



The Guardians of Br'thn

Revenge

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Quiet

“Garfield, which world are we on again?”

You already know, we are on Brown 25671. We only visited thirty two worlds. Not that hard to keep track of, even for a Hu.

“I knew I should not have put in for the enhanced Cat model. Something's wrong. This can't be Brown 25671. Too much life. Brown means brown.”

I sniff the fuzz on the ground and yawn. I would rather be taking a nap. This crawling over constant hills and valleys is boring.

Looks fine to me. Nothing moving as usual.

“Look at the Xanthera. It is all over the place. Granted, it is the growing season, but still. Whoa! It has even reached the upper ridge.” He taps away on his pad. “It was only half way there ten years ago. That's hundreds of meters in ten years. It took ten years previous to that to move a single meter.” He futzes with his bottles, collecting samples and talking to himself.

Suddenly we are both at the top of the ridge. He bends down to collect more samples. At least we did not have to walk this time.

“It is over the ridge! That can't be. We may have to spend more time here. We spent too much time on Grey 77833. Hmm, I wonder if this is affecting all the Browns? No effect on the Greys that I could see.” Scientists can be so boring.

We need to go to a Green world to be sure the effect is not progressive. I hope he takes the bait. At least there will be movement there. Of course, with my luck he will chose a plantimal world. Movement, if you like one meter per eight day. Sigh...

“No, no, this is where the effect is manifesting itself. I need to find the extent. I am stowing the samples. Prepare for transfer in five.”

No Green world. What's the point then? I am ready for a nap. Yeah, a nap would be nice. I yawn and stretch. I make a play toy and bat that idly, laying down, while waiting. Too predictable. Boring.

“You just got up from a nap. Time to go.” He dissolves my toy and we pop.

“Yeow!” And end up in a pool of water. I do a quick search and pop up to dry land to begin the process of licking myself dry. *You are supposed to look before you move us!*

“Sorry kitty. This is not supposed to be here! How did this happen?” He is up to his knees in swamp taping on his pad again. You would think

it was more important that food. Speaking of which...

What shall I have for lunch? Kitty tuna, savory beef, chicken and cheese? Who thought of these flavors? Certainly not a Cat. Hu food, only eat it when I am starving to death. Cats need raw meat. Something with juicy blood dripping down my throat. Sigh, that may never happen again. I make some beef. The closest thing to rat on the Hu scale. Not very close, but hey, I have no choice. I really should have paid more attention in class to duplicating. I need a memory upgrade.

I make the beef, warm it to 40C, the ideal temperature for fresh rat.

We pop! Ah, the indignity! The waste!

He runs up the opposite ridge on this world. I have no idea which world. I don't recognize it. Of course they all look the same to me. Boring! My food is going cold and forgotten. Such a waste of duped beef. A cow died in my imagination for nothing. No honor at all.

I make another meal's worth and chow it down as fast as I can. I am not going to lose out again. Fills the belly, but no pleasure. He must be really upset to pop around like this. Normally it is years, if not decades between jumps.

We pop again, back to Brown. I can see my paw prints and can smell my scent mark. Not that I have to worry about any other Cat showing up. Nap time. I know nothing is going to happen here. He runs up the ridge this time, with his nose nearly to the ground. Stops occasionally to poke at something.

I close my eyes just as the ridge shades me from the direct sunlight. Perfect.

Vacation

You never realize how much you love someone until you almost lose them. That's why we have been together without complaint since Paradise. Bernice and I have been teaching the Code derived from the Dia method of government to countless worlds. Well, not countless, it just seems that way. We are on Mu-An at present. Means people's home, their idea of people anyway. Anyway, easier for us to remember than the longer alpha numeric designate.

I am sitting in what amounts to a tropical rain forest. Every afternoon it rains at least three centimeters. Everything is wet and moldy. Even cerams gather a layer of mold from the organics that inevitably settle on everything. Every animal here has some kind of skin condition and because we have to fit in, we do as well. I itch constantly. The locals may be used to it, but I am not, in spite of the salves they give to me constantly, which only provide temporary relief and smell awful.

I feel like Tarzan. I am high up in a tree in a structure made from local branches and vines. We climb up and down on crude rope ladders. Many die by falling, if the rot does not get you first. Sometimes I think sentients get so tired of scratching that they throw themselves off a branch on purpose.

The local sentient is coded the Mu as you probably guessed by the name of this world. They are an almost hairless squirrel like creature that bears live young, usually twins, no more than once a year. Not mammals in that they regurgitate food rather than having mammary glands. Gestation is six months. Childhood is long and they will not be fertile again until the young are nearly adults, if they survive. They are in season constantly. I mean constantly. Very vocal about it too. But their fecundity is low and they rarely have more than four offspring in a typical extended family grouping at any one time. Troops are usually about twenty, but mating is not limited to inside a troop and there are frequent 'celebrations' when a new troop is spotted. Fertile and infertile are welcome participants it seems.

Adults are nearly as large as a Dio, but half their weight, long and thin. They have small retractable front claws on long thin fingers. Very good at grasping objects or branches, as well as defending themselves. The hind feet are equally able to grasp objects, but the claws do not retract and therefore are not as well suited for fine work as the front ones. They typically provide the vice for work with the front 'hands'. The one

place they do have hair is the tail. A long luxurious bushy thing that they spend a lot of time grooming and trying to keep dry. Grooming is usually a prelude to mating. Very little difference between the genders and little care during mating about who you are with.

We would not stand a chance in their world except for the fact that they have a much slower time base than all the other sentients except the Pink, whom they don't care for in the least. The Pink don't care who likes them or not, but to avoid confrontation they restrict their movements to the ground where the Mu rarely go.

As you might guess fire is an almost unknown concept. The surroundings are simple too wet to burn. Only where there is a severe drought, that mostly affects the edges of the forest, is there a possibility of fire by lightening. But then, the Mu will have abandoned these areas long before this possibility and therefore will not see it when it does happen. They will only have noted the after effects when the rains return to the region.

These dry areas, far from the Mu settlements, are where most other sentients prefer to stay. All except the Ceph of course. They love the fact that they never have to worry about drying out here. The Mu find the Ceph amusing and awkward. Not good at climbing trees, but because of all the wet surfaces a Ceph rarely falls and are almost as slow at the Mu, at least in trees. That is not to say a Ceph won't be found hanging upside down from time to time with a circle of Mu amused at it's predicament.

Hu they also find amusing, but are also frightened of us to some extent. The concept of weapons, other than claws, has never occurred to them. Hu of course need something other than claws, lacking them in the first place. Dia are sort of in between, having claws, but also weapons.

Speaking of weapons, I should discuss the reason why anyone would want them. There are predators, above and below. Above, where the freshest fruit and nuts are the tastiest and only the young can reach, are also within reach of the sky monsters. Ugly bird like things with huge wings. They soar high above and wait for Mu young and other creatures to show themselves. They hit with such force and speed you rarely see them coming. Small Hu and most Dia are at risk, if not from being eaten, then from being knocked from a tree to their death below.

Their being long and thin helps in catching a branch on the way down and being slow makes them less noticeable in the first place.

Below are reptile like creatures, sort of a cross between a tiger and an alligator, we have called the alliger. Three different sized species, all of which have huge sharp teeth. They depend mostly on eating anything that

falls from the trees or each other in times of need. Covered in excrement, but with jaws open, they wait. Mostly they get the dead or the soon to be dead. Makes no difference to them. Some have learned now to wait at the edge of the forest for visitors from the dry lands. Blimps are likely to be invented soon to avoid this tooth gauntlet.

You would think this would be a problem for the Pink, but anyone who has tasted them knows they taste so horrible that even an excrement covered alliger would not touch them more than once and Pink heal fast. Being such a bright purple pink color, no one is likely to mistake them for anything else either. The Pink just taste their way over the forest floor, content in ways I will never understand.

Of the smaller predators are the various snake like creatures, insects, fungi and viruses. A typical world combo of fun. Did I mention that I itch most of the time.

“You finally decided to record our adventures in mold world?”

Bernice likes it here only slightly more than I do.

“Hold on a arn.”

Communication is by whistling. Hu make do by using a flute like device they have fashioned from bones and/or wood. Being at a different time base was a good thing here. Not even Sussi would be able to keep up with them otherwise. A few have learned how to whistle well enough without props, but one tone mistake can get you into trouble or a lot of embarrassment, mostly the latter. You would not believe how many ways you can invite coupling in Mu. Few other sentients participate, but this does not stop the Mu from teasing us. I think they are curious why we never seem to enjoy the one real pleasure life has to offer.

She looks over my shoulder, “Don't forget the one thing they did get from us and seem to appreciate.”

They can make sort of long term records by the most amazing knot like string things. Easy to carry and can be made from lots of different species of air roots and vines. Of course they rot eventually, but they can be read in the dark, a real advantage over Ceph spheres or paper. The Mu spend a lot of time, when they are not mating or grooming, working on their knots. The problem is, is that short of knotting the knots about themselves they can't carry many at one time.

