female Ceph holding a bowl of green paste. Speaking means she has been adapted as well. Most don't bother.

~Will you stop showing in the third person. Everyone has figured out who you are anyway. Your fish is going to burn if you don't take it out soon.~ Obviously still prefers visual to oral though.

“Forgot all about it. Thanks.” He, er, I go over to the oven and TK the

bowl to the counter.

Cheater. Pu rolls over

“Since you know who I am, you also know what I am. Besides I'm hungry.” I finish the fish with Her watching and Pu sleeping. Snoring more like it.

I do not snore, I purr.

~Sounds like snoring to me.~

~You appear to know this place. I am looking for an Apprentice Karjk.~

~I know of him. What is your interest in him?~

~Just a package delivery.~

~Ah, he is probably in the work area. Let's go, I'll show you.~

~This late?~

~An over achiever.~ She does the Ceph equivalent of a sigh.

We make our way through the wet roads past a community in the progress of being formed. Skeletons of homes are along side finished ones. Very quiet.

Finally we near the workshop. Ceramics just as the Trader had surmised earlier. Once in the light of the workshop she can show again.

~A sentient without balance will never succeed. If he does not find balance soon I am afraid I will have to fail him.~

~You are his teacher then.~

An unkempt over worked very tired Dia comes out from the hot room. He is holding a ruined sculpture with tears in his eyes and his feathers down. It was his. He put a lot of time, effort and soul into this piece. Now it is ruined. All his dreams lay waste before him. Or so he thinks. He looks up and sees us watching him. He loses it. In his shame he runs back into the room to hide from us.

~Come he must face this.~ A wise teacher.

I stop to look at the smashed sculpture. I remember all too well my own experiences learning and growing up.

We find him with his face to the wall and his head goes even lower.

“Apprentice Karjk I have come to make a delivery to you.” I pull the package out of my pocket and wait. Slowly he comes out of his shell and looks at me.

#!You don't understand. I have no reason to accept the package now. It was to be the final part of my masterpiece. I am no better than an unseen. You should leave and not embarrass me any longer. I no longer exist. !#

~A bit melodramatic don't you think? Is he always this way?~

~From the first eight day.~

“Well, what do I do with the package?”

~Whatever you want I guess.~

“Okay, I'll just set it here then. Maybe someone else can use it.” I place it on the repaired sculpture and we both leave.

~How long until he notices?~

We get half way down the aisle before we hear the scream or the Dia equivalent.

Pu, you did not walk in on him did you? You know how Dia feel about Cats.

Please, I am still in the kitchen. The morning workers are starting to prepare my masterpiece.

It is not your masterpiece if someone else does the work.

Stupid monkeys.

Let me guess, it involves food.

Quiet. The best masterpiece ever is being consumed.

The Ceram Master takes me back to the hall. It is not empty any longer.

Bowls of food of all descriptions are laid out.

~You didn't think that was the only kitchen did you?~

~Not if you let Pu into it I didn't.~ Truly.

Don't even think it. If they knew it would ruin far more than Apprentice Karjk's life. Nice job on the reconstruct. Did you scan his mind to get the image?

Are you saying that I am not good at doing 3D reconstruction? I am hurt. Besides I didn't do it. I thought you did.

I had you brought here because we have a problem. You will meet her soon. Let me know when you do, but don't show it.

Huh? Is she TK? Someone did the sculpture and it makes me nervous when I don't know who is here.

You will understand.

Others come in and out setting things up and cleaning up. The unseen. I never tire of watching them. It must be where the Ceph get their training in patience and precision. I don't recognize anyone until a few Traders and another Teller arrives in the early morning.

Something is not right. That smell. I know that smell. I break protocol and scan. I can't localize it.

I hiss under my breath, “There is a First One here.”

Suddenly a huge Ceph comes in and everyone drops to the floor. I do the same. I am not stupid. A Matriarch. Funny I thought the Ceram teacher was. Of course that would make no sense. The power behind the throne then? Or like me, hiding out and watching.

There can't be a First One active at least. I can still feel the tingle from the fields. They were installed on all sentient worlds in the league. The

smell is here though. Probably someone who got caught in our little fly trap. They DSd in before realizing they lose their abilities here. Must have transformed before coming across. An insectoid would definitely stand out. Smart enough to not take chances. They are the rulers of the universe, or will soon not be. Not sure where things stand there.

~All rise.~ They borrowed from old Hu courts it would appear. Effect is the same. Everyone relaxes and the food is distributed. Who is it? We really know almost nothing about the First Ones. My brief encounter was more in the One Mind mode than real close examination or conversation with one.

Pu, I need your help. Who is the one who smells like a First One? Her head pokes out from behind the throne. Risky right now Cat. She may think you are planning an assassination.

I am one of her personal body guards. The one you seek is wearing a red patch on her green robe, oh one of no smelling abilities.

Since when can you see red, you color blind old Cat?

The one who must not be named thought it would be better if I was full spectra. Have UV and IR as well. Kinda pretty as you monkeys say.