What Bernice is referring to is our tool belts. They caught on instantly. Very flexible, but discerningly sentient. They adapted alliger skins to make versions with many smaller pouches with one pouch for each knot record. Getting a alliger skin, even off a dead animal, is not trivial and has become a test of courage and ability. The pouches even

helped slow down the rot. The knot strings are used to help remember stories and memories. I am wondering how soon till they are used to remember favors and then possessions. They will have to be watched carefully.

There is one other thing they got from us, ceram. They can't make them of course, but they like the pretty colored beads and small containers that the dry sentients make in exchange for herbs, fruits and nuts. At some point an off world sentient will try and hunt an alliger, but we are discouraging that for the moment out of ecological concerns. The Mu have a right to their trees and with the alligers gone others would likely move in. Assuming they ever get used to the itching.

“Okay, Bernice, all set. Hope this vacation is better than the last one we went on.” A reference to Farpoint.

“We never go to the same place twice.” She laughs. Can't, seeing as how Farpoint is just so much molten rock now.

Of course we take mini vacations on the world we are stationed on, but once every few hundred years we get a few years off to a place of our choosing. My turn to choose and I have chosen a nice tropical water world. I feel the Blue have been neglected too long in our education.

“Looks like we have a send off party.”

“Mating party probably. Can we still refuse?” She nods emphatically. I don't have a tail, so am considered very ugly. She does, albeit a hairless one. But, it does get her more attention from the curious than I get. She has threatened to attach a tail to me at times.

They are using their 'umbrellas' to keep off the rain. These have hooks on the top to latch onto branches to free their hands. Together they cover a sizable area, with leaks at the edges of course. They are quickly all around us, everyone touching everyone and fondling every part of your body. Not for the prudish. By Mu standards I am well built and this fascinates them. Wonder what they would do with a Hu female with large breasts? Probably ignore them after the novelty wore off. An organ oozing liquid food for the young? How disgusting!

What's that smell Jake? I know that smell. So do I.

I don't have time to answer before the most searing pain I have ever felt rushes up my arm to my head in less than a second. I see Bernice black out just before I do, and then we are falling.

Learning Center

I have to keep up on all the sentient music forms. I am most familiar with Ceph and Hu of course. Most of us Ceph cannot even hear the finer air registers of the Ba. My problem is that I have a graduate student who is Cat and can hear, but finds the music annoying and not to his liking. The Cats here are level two, mostly TP, rarely DS unless spooked, which is hard to do. They have no qualms about reading all the sentients around them.

~There is talk of raising dogs to sentient status.~

I will have to work harder on getting poisonous snakes up the list then.

~What is the animosity between your kind?~

From the beginning of time we have competed for prey. They took the easy route and sacrificed their freedom and intelligence. Does not take many neurons to get to a food bowl once a day.

~Ghost did not mind. Or was it the back rubs, I forget.~

humph. Don't forget you have ag duty this eight day. He looks smug.

~Sorting is not so bad. Mindless enough that I can still work on my composition. May actually be just what I need. Thanks for reminding me.~ You are not going to get me that easy, just because the only time you like dealing with dirt is when covering waste.

Each world has a university called the Learning Center where all sentients get together to exchange and share information and train the next generation. All of the guilds are represented at the highest levels. No one becomes a Master without spending time at a Center. Fortunately, no one reaches the Associate level at a young age to qualify to come here. Whereas the universities of old had to put up with the hormonally challenged, we are much calmer here.

I am here on ^Ba'Eden^ on an exchange program. The Ba don't care what we call the world, so they got the generic. It is just the current place they are. The most adaptable of the sentients they have no particular affinity for 'home' such as it is, any high strong tree or cliff will do. Hmm, at least once they got over the initial shock of believing they are the only sentient. Not being territorial could explain it.

Different worlds have Centers at different tech levels. It is important to show only a little higher than the current level. Push a culture too fast and it will break. Here on the Ba home world they are around tech four. They were tech three before Opening, but sort of stuck there for hundreds

of years. They were frightened at Opening, thinking we were all interested in eating them. They are taking this very slowly.

At least we don't have to walk everywhere any more. There are slow trains between the major population areas, run at about thirty kilos per eighth. A Cat can, and often do, lope along at that rate. The Ba are afraid of large mech devices, but also see the need to bring their world up, tech wise. Taking it slow is not a bad thing. Of course they have members on every other world now. Once that starts to pay off they will go at a much faster rate if they are not careful.

A Dia approaches me and shows with a slight accent, ~Instructor, do you know the way to the philosophy department?~

~Seeker, a first year?~ She acknowledges. She must be a new arrival. ~Were you not given a tour?~

~The train, I had no idea that it took so long. It looked so fast when I first saw it. We do not have them in my settlement. I could have run faster, but ...~ She hands well. Very diplomatic to com in the receivers language.

~Could not resist. I understand. Well, you are here to learn. Your first lesson. Tech is not always the best way to do something. What Guild? Sorry, I should ask your name. I am Instructor Sussi, like the legends.~

She straightens up, ~I am Seeker Lessa. I am certified as a Self Walker Trader and as a Helper Pollution Officer.~ Ah, just my luck, an over achiever.

~And which will you Master at?~

~I have not decided yet. What is your specialty?~ Oh no you don't.

~Neither of those two areas. Stick to what you know, that is the surest path to becoming a Master. Spread too thin and you become master of none.~ Like a Trader, humph. She gives me a Dia sigh. Has heard this before no doubt.

She bows out of respect and turns to go. I tap her on her side. When she turns I show, ~I am going to see Instructor Hernkic's seminar myself. Walk with me.~

She opens her mouth to speak, then remembers to show instead, but decides not to. I don't need TP to know what is happening. She was not going to see the seminar. I would guess she was going to check out the department for another possible career change. Now she is stuck with me guiding her. Of course I was not planning on the seminar myself, but I have the time and it will be good for me to see what has changed.

A nice spring day, with a cool overcast. Some of the mammal sentients are cold and are wearing more than normal. Still, I am glad the

seminar is outside in the amphitheater.

~Is it alright to sit closer? My eyesight is not great and it is easier for me to see subtle showing when I am closer and not attempting to see over the tops of everyone else.~

~Of course.~ Not my choice. I would prefer to stay in the background and be unnoticed. Except when I am on stage. Then I really don't care. It is all about the music. Everything else ceases to exist. Nothing but the music.

A composition starts in my head. I have been working on this one for years. A six thirteen syncopated inversion. A simple piece, but haunting. Sentients have a hard time getting it out of their heads. Several of my students incorporated parts of it into their work. They couldn't help it.

“Please welcome Instructor Hernkic.” Everyone is quiet and still. Conversations stop. At least they have not forgotten how to behave. Or, rather, they have relearned it. There was a time when there were no seminars, no Instructors, no Seekers. Hundreds of years ago, but it seems like yesterday to me.

“Instructor Hernkic will be espousing on the subject, First Ones, Myth or Reality?” Pounding ensures to show respect. It is something that all sentients can do. The Hu habit of clapping is hard for most everyone but them. A harsh practice anyway, in my opinion. Of course our simplified Nauti acknowledgment is best, but only the Ceph can do this properly. I miss home world.

A heavy set slightly stooped Di rises to speak, !Like the title of the seminar? Does anyone here doubt the answer?

Yet, there was a time, in the not too distant past when it would be assumed that of course they are real. Along with Travelers, Guardians, Enforcers and the like. Oh, and let us not forget the elusive 'thn. The solid sentient that floats on air.!

I will have to report back the Guardian council that they have succeeded. No one believes in us any more. We have ceased to exist. I am not sure this is an improvement. First Covenant, then those three nerd communities, and finally Farpoint. Why the obsession with First Ones? This audience does not believe in them, yet they discuss them. I would have rescued our own and left the others to deal with theirs. We have gone to ground as the Hu say, but is it enough? Do the First Ones even care we exist? Over three hundred years and nothing. An arn in their time, in slow time, in any TK's time really.

What's that taste in the air? I know that taste. My senses are on full alert. I do a quick pulse scan, very carefully.

!And this is what the supposed First Ones are supposed to smell like!
Lessa hands me. At least she is discrete. ~That is just a yukgi beetle.
Poisonous, so it is good to remember the smell. Even stepping on one can be very painful.~

I relax. So close to the real thing. Maybe that is not surprising as both are insects life forms. If a Ceph could sweat I would be right now. I know it is just a matter of time. A culture and species that has lasted this long, far longer than any other, is going to 'correct' any errors that come up in their plans. I wish they were more like a musical score. If you make a mistake in a performance, you move on. It happens. What you don't do is stop the performance and go back and correct the mistake. I am hoping they will think of all of this a performance. They have next time, approximately thirty five million years from now. With any luck we will have played out our part in the evolution of the universe and be gone. What is one missed note after all this time? Certainly not that important.

!A show of appendages. How many sentients have seen a First One?!
There are signs of amusement, but no one responds.

!How about a Guardian? An Enforcer? Traveler? Oooh, how about a 'thn? Wouldn't that be grand?!

A lot of noises and displays of amusement now. Really, no one believes in us any more. Good. They are too 'advanced' to believe in stories for the young.

!I contend that there are no First Ones, Guardians, etc. Not even 'thn. They are simply arc types from the time of myths and legends. Illustrative stories that the Tellers show to the young so they may learn the moral codes and expected behaviors of a civilized culture. The real question is not whether or not they exist, but do they, in their mythical form, still perform a service, or, have we evolved beyond the need for stories?! He pauses to let that thought filter into their neurons for an arm.

Lessa hands me, ~I have heard this before. All communities talk about it among the adults. No one believes in them any more except the young. Slight of arm by a good Teller is all. Too bad. If I was a Guardian I would do things differently. I would not be so shy and hidden.~

I hand her back, ~So a culture ruled by force is better than one who comes to the correct conclusions based on their own experiences and discussions?~

She looks up at me. They always assume that our 'center' is somewhere in the main mantle mass, when in fact our 'brains' are much lower down, more carefully protected. Vertebrates are so poorly designed. I am still amazed they became dominant on so many worlds.

~But the Guardians are supposed to KNOW the truth. If you know THE truth, should not all beings follow it, even if unwillingly? Otherwise we invite disaster. Better that there be a few disgruntled elders than a whole culture die because of some stupid mistake.~

~You are assuming of course that the Guardians KNOW the truth. You have heard and read the stores by now. They started as normal sentients like anyone else. What part of what happened to them imparted total knowledge?~

~Experience of course. They must have seen countless trials over what would have been many of our lifetimes. They have seen the mistakes that can happen. They could warn us and guide us so we don't make those mistakes ourselves this time.~

~Then why must they be dictators to do this? Why not work in the background as advisers, companions, friends and even maybe a Teller or two. Actually a Teller would be a good way for them to work. They could move from community to community passing on what they learned.~

~But they would not need to be Guardians to do that? A normal sentient Teller could do as much.~

~Hmmm, you are right. Guardians are not needed then.~

~I did not hand that. But I can't think of a way out of your argument at the moment. Maybe there is more I can learn from the Philosophy department.~ Great, this is what I was trying to avoid. Sigh.... as Silver is always doing.

Instructor Hernkic goes on to give evidence of how stories can arise over time from perfectly normal circumstances. So much of our stories were not actually witnessed by norms and can therefore be easily dismissed as pure fabrication. Story telling has even become popular in the Ceph culture. No more ignoring the unseen. They are now actively taught, instead of expecting them to passively observe and absorb the skills and knowledge needed as I did. Not that selection does not still occur, but most of that happens at the hatchling and crawler stages now. No more 'accidents' happening to a stupid unseen. By the time they become big enough to be doing work, some adult adopts them and protects them. Mammals! They are corrupting our culture.

Instructor Hernkic is well received and the discussion goes on for at least a polite period of time. I signal him to come over when he has a chance. Most of the sentients have left before he breaks free and comes over to us.

Lessa immediately show respect and exclaims, !You have given me much to think about Instructor. Thank you.!

!Your accent is excellent. I am glad that I could help open your mind. Are you still a believer or have I covered over your previous thoughts?!

She shows embarrassment, !How did you know?!

!Only believers feel I have given them new thoughts.!

She nods, !Of course. However I know you are wrong. It is not my beliefs that they exist that have changed, but my thoughts about their methods. Instructor Sussi has given me much to think about as well.!

!Well I certainly cannot compete with a musician.! This is not said in anger, but amusement.

Lessa looks at me and does not see his amusement. My profession has been exposed. She turns back to Herkic, !No, your arguments would be persuasive, very, it is just that I have seen them. I know they exist.!

~At least you thought you have seen them. Please show us your experience.~ Now she has my curiosity. Who was careless? Someone is going to get chastised for this. Probably a level two or three. They can be so careless.

!Yes, please. How about we find some food and drink. The Hu Cafe should be open by now. They have adapted some of their offerings to other sentiments. Their crunchy melon is quite good. Not too sweet.! He lowers his eyes, !Avoid the Ba Treehouse though. I am not against eating arthropods, but fermented?! He shakes. I can eat or not eat Fukangi. An acquired taste.

We chose refreshments and a space to exchange thoughts.

~Please begin your telling Seeker Lessa.~

!Excuse me Instructor Sussi, my Di is better than my Ceph. Do you mind if I share in Di?!

#!You may share in Dia if you wish, we both understand, though you don't want to hear Instructor Sussi try and pronounce your idioms.#!

She looks very confused, !This is embarrassing, but I actually do not know Dia. I hope that was what you were using? I was raised here. There are not many Dia only communities and I was not raised in one of them. My parents died in a plague while I was in egg. We had Ba, Hu, Di and recently a few Ku, so learned their languages. I learned Ceph in classes as all do. Visual is more universal and easier on vocal systems.!

!You would be valuable to any community with that many languages. I am surprised they let you leave.!

!I was the only Dia. I could not mate, though I certainly had sig friends. Being an only I am allowed by right to look for another community if I desire. Besides, I am qualified to be here, it is just whether or not I return that is in doubt.!

!I want to hear your tell.! I was not even supposed to be here. I should be back in my office preparing my next class.

Even Hernkic is amused by my Di. Hey, I have been adapted, I don't have to like it.

Lessa is more polite. I am sure not everyone in her community was equally proficient at all languages.

!I was given permission to go with a Trader chain to help get supplies for a neighboring community that had suffered a bad harvest. It was my ability with many languages that was needed. Probably the reason I was accepted into the Trader Guild, though I had already joined the local Pollution Guild. That was my secondary task, to be sure all proper protocols were followed. Both Guilds required its members to be diplomatic.

It was on the second load of materials that the incident happened. We were at a small camp two days out from our destination. A local had already come out to meet us. A Ba elder. An important bridge between our two communities had been struck by a falling tree and destroyed. Three sentients had confirmed that the bridge would have to be abandoned. The elder was one of them. She, with help from the other two, made it across the stream to come to us to tell us.

The problem was that the community desperately needed the supplies. We would have to find some other way to get the supplies across. A Master Maker suggested that though we ourselves may not be able to get safely across it may still be possible to get the supplies across. If a few packages did not make it, it was still better than none of them getting over.

We followed the elder back to the site of the bridge only to find it almost completely intact with an old Hu Teller standing underneath the center of the bridge, where a major support was being replaced, without any visible means. Once our presence became apparent, he disappeared instantly and the structure collapsed into the stream. The tree than had fallen on it however was along side the bridge, providing a secondary means of crossing the stream. The log bridge would not last the winter, we receive too much water for anything this simple to survive. But it would suit our purpose of getting supplies to the stricken community before winter set in. That meant we had until spring thaw to build another bridge. Someone else's concern. I would be expected back long before then.

No one spoke of what they had seen. Officially sentients with the ability to move objects and disappear at will did not exist. We would be

thought to have been lying or worse, intoxicated.

But having personally seen the event, it got me more interested in the Trader Guild as a means to seeing more of the world. That was the first stage of separation from my community. The Trader Guild that I joined still allowed me to visit my hatching community once in a while. That was more than five years ago and I don't even miss them much any more.!

!One has to wonder what we could possibly offer you?!

!I would need to be a Master Trader in order to go beyond the local communities. I need to see more. Being a Master Trader would be one way. Becoming an Instructor however, would allow me to visit other worlds.!

!Hold up raptor chow. Not all Instructors visit other worlds. Most of ours have never been anywhere but here.!

!And some Traders are able. The chips we all use to pass information around with are not made here. We are level three, maybe high level three at best. Chips are level six at least. Someone has to move them to and from the level six worlds.!

!Would that not be a level six Trader? How would a level three sentient fare in a level six world. We would be like an abandoned clutch.!

I counter though with, !And how would a level six Trader survive here where they would be dependent on arm skills acquired over a lifetime. Here on a Ba dominant world a raggery would find them quite tasty. They would be unlikely to even know about the lowly yukgi beetle we all just tasted the odor from. A deadly lack of knowledge under the right circumstances.!

!Then how is it done?!

!In pairs of course. Stay here for a few years and you will learn much. Then you can decide what you are to do to help all of us succeed.!

Hernkic adds.

!She is concerned that as Dia her lifespan will not allow such patience.!

We may have to do something about that. What do you think? I am glad I got your message to check her out. I thought when I saw you two together it meant you thought she was a prize.

I sent no message. Did you just bring out that beetle again?

No and I smell it too.

We both look at Lessa. She has the weirdest expression on her face as she reaches out to touch me. I immediately raise a shield at level two. If she is truly a First One she will sense and pass through my shield with

ease. When her clawed hand reaches my shield she is prevented from going further. She looks confused and tries several times, only to look even more confused. She starts to shake, then even more and more violently. I scan her. Every system in her body is breaking down.

We are too public. Let her die. He has sensed my shield of course.

I need to know. You were not on Paradise. I need to know.

What makes you think this has anything to do with the First Ones, you have seen a simple beetle makes that smell. Other things may be able to as well. She may have been reaching out for help. Sometimes I think you third gens are too paranoid. Most sens in distress reach out for help from others they trust.