What were you doing in the woods then?

Coming to fetch you of course, at Her request. Took you long enough.

A Guard comes up to me. ~Teller, your presence is requested.~ Ulp, by the Matriarch no doubt. Which story do I tell? No Toad for this one.

I think about it for a moment. Perfect. I have the perfect story.

I am escorted to the dais. I really don't like authority figures. You either love em or hate em I guess. And I know that all authority figures hate authority as well.

As soon as I reach the dais I see the suspect. It does smell worse up here. I do a quick pulse scan. She scans like a normal Dio. A big strong one, but normal. Have the First Ones been abducting samples so they can copy them? I pulse scan the DNA. Diploid. First Ones are hexaploid. That much I remember. You can hide less information in more, but not more in less. Just to be sure I scan everyone else on the dais. Everyone is earth normal diploid. So, what is this about? She smells like a First One, but is not.

~We are waiting Teller. You are a Teller are you not?~ A Guard asks this, but the questions come from her.

I do a Nauti salute in the old form, not the modern simplified version.

I see a small hand signal from Her. ~You honor us Teller.~ I know how to kiss ass is what she means. Er anal pore in Her case. Some things don't translate well.

Revenge

What are those two up to? I ask them simply to identify one person and now he is standing as if he is to be the story teller for this session. I don't know why this Matriarch loves stories so much. Decadence may be slipping back into the power structure. It may be time to shake things up again. Not the first one I have brought down. Too bad, I had hopes for the Eden colony. Hopefully just a temporary setback. New worlds are so hard for us to colonize.

They are so close to the bait that even a flu suffering Ba could tell who it is. Pu must know. She probably spotted her the moment she arrived. I thought those two were a team.

Ah, he is starting. He will speak as well as show. I taught him how to do that. Good student.

“I have given much thought as to what would be the most appropriate tale to share in front of such an illustrious audience as this. There can be only one tale grand enough to please. I will share the tale of Rooi Seeks Revenge.”

What!? That rascal! He wouldn't dare! Who told him anyway? Silver wouldn't, that's for sure. We were alone at the time.

The Matriarch is handing her agent. Good, we will put a stop to this before it gets out of hand.

The Guard goes up to Oz and taps him.

“Excuse me a moment.” Oz shows to the audience.

He converses with the Guard. He then moves closer to the Matriarch herself. Most unusual. She does not like the smell of Hu. None of us do really. She, however, does not have the ability to turn off certain receptors as I do.

He is sitting down next to her! Outrageous! I will have to replace her as soon as I can. Only not soon enough. He must be making this up. No one was supposed to know.

“Rooi, as we all know was the greatest of the Guardians of old.” Rub it in, you are only a few years younger than I am hatchling. Everyone is attentive though. Might as well relax and take it. They don't know I am here.

“Silver as you well know is the longest living Hu Guardian and possibly the trickiest. Silver has a bad reputation for embarrassing others for amusement. Actually his whole team has this habit. He claims it is for instructional purposes, but his victims don't always feel that way. He made the mistake of embarrassing our own Rooi one day when they were visiting the moon.”

I find that I can't help but watch our suspect. I have been watching her for nearly an eight day. Nothing suspicious though. She is acting as a bodyguard. Hard for other sentients to advance any other way in Ceph society, considering all the training required. She has good references though, from Ceph A, the home world. We found that having a variety of sentients gains one the best characteristics of all. Each has their strengths and weaknesses. She works out in the training pits with almost every weapon she can clasp. Does not always win, but she learns and is gaining on our own champions.

I am actually surprised she is as good as she is. Most people with this much aggression ended up in Hell until we disbanded it and let the sentients live out their natural lives on a comfortable, but not wonderful world. They lacked for nothing, but were allowed no offspring.

When Jake finally convinced Bernice to let us in on the Dia secrets we made fast progress. Their tech may have been the lowest of the recent forths, but they made up for it in organization abilities. It was their adapting the guilds of our culture and the ones from Hu history with the six of theirs that made it all work. Now there are eight guilds as these work better with the other sentients than their original six did. They were flexible enough to adopt the same eight. I was impressed. Ceph would never have done this so quickly.

The best adaptation was the healers also being the ones who helped with those who did not follow cultural rules, something the Dia did not have to worry about much, yet they proposed it. Brilliant. In our culture they simply would have been darts by the Guards, problem solved. But, by finding out why it happened, the healers were actually able to prevent many further occurrences by others not thought to be at risk.

The problems with names. We reluctantly had to change the title of our Guardians to Guards. A simple thing, but for a culture that makes one minor change every thousand years, it was difficult. The argument in our favor was that we had been using the Guardian name long before the Hu Guardians ever existed, before Hu were any more than, what does Pu call them, ah, monkeys.

We finally conceded when other less desirable changes were proposed in the name of 'cooperation' and shoreline access. If we were to allow other sentients into our worlds, Ceph A and Ceph B, then we needed to reduce our own presence there to avoid pollution overload. We still maintain a majority presence and administrative rights of course. We needed that new shoreline access though.