Being Ceph is enough to make us paranoid.

!We need help! A Seeker has fallen ill. We need help!! Hernkic calls out.

Soon others are surrounding us. It is too late though.

Search

“Rooi, we have searched everywhere. If they got out we can't find them. I'm sorry.”

~There is no way they would not have backup. All of us top level Guardians are prepared, especially when dealing with a potential First One.~

^We can't find them. Maybe they really spooked. It has been some time. They could have transferred and then left. A lead? In search of the First Ones maybe?^

~They would not do that alone. None of us would.~

“You might Rooi. Let Jordon go. Q and I will look. Everyone else go back to work.” *Rooi I want to show with you.*

When the others leave I wait a moment. We can be somewhat unpredictable. Sure enough, Jordon comes back.

^Sorry, forgot my hat.^ He leaves again.

Owa pops in, “I can help. My nose is better than yours.”

“Go find Q. I want him on this one. He understands.” She stays though. Can never tell a Cat what to do.

~You think they have forgotten? That the transfer was too quick?~ I don't answer. Don't have to. It is the only explanation if they are alive.

“Rooi, I think you should go to the Regional Center. I don't think this is limited to just the Earth Froth. There were nearly a million TKs on Paradise. If anything, they were linked in longer than ours were. They may be in danger and need to be warned.”

~And you should stay here. We can't risk both of us together. We should not be together now.~

“We were never linked in. They don't know our DNA like they did the others. What is the total up to now?”

~What do you mean?~

Owa comes into the conversation, “One hundred and sixteen others we know of so far. Ozi and Pu were not the first even. They are going after everyone who was there. It was too sudden for us to spread the word in time. You need to get to the center with what we know. We will do what we can here. We will camp at Destruction.” Owa leaves. We are using Destruction too much. It should be a memorial, not a 'camp' or waste pit.

~Were the others killed the same way? Genetically engineered prions?

~

“So far. Makes me wonder if all prions and viruses in the Earth Froth were left overs from some previous meeting.”

I add, “Or they just used a vulnerability they knew we had. They could have been watching us from the very beginning.”

~There are trillions of stars with life forms. How many First Ones do you think there are?~

“One high TK could cover a couple of systems if they had to. Not much to do but observe. It would be enough to know what was going on. Remember from what the 'thn have told us, the First Ones have been around from before this universe. If they had one on each sentient world when it frothed they could keep up with what was happening. They are supposed to be devoted to the diversity imperative. What better way to observe the results?”

~It is also possible that not all the facts we think we know are true. We have more conjecture than evidence. I am not sure I can do much more than raise panic at the center. If they use our weaknesses against us they will attack each froth world in a different way. Oz, Pu and I were the only ones on Eden that were also at Paradise. How did they know where we were?~

“It was three hundred years ago Rooi, maybe they are just very patient. You waited that long to turn Silver silver.” Don't remind me.

Hmm, “I am more worried that they will set up another mirror. They can't go killing all the TKs if they intend to do that. Maybe they really just went after us. It was our TKs who soured the pot.” And the two of us who shut down Paradise.

~They could go after everyone on Paradise. How many TKs in the entire universe do you think there are? Probably trillions, so a million used to power their engine would not even be noticed. They may have even had a reason for choosing these particular ones. It always seemed wrong to me that so many did what we did and found Paradise. Maybe they were drawn there.~

“Then maybe they will set up a new Paradise and Mirror on another Earth Froth.”

I shake my head, “Too obvious. It is a big universe. How many worlds were near the center. Probably millions would fit.”

~No, only the one, though others are close. They could even choose a green world just for revenge.~

“I don't think we are that important. They can always start over when the universe flips. No reason to do it now.”

~How many TKs can do what we did? They are looking for us. I

would be.~

Healer and I say in unison, “Go Roo.”

I add, “Oh, don't know if this is important, but in every case there was the smell of the First Ones just like you reported.” She bows and pops out.

I ask Healer, “You know where Q is?”

“With James and Rachael working on the new Enterprise?” She scratches his head. How long has it been since Healer switched genders. Only now getting used to it.

Healer continues, “We should not be building it. The First Ones hate tech for some reason. It will only bring them to us.”

“And allow us to find them. There are many cultures with tech higher than anything Hu came up with. Besides, we have their signature. Should be able to find them from orbit.”

“Even a TK9 could take us out from orbit too, but you don't think they are nines do you?”

“If there are not hordes of 'thn here to squash us then it must not be that rare. Besides who would make a servant more powerful than themselves. They have to be thirteens at least.”

You stupid monkeys made machines much more powerful than yourselves, but always also knew of a weakness that could be exploited if necessary.

“Not that a few did not die at times. But, yes, a fail safe, that might explain it. The 'thn certainly show a fear of a great many things. Some of those may point to the First Ones weaknesses.”

Grisser, who has been silent through this discussion, lowers her ears, *Good luck stupid monkeys.* Yeah, I agree, not going to be easy.

Regional Galactic Center

How I wish I was back in the time when the 'thn helped us get to the center. The Guardians of the time were just along for the ride. Well, at least at first. A few learned how to get to the center on their own later on.

It takes only a few hops to get to the take off site. E1, in the middle of the desert. A very unlikely spot of a Ceph. Sentients live there, so I can't just pop straight to the spot. Curse them for letting them settle here. The reasoning, if reason can be used in this case, was that someone would sooner or later notice our presence on top of the mesa. Better if it was normal for sens to be there. One more is less noticed than only one to begin with. But, it means that I have to walk at least part of the way. You know how far a sen can see from up there?

It looks like a long dry way up. Summer too. Why do I get the idea that I have been set up again. This is Silver's territory, or even Pushy Paws, yet here I am, a wet soft bodied one. This is worse than the trek I took before I became a Guardian. There were at least trees and streams there.

I use four staffs when going up such steep grades. I smear lotion all over my body to help slow down the dehydration. I thought about using an IV drip to help, but decided that would appear too weird. It should not take me more than a day. A very long day, a very long dry day.

Of course it would be better to wait until dusk to be cooler at least, but they are level three tech here. No electricity and minimal artificial light sources. I have to fit in. A Ceph making this trip has to appear in bad shape when they arrive. Besides, it is a sacred place. No one uses advanced tech or TK here, at least not openly. It could be worse, it could be summer or winter.

Looks like a storm is coming. I could not possibly be that lucky. Probably hit north of here and miss me completely. Usually does. Halfway up the mesa's side means I either miss it or get washed off the side.

Time to watch more carefully. I see tracks from most sentient species. In spite of the fact that no one believes in us anymore, many make the pilgrimage. Fortunately the transfer station is close by, just the walk up the mesa side. A dio can make it in a few eighths. We are the slowest of the sentients out here.

At noon I am nearly spent and running low on water. I hear steps. Something big is coming around the corner towards me. Coming fast too!

I climb part way up the slope to avoid being trampled.

I nearly don't make it when a Di comes towards me at full run!

Ah, there you are little one! I have been looking for you all day. Oh, you look a little dehydrated. I brought lots of water. He pours liters all over me. It feels wonderful.

~White! I am very happy to see you. How did you know I was here?~

I am actually more surprised that he is still alive. I thought all of the lower TKs would be dead by First One by now. White never got past six. Just not interested. I had to raise him to at least that level to thank him for all his help. Oh, wait, that's right. Only seven and above were called to Paradise. He missed the whole thing.

Menace told Gryci who happened to be at the same transfer station as I was at. I was free, so I decided to keep you company. Hope you don't mind.

~I am very pleased to have your company. Let's walk.~

I could carry you and we could be there in less than an eighth.

~That would be heaven. Thank you.~ He picks me up gently. He also runs more smoothly and carefully than he would normally. I am grateful.

We should get there before sundown. Beautiful sunsets from the top of the mesa this time of year. I still prefer my home world, but this is nice too. Sure is dusty though. Should be plenty of water though. It was nice of all of you to restore the aquifer after the Hu drained it. I remember now that White likes to show, a lot.

Several long stories later we finally reach the top. I learned more about Di social structure than I ever wanted to know. The other sentients are having an effect on their culture. We are all becoming the same. Each gravitating towards a mean. Normally as a Ceph I would be happy that everything is becoming safely stable. However, as a Guardian, I am worried. This universe was set up to maximize diversity, not homogeneity. Our numbers are too low to handle a major mishap. Even a handful of Enterprise size ships could take us all out. With everyone thinking the same, acting the same, living the same, we will not have the diversity of ideas to succeed. We are dealing with First Ones, not ordinary sentients.

White sets me down. I come around to face him.

~I want to go to the sanctuary right away.~

No problem.

It is a short distance. No one else is about. The sun is setting, but I don't want to wait. I taste smoke. Everyone is making an evening meal. The air tastes good. No time. I can fill up at the center. TK chow, yum.

The altar in the center of the room has a single not well maintained fat candle sputtering. I look around. The sanctuary is being neglected. How long has it been since I was here last? Maybe a hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago. I am not fond of the regional center. They don't have good soaks there. Okay, I am not fond of strange creatures. Too much to take in all at once. I like predictability.

The books, logs of the Guardians, are nearly dust. Definitely not readable. Even the engravings on the walls have been damaged. Young ones or upset adults? Ah, a Nauti sphere. I believe I was the one who did this one. I pick it up. A huge chunk is missing from one side. This is outrageous! Who would destroy knowledge in such a reckless way?

Two approach. Crab. What can I do to get rid of them?

Two very elderly approach. One Hu and one Dio. Male and female. Looks like they have been together a long time. They clasp hands. Maybe for mutual support. Who knows what their history is. I sometimes wonder what it would have been like to live a normal life. I would be long dead of course.

The two slowly make their way to the altar. One cleans the altar off with a dirty rag. The other carefully refills the lamp without blowing it out. Good technique. I am impressed. Some might lose the lamp. Others would undoubtedly set themselves on fire. The lamp comes up again to full brightness this time. It is then that they finally notice the two of us.

With creaking bones, they honor us with a weak Nauti bow. I am not sure they could do better than this if they wanted to. I honor them by giving the traditional full bow with raised arms.

"It has been a long time since I have seen such form. You give us great honor Rooi. Named after the Guardian. That is rare in itself." I had forgotten all about the tattoo on my mantle. So few read Nauti. Just decorations to most these days. She turns to White and asks, "May I have the honor of your name honored one?"

"I am simply called White. I used to be much paler than I am now when I was small." He bows to them and they bow back.

It starts to rain outside. Just drizzle at first. I should go out and enjoy it. Then it hits like a hurricane. Lots of rain. I scan outside. Centimeters deep running off in all directions. The dust quickly turns to mud. The sanctuary is raised fortunately. We are in no danger of being washed away. Our two hosts look out and decide they will not be returning to their homes just yet. They go to one corner and put out some blankets. They lay them out and curl up together to sleep it out.

I definitely do not want to wait this long. Sentients may be dying as I

wait.

If we leave now, it will give them something to remember. A fitting send off for a life serving the Sanctuary. It would appear they deserve it.

Maybe something less dramatic, I think to myself.

White is wondering, *We could always take them with us and drop them off somewhere else afterwards.*

I look over at them. I don't need to do this, but somehow it seems fitting. I concentrate and scan them. Nothing unexpected by old age. I close my eyes and get to work. Extend the teleomeres, dissolve the cancers, rebuild the bones. When I am done, I release natural hormones to let them sleep.

~I am ready. They will not notice.~

I am touched by your actions. He bows to me and comes closer.

I concentrate and jump.

We arrive in the central courtyard. I head immediately for the soak pool. Not really intended for that purpose, but better than all the mud at the mesa.

That was the smoothest transport I have ever felt Roo. Even better than the tech gateways.

He looks around while I concentrate on the water. Not salty enough. Tastes funny actually. Too clean. Or was.

Roo, there is no one here.

What? I look around and see nothing. The corridors are empty. No litter, no hair, scales, whatever. Nothing. It is like no one was ever here. I scan and am blocked by thick 'thn matrix wall. Not unexpected. I am not limited by a normal nine however. I push beyond to all the other sectors of the center.

~There are not even any 'thn present. Absolutely no one. Could the First Ones have attacked them? Search for anything out of the ordinary.~

White nods, concentrates and starts walking. Only a six, but with acute senses. I don't believe the Nauti designed us Ceph that well any more. Though it obviously served the purpose. I delivered the black 'thn to the end of time. So, why are the First Ones attacking us? They must know. We did what we were brought up to do. Isn't this all part of their plan?

I am worried that we are too late. That the others are all dead as well. I get out of the water and dry myself to being just moist instead of dripping. But it could not be everyone. This is only one regional center. There must be millions of centers. There must be trillions of TKs in the multiverse, maybe even trillions of trillions. There were only a million or

so at Paradise. A very tiny fraction of the whole. Assuming they took a distribution of victims there would be a statistical possibility that no one from here was among the chosen.

On the other hand there were nearly three hundred of our group present. We were different, they thought so when they kicked them out of the array, or were others all part of groups as well? Was it the entire regional center than was harvested? I would have thought I would recognize species if not individuals. I didn't.

Roo, over here.

I scan and clue in on his location. I then DS.

~What have you found?~

He moves aside to reveal a Nauti sphere. A true one, not the imitation ones the Ceph make. I could make one if I had to, and one other.

Look familiar? I know of no other species that does these.

~There are no markings on the surface.~ I do not want to understand the sphere here. White is okay, but this needs to be seen by Silver as well. Where did the others go? We are in only one of the froth manifestations of the center. I start a scan of the other froths. It is easiest to do at a center for some reason. Good thing, as it makes moving from one to another easier. A pinch point, in a dimensional sort of way. Otherwise they would have to devote too many 'thn to service it. I can visualize in my mind the nodes that must represent the centers in the 'THN structure.

I am totally motionless during this. White is getting bored and wonders off. With him gone it is easier for me to concentrate.

After several eighths and a few check ins by White I am not having any success. They are absent in all froths. I have two arms on the sphere when I absentmindedly scan the sphere. It is enfolded as I suspected. Lyssi knows me well. Maybe they all moved to a nearby center. The 'thn could have moved them without much trouble. They probably move that way all the time. I am sure the vortex point is not unique to our worlds.

So, why did we have to start from E1? Isn't the vortex the same for all the earths?

Huh? Ah, White is back.

~The vortex point is at the same position on all earths, this is true. However, each world has undergone different geological change. It would be impossible for me to find the exact point on any random world. We can however return to any world you wish. Assuming we don't end up underwater or in a cliff.~

E1 sounds good to me. Thought so. So many think that being a nine is easier. It's not. It's much harder. What did the Hu Jesus say in his

showings? To whom much has been given, much will be required. That is certainly true of a nine.

The sun is well into the sky when we return. I did not realize that we were gone that long. The two elderly ones are near the altar staring at us smiling. Crab. They drop slowly to a Nauti bow, much better this time.

The Hu speaks, "Thank you honored ones for healing us."

You're welcome honored ones. You honor us by maintaining this sanctuary long after all others had given up hope. White bows to them and does his best smile in return. Which unfortunately looks more like he is about to eat them. They must be used to it and make no comment.

They are still smiling. Why?

I turn around to see many faces looking at me through the door. Crab! So much for being discrete.

White TPs me, *We can't do much more if they saw us arrive. No need to walk back at least.*

True. I DS us to the station. I need some time before deciding what to do. We thought about removing the space station after what the First Ones did to the first Enterprise, but we decided just to minimize the time anyone spent on it. If they remove it, they will not take out more than one or two of us. Did they already get everyone at the station? Or once it started happening, did they get out and hide to avoid being gotten? A lot of TKs all in one place would have been much easier to dispose of than one at a time scattered throughout the galaxy.

I make a decision and make a gateway. To Mirror.

Sardine Bay

^Want to go out to the ruins?^

~Anywhere but here. I am so bored. Get the boat ready, go out, catch fish, bring them back, gut and pack them, sleep and repeat over and over and over.~

^Why do they make such a fuss over these ruins? All they are is a bunch of old rocks with iron stains all over them.^

~The elders teach us that they are the ruins of the first Hu to be adopted by a 'thn. In other words the first Guardian. The rest of his team became Guardians too. At the same place on the Ceph home world is where the first Ceph Guardians happened. Do you believe it? Does it look like a place the all powerful wonderful Guardians would happen?~

^I heard that too, but I never found anything that indicated there was ever any Hu settlement here before our community got here three gen ago. Maybe all the good stuff was found by your ancestors.^

~If they found anything it would be in the hall along with all the other historical stuff. I may be in this form, but I do not see at all why they are so obsessed by history and doing everything the 'approved' way.~

^At least you know enough to stay out of trouble. Every time I do anything they are right there correcting me. I can't move anything a millimeter without some one older than me moving it a fraction of a millimeter in a different direction. A fraction of a millimeter! Does it make any difference in the outcome? No! They are all mountains! They never move.^

~Even mountains move in the Halls of the Matriarchs.~ He shows this all formal and stiff. Looks funny.

^Only on Ceph A. They have not been here long enough to see them move.^

~Actually they have. All these ruins before us were under water when they arrived. They say because of a small ice age that has been forming the water has receded several hundred meters. It used to be up where we started. They were partially underwater when I was hatched they say. I don't remember.~

^Do you remember where you came ashore?^

~You always ask that and I always show the same. All I remember were the crabs and gulls. The gulls were the worst. Look at the rocks around here. Crouch down between any two and look towards the shore. It looks the same between any two. You do the best you can to hide from

the gulls, knowing that in every other crevice is a crab waiting for you.~

^Amazing anyone makes it in.^

~Most don't. That's the point. Selection for the strongest and smartest. All so I can catch fish for the rest of my life.~

^Yeah, well I get to take all those fish guts and separate the male and female parts out to try and start as many new fish as possible. It all has to be done as fast as possible or the gonads die and are useless. We all get hell if that happens. I smell like fish guts. Whoa, get back some that wave nearly got you. You want to spawn before your time or something?^

~Might be better. At least it would be over. And being daylight instead of a moon night, at least I would not be responsible for making any more sentients to suffer.~

^I have heard that mating is fun.^

~You can do it more than once. We can't. Once is all we get. You don't risk your life when you do it either.~

^Hey, we are not Hu doing several times an eight day. Once a year is not that often.^ He dips two hands into the waves to taste the salt, tempting fate.