Eden, formally E1, is the most like our own worlds now that it has been cleaned up. Mandhi was the most depressed of the our Guardians about this, seeing all the tech being dissolved. Examples of most items

were kept in a sort of hall of history. She spends many an eight day studying the various artifacts and disturbs many of the Hu Guardians with questions.

We all learned who was reliable and who wasn't.

“And then Silver . . . “

We avoided Silver and Owa and were suspicious of the rest of the original Hu Guardians. I think that living that long did something to them. Mei was okay, though a bit obsessed with star ships. She nearly lost her remaining sanity when the First Ones dissolved Enterprise. Maybe because of the time dilation of being at such speeds for so long she was not actually that old sentient wise.

Sussi had to work with recordings, which until she became a Guardian would have been as good as live with our limited hearing ability. Now, she has to settle for whatever she can get going with the new sentient groupings. She makes much effort. New abilities are not always good luck. It has improved her own flute abilities though she cannot share them while hiding.

“Guardian Rooi was the most patient sentient ever to have existed.” I doubt that very much. Silver himself worked on E0 for millions of years to spring traps on Owa. Granted most of that was in slow time. There is something I don't have patience for. Hate slow time. Don't much like fast time either.

“It was the most amazing thing. She only had to show a single word and the neurochemistry in Silver's brain set off the genetic cascade. Within a few arns he was completely silver from top to bottom. Silver was silver. I know that does not translate, but it was beautiful. Over three hundred years between the two events and she never let on that she was upset with him in anyway.”

He bows and gives a Nauti salute to the Matriarch. He is given food and liquid. I am ready to roast him. I can do the silver trick much faster now that I have practice. I had to be slow because Silver was expecting something. Most of the time was just waiting before I did anything. With Oz up there I will have to wait for this meal to be done before I can approach him. Pain, as the Hu show.

I did get my revenge, the problem was and as Oz left out for political reasons, was that Silver loved it. He took to walking around with a construct called a surf board. Why anyone would want to ride the crest of waves is insane. Everyone called him Silver Surfer for years. Fortunately even Guardians tire of humor. And of course no one appreciated the subtle genetic engineering I had to do without his noticing.

There is some kind of disturbance at an outside door. Strange. Everyone should be here already and the only movement should be the unseen

servicing everyone. I pulse scan and notice a Dia outside trying to get in. I scan again and notice that it is Karjk. He must have stayed too late in the studio again. I start to make my way towards the portal to let him in.

Guards are ahead of me when the door bursts open violently. Sentients scatter, but the door splinters and the shards are moving on their own like missiles. Sens are drying. I glance at the Matriarch. The smelly Dio and Pu have moved to be between the portal and Her.

Karjk is TK! Why didn't I think to scan on psiotics? I make a crude limiter and DS it into his body cavity. The missiles stop and the Guards go after him. He screams and runs off with them following.

I turn back to the podium and Oz is shaking violently, foaming at the mouth. Pu snarls at the Dio and leaps to attack her. Rips out her throat in one swipe. Messy, blood everywhere. Oz has fallen down on the floor and now Pu is starting to shake violently.

Crabs! Oz is dead! Pu is nearly dead, no, she is dead. The Dio is dead. There are five dead near the portal from Karjk's missiles and many wounded. Guards come back in bringing Karjk, dead. I dissolve the limiter. Don't need to have anyone find that in the actions that will surely follow.

This is all my fault. I was the one who brought everyone here. How do the other Guardians handle these situations? I can go from one end of time and the universe to the other, but I can't handle these situations.

It must have been Karjk who rebuilt the sculpture, but how? I did not raise him. Natural? Dia do not normally go straight to TK3. Of course many don't know they have been raised until something happens, like the stress over the ruined sculpture. That might explain a one or maybe, big stretch, a two, but never a three. The First One?

What killed Ozi and Pu? No one is going near the bodies. We have a natural aversion to sickness, especially ones that cross species and kill in seconds. No one else appears sick though. I scan for the Matriarch and find her easy enough, alive and well. They have cleaned the blood off of her already.

I move closer to the Dio. I taste the air. Does not reek like First One any more. Without touching her I do a detailed examination at the finest levels. If the First Ones made the 'thn and presumably the 'THN, I am not convinced there, they could hide quite a bit. Ah, not that hidden. The skin of the Dio is covered in a liquid. Not normal for a Dio to sweat. Fast acting prions genetically matched to both Ozi and Pu.

~Professor, it is not safe here. Please get back. Others will come.~

I can scan anywhere on the planet, so it does not matter where I am. I retreat to the edge of the wall. The liquid came from somewhere. I scan the Dio herself. She was producing the prions! She has been genetically

modified to be a killer of just Ozi and Pu. No one else. I leave by way of a portal as others are coming in to help with cleanup and crowd control. No one else will be harmed.

They have gotten their revenge. It was Pu and Oz that they first were suspicious of. I have tipped over the crab bucket. I need to warn the others.