^I have a better idea. Lets go to the forest. We could try and find the thieves.^

~They are several eight days from here at least. They are not going to be set up this close to a settlement. Our patrols would have found them.~

^Explain the missing items from stores then. Someone is using us. Wouldn't be great if we are the ones who caught them? We don't have to actually find them. Even if we just find evidence of their passing we would be treated better. Let's not waste this freeday moping about like we always do. It would be different at least.^ Today is a good day to live. Please choose something other than the ocean.

~We go to the redwood stand. That's where I would go. You can see the entire settlement from there.~

^Everyone knows that. I'm sure they check that place every time. But, hey, if you are a new Guardian, maybe you will see something new. Remember when we used to play Guardians as unseen? Those were good eights.^

~Okay be Jordon, I'll be Gryci. Let's hope I survive though.~ I do hope that. Ours names aren't Jordon and Gryci of course. Naming day is still fresh in our minds. Only a few eight days ago and so far our tasks have not changed. Neither one of us expected to be catching and cleaning fish the rest of our lives. The worry of course is that if we stay at these tasks too much longer they will forget about us and just leave us there.

Then we could only hope to become trainers of unseen. Nothing higher. Yes, all tasks are valued equally, but not all tasks are equally enjoyable to be done.

Uphill to the redwoods. Ceph like to be able to see what is coming at them from the sea, so cut down the taller trees between their shelter and the sea. Which of course is silly, as everyone else, well, except for the Blu, would come from the land. As our thieves are obviously doing.

But, the Ceph, ever wise, will not change their tactics. As long as the thieves do not start an outright invasion the Ceph Matriarch will only offer minimal effort. Hence, we are doing what we can on our freeday, as is everyone else. Oh, there is a reward, minimal, for anything related to stopping the threat. Silas and I are just bored, otherwise we would not bother working on such a fools errand. As far away from the fish as I can get is fine with me.

It is hard going for Silas, going uphill towards an area not well maintained. Too many loose rocks and stones that offer no surface to grip. I do not go as fast as I could. There are times and places where he would have the advantage and I would be the one going slow or acting stupid. Mostly that. The Ceph brains think differently. They can do several thoughts at once without effort. Not me. One thing at a time or I am lost.

We make our way past the streets. On the dirt trails Silas does better. We are soon both covered in dirt and mud. I purposely add a little extra so as not to look like I am having it too easy. I look up. We are among the first redwoods.

~We will see better if we go up.~ I affirm. Climbing we are about equal, though we use very different methods. I have nice claws and a light weight. Silas can grab anything and pull himself up. Redwoods offer a lot of cracks in the bark for hand holds. Claws and suckers.

~Wait. See this?~ I find a juicy insect and munch it as fast as I can, then I come closer. I can never predict exactly where he will place a hand, so I usually keep my claws away by staying on the other side of the tree. He does not move and I carefully crawl closer. We are about twelve meters up. Neither of us would fair well if we fell. I am more used to the trees of course, but not immortal. Silas, however, can spread out and grab anything within reach of any arm. He would then swing towards whatever he caught and hit hard, but would survive. This strategy works better further up. We are in a sort of dead zone. Too high to survive direct impact with the ground. Too low to be able to grab anything in time.

If these trees were younger the Ba would petition to occupy. Redwoods exist in abundance on the Ba home world in much greater

diversity. Here for some reason most of the trees in the area are of a single clone. The life group says the clone may be ten thousand years old. That scares us. Too much risk that something would come along to decimate our homes.

^Fungus. Our elders were right about these trees.^

~But what kind of fungus? This one does not normally grow this high up. The only way for it to get here would be if someone left it here.~

^A spore could easily reach here.^

~This species does not propagate well by spores on bark. Better if hyphae are transplanted. The spores do better on the ground, attaching themselves to the roots where it helps the tree. Here it will help rot it.~

^I knew that.^

~Missed the class on tree cleaning did you Pok?~ I hate tree cleaning almost as much as fish cleaning. Difference is, if you fall asleep cleaning a fish not much happens but a slap on the head. Up here, you die of sudden impact with the ground. Improves the concentration and the stress load. A lot of Ba die of stress. Which does not make sense to me, as most of our children survive to naming, whereas most of the Ceph do not. If anyone were under stress you would think they would be. Silas explained it to me that they are more fatalistic. They expect to die before naming, therefore it does not bother them. I still don't understand.

^So, why is this significant? Ba have checked every tree in the area. One of them must have brought it with them.^

~You believe that?~

^No, a Ba would rather die than commit such a crime. And Ceph are not in the habit of climbing trees, even if you provide a nice moist way for one to get here.^

~Look more closely at the hole it is coming out of. Look familiar?~

^Four sided. Not natural. No claw did this. Sky Father, only the Hu wear artificial claws.^

~And we know that Hu are among the thieves. What now?~

^We could go back and report it, but at most we could gain an extra ration. If there is one hole, there must be others.^ I place a claw in the hole and examine the sides. ^This was caused by someone going up.^

~Up we go then. Look for more holes. This is the first that I have seen. I would like to know how that was possible.~

^From that branch just below you. They started on that tree and came over to this one. Probably to help prevent detection. If you fail to find more holes, look to nearby branches. Assume they might have rope as well. There will be marks on the bark where they looped the rope

around.^

~Low tech.~

^Stealthy though. A single individual could carry the necessary materials.^

~All the items reported missing could be carried by one sen repeatedly attacking us.~

^Attacking? Do you think this was done for a reason other than survival? Just someone hungry looking for the necessary materials to survive?^

~It is not told outside of the Ceph, but I saw that one of the items taken was a Matriarch's sphere. That can get you darted if you're caught and you can eat one, so it is not survival.~

^You're right, definitely not for survival. They why? A trophy? To say that you could do it? Sounds like the kind a thing a rogue or defiant would do. A sphere has no practical use. Even if you could read it, it would bore you to death.^

~Hey, you are taking about the Ceph. It would probably rot your eyes out and scramble your brain from boredom before you died.~ I sign amusement and go back to my side of the tree. We ascend another three meters without success.

~No Hu is that large. Search around.~

I concentrate on the branches that come close. Being lighter it is easier for me to move on them. I end up back at the first hole before I figure it out.

^They came here from that branch we think. They were going up, judging from the shape and damage to the hole. Ah, up there! See the rubbing on the branch? Get up to that branch.^

Silas makes it first. He can hang upside down better than I can, even if it looks ridiculous. He examines the rope marks, grabs the same location and swings himself as if he was the rope.

~That way!~ He takes off down the tree he is on to get to a nearby branch and over to another tree and up again. Takes a lot of practice for a Ceph to be this good in trees. I am happy to have helped.

Understanding what the person was doing makes it easier to find the clues. We go much faster now. Our path is not always up, it is more a path around the edge of the settlement. We also find locations where the tracks are much older.

~We should have brought a temp sphere or something to record the paths on.~

^That won't be a problem. All Ba have a good memory when it comes

to tree climbing.^ I hope.

~In other signs, it is obvious that we have been watched for some time. I am guessing that they were after specific items and had to wait and see where these items were stored.~

^Also says that our Guards are not very good at preventing anything. Once, maybe, but not repeatedly. That has to be embarrassing.^

~And could get us into trouble if we are not careful. Guards don't like being called foolish. There was also a possibility that it was one of us or even more than one sen.~

^I was expecting it all to be just misplaced items. Or someone forgot they were borrowed.^

~Ceph don't forget. I would have agreed with you until the sphere went missing. That took talent. They are guarded constantly.~

^You can see a lot from here. Did you notice the patches between trees. Some look like intentional gardens. I know that smell from somewhere, but I can't remember. Not something a Ba would use in cooking or healing.^

~I didn't notice, not being a tree species our eyes are more tuned to the blue spectrum not the green. There are a lot of land species here. Maybe Hu or Dia? The Dia are especially secretive at times.~

^Maybe. You can see the Matriarch's shelter. Notice anything?^

~A few cover plates are out of place. No Ceph would allow that to happen during construction or maintenance. Wonder if someone could get in that way?~

^Or observe things to see where the spheres are stored. What is the schedule for cover maintenance?^

~Do I look like a fish handler still? I think you just mistook me for a constructor.~

I ignore the comeback, ^You would think that after what happened five eights ago they would be more careful.^ Back when we were still unseen. Silly designation. We don't suddenly become adults.

~I saw that they think it happened because of over reaction, not too little vigilance.~

^Some over reaction, a Teller, two Guards and five sens died in less than an arn.^

~Glad we were on task and missed it.~

^You mean you're glad you did not have to help clean up all that blood like I did. I still retch when I smell copper or iron now.^

~Hundreds of years without anything happening and now this. The items started going missing about an eight day before the mass death.

That's why everyone was on alert. Did you know the Ba?~

^Why should I? I was born here and he was an outsider. Only here because of our ceramics teacher. Do you know her?^

He shows amusement, ~I'm sorry. No, I don't know her, she is a favorite of the Matriarch herself. Outside of my shelter. The fishing boats are returning with the day's catch. Looks like all of them made it at least. Weather has been good. Hope they have quota.~

^You prefer to be cleaning the hulls instead? They make us clean out all the spawning tanks and tables and floors and utensils and, oh you understand.^

~Look, sea traders are coming in. That's a large ship. Must be from the south. Too big for just trade, must mean passengers. Maybe someone important.~

^We need to get back if we are to make the next meal. I hate to miss more than one a day.^

~Disadvantage of a fast metabolism.~

^I don't have the advantage of going into 'never get there in a year mode.'^

We banter back and forth as we make our way down the trees and back to the settlement. We come out of the forest just behind the Great Hall.

^This place makes me uneasy. Move faster.^

"All right you two, stop right there and puts your appendages in plain sight."

We stand perfectly still. Herman is the only Hu ever to make Guard. A recent arrival. You would think after that Dio went crazy they would fear any Guard not Ceph. Not that I know what is normal, having lived my entire life under this Matriarch. We don't know his real name. No one but another Guard and the Matriarch would. All the local ones we know, because we grew up with them. Well, at least their unseen names. There are no old Guards. Most can't keep up as they age.

Did I mention he is a speciest? Hates everything but Hu and Ceph. That means I am a special target for his hate.

"Well, Silas and Pok. I don't know why you keep company with such scum Silas. Hmm, looks like you two have been into something dirty. Let's see. Lots of mud, but that's eighths old. Tree sap and needles. Been doing some tree climbing here about have we. Looks like I get to take you two in. Spying on the Matriarch is a darting offense." He looks particularly at me as if sizing up the dosage it would take. Not much. Fast metabolism and small body weight means we go quick. And painfully.

Looks like I only got to keep my name for a few eights. I can feel my heart about to explode as we are led away. We don't try and run, that only means they get to torture you first. No one ever gets away for long. Sometimes I think they let them go, just for the chase and practice.

We were not far from the Great Hall and led right in. Looks the same as when I was there last for the every other eight day all sens meeting the Matriarch liked to hold. Mostly to boast how great she was, but also to tell us how much more we would have to sacrifice for the good of all. Meaning how much more she would be getting by our extra work. Soon I am told it will be ripe for someone to get angry enough to dispose her and then a few rapid Matriarchs later we end up with someone stable enough to rule again. Meaning they finally succeeded in killing all the competition. Oh, and lots of common sens die in the process.

If we are lucky we will still be in jail when it happens, meaning within the next eight day. The new Matriarch usually declares an amnesty as a sort of last revenge towards the old Matriarch. Whatever happens, it is always settled within one eight day. They can't dart us before then unless there were two or more witnesses to our deed or in times of war. I hope she does not think we are at war. Certainly no one has been named as the enemy.

We are led to the main circle and left there. Silas hands me, ~Now what do we do?~

I hand him back, ~Die of course.~ I nearly die of a heart attack on the spot. I need to pee badly. Of course. Only way to lose even more dignity would be to lose it here.

~So, this is where it all happened. The Guard was on the Matriarch's circle with her and the Teller. The crazed Ba comes in the side portal and everything goes surf zone. Why?~

^No one knows and why are we discussing this?^

~You would rather think about dying? You think the two are related? The thief and the chaos incident?~

^If they are they did not get what they wanted at the incident, as items continue to go missing.^

~That could be sens being more aware of items they are missing or it could be the thieves trying to make us come to the wrong conclusion.~

^What's that smell?^

~I don't taste anything except fish. I will never get rid of that taste.~

^It's that smell from the forest. Remember the plants I thought were cultivated. Same smell.^

~Quiet, I hear something.~

^About time. Now I recognize the smell. Old Nipper. Why didn't I make the association before?^

~That Cat who eats too much catnip all the time?~

"Merow!"

^What's he doing here? He could not walk a straight line if a Guard was prodding him with a dart gun.^

~Hey, kitty! Stay away from us. We are in the condemned circle. You don't want to join us.~

Condemned huh? Who said that to you?

He has the goofiest face when he TPs us.

^Herman the Guard did.^

Herman? Ah, I see from your minds who you mean. He is just a bully. Does not have any authority to condemn anyone. His name is really, ah, ah, fleas, I don't remember myself. Don't use names much. I can tell who is who by smell.

^Have you smelled yourself? You stink. Surprised you can tell who anyone is.^

Well, you two smell good enough to eat. Seen any fish lately?

~A Hu with a head cold could tell that from across the room much less this close.~

So, why are you here then?

~Herman thinks we were spying on the Matriarch.~

Serious charge. Were you?

^We were trying to find out information about the thief. The trail we found just happened to end uphill from here.^

You found something then. Tell me and maybe I can help.

^I know Cats. They take from you and claim credit for themselves.^

That's right, lazy old Cats, napping most of the time, when they are not torturing innocent little creatures before they eat them. Please save me from myself. Let me show you something condemned ones who would rather take their secret to the compost pile than help save the settlement.

~He's good. Didn't know .. ~

Cats could think that well. Please. Here. Look. He holds up the medallion on his collar. It is a royal seal, defender of the settlement, top rank.

Don't ask who I took it from, you know I could not attach this myself to my collar.

^You are not a nipper then?^

Never touch the stuff.

^You reek of it.^

Well, I don't partake. Just smear it on my fur to give the impression that I do. The rest is acting. So, let's get going. I want to see what you found.

~Aren't you forgetting we are in the circle of the condemned? Being tortured before being darted is not an inducement.~

Very well. He holds up his paw. On my honor as a Defender I hereby declare you are not guilty of spying on the Matriarch. Satisfied. Let's go. By the way, do you two want tasks more interesting than pushing fish?

He starts towards a door. There are glow spheres inside the hall so we have lost knowledge of time. As he pushes open a portal I can see it is now dark outside. What time of night is not known. I suddenly feel very tired. I did not realize how much I was staying awake on fear.

How do I know that medal on his neck is real. I have seen Nipper around for years, but I never noticed the medal before. I am dead for sure. First I have to pee immediately!

Castle Tothkin

"Hytha! Get over here now!" She slowly makes her way over as if she does not have a care in the world, like she is the high princess herself.

"Oh Yasmin you worry too much. I read the articles, we are just as good as they are. We are entitled to the same treatment and respect."

"Wash your mind out dear or you will end up dead. They control the bullies. Bullies have a way of making people behave. Look what happened to Simie."

"Simie was old and worn out. Good riddance. More food for me."

"Girl, I don't want to hear it. Suit yourself. I am getting back to work. I don't like pain the way you must. Don't say no one ever told you." I get back to cleaning the waste facilities. Not so bad once you get used to the smell and when you are in there no one bothers you.

That back tooth is acting up and hurting again. I feel it with my tongue. It is a bit loose. Hope I don't lose it. Can't afford to lose many more. Hard enough to eat the old bread they give as it is. I will have to soak it first I guess. Just like Simie did. Good old Dia.

He finally could not stand it any longer and let them kill him. All it took was a whispered remark in the right place. Didn't expect it to be so bad I guess. He screamed something awful. You can now see his tat on the Prince's new shoes. He makes of point of showing them to us whenever he can. !Oh don't worry Yasmin, we don't make shoes out of Hu. We make lamp shades instead.! I have seen one of those, though I did not recognize the tat.

Those articles were from the time of the Guardians. No one has seen one since before the time of remembering. Most believe they are a myth. Without the Guardians it did not take long before the current system came about. Though if you hear them tell it, this is the way it has always been. They even made up lineages to prove it. But we slaves keep our own histories. In our minds. We get caught writing or reading we get whipped. Since they can't read our minds it is the only place. I don't know who taught Hytha to read, but they may have just killed her.

The only place she could have seen the true histories was in the library. Probably ordered to clean it. Hope she remembered to fake her reading so they did not think she was actually reading and not just pretending. I know a few words and I can remember when the Princess Mei Ling read to me when she was little. She only pretended though. She held a book on warfare but told me a story about a princess who was

tortured by an evil servant who later suffered a horrible death. No surprise there.

We know we don't deserve to be slaves, but reality says that is the way it is. We have no choice. Fantasizing about a Guardian riding in and saving all of us and punishing the uppers are just crazy thoughts. No, best to just get on with it and not draw any attention to yourself. I am just glad that at my age I am an inside slave and not outside in the cold. Seems to be getting cold earlier and lasting longer than I remember. Must be my age.

This pot is heavy. How many sens used it before telling someone they needed to be serviced. I think they purposely try to make things harder for us just to build their own egos. No matter.

I open the portal to a sharp wind and icy cold air. There is frost on the ground. Seen that before girl, just do it, I tell myself. Dark still. They have to be cleaned before the uppers wake. Some party last night. Should be asleep for some time yet. I empty the pot into the digester. It has iced over, but the heat from the recent addition is enough to help melt at least the top layer. I next shovel some dirt over the top to speed the process and cut the odor.

Less than a hundred meters back I reach the portal to open it. Stuck. I push harder. Nothing. Strange. Oh shit. I hear sounds of amusement. The stinking Ba twins again. What are they doing awake? Probably only consumed watered down fermented ant and honey. Just my luck. I can't get in. If I make too much noise I will be punished for that. If I don't get back in to finish my work I will be punished. Never mind it is not my fault.

I am not dressed for the outside, cleaning the pots would only ruin anything I wore. I am shivering already. I could easily die out here. On the other hand it would not hurt as much as the punishment I will get for not completing my task. They will probably mess with my corpse before recycling. Hope the ice crystals ruin my skin so they can't make a lamp of it. Skin is too old anyway.

^Good morning Yasmin. What's you doing out here in the cold morning?^ I shake myself awake.

"The twins locked me out Master Rio." He is the genetic contributor to the twins.

^Please remember to use their formal names. They are of age now. I will have a talk with them. I'm sorry for your pain.^ He is the nice one. His mate is pure evil. The twins take after her. What they see in each other is beyond me. He pulls out a long knife, slips it in the crack and lifts

the latch to open the door. Their area has a real lock on it, but the latch was effective enough to stop me.

"Thank you Master Rio. You saved my life. Thank you."

^Just get inside before they do anything else. Ah and Ha, remember.^
I will remember.

Too late. I reach the pots and they have turned them over. Surprised they did that. Too much of a chance they would get some on themselves. Of course Rio is elsewhere now and does not see this. No matter, better to just get to it. I will miss first meal, but I am alive. Better than what I was expecting an eighth ago. Praise the 'thn for watching over me.

I get back to the gathering area. It is where the inside servants wait for their next task if they are not permanently assigned like I am. Tasks vary day to day. I can understand why it might be important to keep some of the staff floating.

^You stink something terrible Yasmin.^

"I know. It was the twins again. I'm going to wash up."

#Not wash day Yasmin. You're just going to have to wait.# I know. I sit and fold my head into my hands. I stink. It has warmed up outside some. I decide that as long as I am already in this state I might as well finish what I started. The work will keep me warm enough. I make my way outside. I don't have to worry about the portal now. Too many sens and fellow slaves about.

The work is hard but satisfying. Upper shit smells the same as lower and it all gets used to the same purpose. They eat the same food, just the choicer portions of each item prepared to a higher standard. I spread it out on the designated field and turn it into the soil. There it will stay for over a year, to let the natural materials cleanse it and make it suitable as fertilizer for our crops. Others will see that end.

I make it back in time for the one meal I will have this day. I have heard that uppers get as many as four. No matter. Tastes like meat in here today. I wonder who died. I look around to see who is not eating today. We never eat our own kind. Hytha is eating, so it is not Hu. Assuming she would care of course. Looks like all sens accounted for, so it must be left over bones and such from a game or stock animal. Just as well. The idea of eating someone you worked with is repulsive even when I am hungry. I eat it anyway, but I think about it some. I keep away from the others, knowing how I must stink. Not that any of us is a rose.

They say the rose is the only species they brought from Eden. I don't believe it. By dark I am exhausted and am quickly asleep.

Brown 2794

"Garfield! What are you doing way out there? Come back here right now. We need to leave." I continue to finish packing my samples at the same time keeping an eye on him slowly making his way home.

I'm right here. What's all the fuss. I'm packed. I turn to see him right next to me.

"What were you doing out there? Started collecting samples for me?" I smile. Not likely.

I have been here all day. Not interested in anything on this mud ball. Who are those Cats coming this way? No one I know. Garfield scratches an imaginary flea.

I finally catch what he has said. "Huh?" I turn and the one I saw coming towards me is now two. I scan. Two Cats alright. One is sand colored, which explains why I did not notice her. The other is a black male. Someone is very lost if they are here.

Not moving very fast. In fact one just collapses to the ground. Both are very dehydrated. Water is the one thing this world has, so this makes no sense. Emaciated too. That makes sense. Nothing to eat unless you make it or bring it and Cats don't carry anything if they can help it.

"I suppose we should help them."

They might be First Ones. Garfield is afraid of his own shadow, but he is right.

"What would they want with one of us. Neither of us was on Paradise. What I heard was only those they met on Paradise are in harms way."

They got here some how. Maybe they are mopping up the left overs so no one who knows of them can attack them again. He hunkers down ready for attack. Of course to a TK this is pointless.

"Tellers have been spreading the story for centuries. There is not a sentient on fifty worlds that does not know."

But they do not pose a threat. Even a top Cat leaves kits alone. No they don't.

"I don't think they pose a threat. I'm going over." I decide to walk all the same. It might give me just enough time to escape. I am no fighter like some of the others. No more interfering in other's lives. No more.

I finish packing my samples so if I have to go quickly I will not have to search for them. The oxygen level on this world was supposed to be around twelve percent, but it is already up to fifteen. Not much grows here but a sort of cyanobacter plantimal precursor. It has expanded three

fold. Did Mirror and Paradise exert that much influence over the rest of the universe? Seems hard to believe, but what else explains what has happened.

Are you going or not? Both are laying down now. A trap for sure.
Garfield is behind me looking out from around my back. I think he needs more exposure to other creatures. Definitely a scardy Cat.

I sigh and get up. I can just make them out. Nothing else in the landscape except for the scum ponds. They are on a small mound between several. Slippery all the same. I check my boots and sharpen some of the spikes. If they remove my TK, I want to be able to run. Would be a good idea to make supplies too, but Garfield is likely to begin eating them. I make some twice their distance out and wait a minute. No response from the two. Either they did not sense the TK use or don't care or are waiting.

Don't like surprises. One is going into atrial fibrillation. Fake or real?

I pop next to them. Neither responds. I concentrate on the one with heart trouble and repair the damage while administering a sedative. The other one looks up at me and then collapses again to an unconscious state.

Come on over Garfield. You know more about Cats that I do.

Just use me as a model. You will do fine.

I mutter, "Get here now Cat!" I pop him over. He freaks, then calms down and sniffs them cautiously, then licks his flank.

Have not eaten in at least two weeks. Dehydrated too. Kidney failure in both. Heart giving out on the aromatic one. I am assuming he means the one I worked on a bit. How would I know what they smell like.

"Any indication they are anything but normal Cats?"

Smell normal to me. He is cautious though, looking up at me.

"Don't let them touch you. I heard that the First Ones use some sort of fast acting prion infection to kill their prey."

"I am going to heal them and then leave a stash of food and fresh water for them."

Shelter too. Need to get out of the sun. Heat stroke likely in their state.

"Good point." I make a simple dome shelter. Garfield goes inside and adds pillows of all things.

"They are not royalty Garfield. Just some feral Cats it looks like. Don't overdo it or they are likely to be afraid of it."

I concentrate, using Garfield as a model, and heal the major damage. They will wake soon and I don't intend to be around. I am late for my next collection point. It has to be the Mirror/Paradise connection. It is the

only explanation. I take out my handy and type in a few equation parameters. The Rooi Plot comes up with our current location highlighted.

"Okay, if there is so much change here, what about another level in?"

Garfield yawns, Why not go to Mirror itself and work back towards here?

I look at him and think for a moment.

"Sure, why not." I collect my samples and pop us to the main lab. I enter cautiously. Nothing looks changed. Layer of dust over most surfaces. I suppose I should clean up at some point. I walk though the well worn path through the center of the chaos. My chaos so it does not matter. I carefully place my samples in the stasis chamber and check the condition of the other samples. Nothing looks disturbed.

"I hate Mirror. If First Ones made it off of Paradise, surely they would be on Mirror, sensors or not."

Maybe I should stay here to you know, guard the fort. Isn't that what you Hu say? He looks up to me with hopeful pity in his eyes. I could almost feel sorry for him, but I know him well and know this is all an act.

"If we are gone, all of this won't matter. You are certainly not going to take over my work." More pity looks. Did not think so. He suddenly turns and looks over to the greenhouse and growls.

"Won't help." He growls again and slowly gets behind me. Something falls in the next room. I quickly scan.

"Shit, two more Cats! Are they falling from the skies?" I do a quick scan of the entire facility. We are on a black world. No life. Poisonous gas, searing temperatures, both high and low. This world will never support life. We are only a few out from Mirror. This bothers me of course, but I could not take the chance that any of my collection got to the wrong world. It is only these two.

I go into the next room to find them investigating a fallen pot. One turns towards me and meows like a kit. It is an almost green color with tiny blue tufts on it's ears. A female from a quick scan. But no Cat has ever been this color. The other is beige and nondescript. A basic Cat. These are hungry and judging from the mess in here it is obvious they have been looking for something to eat, anything.

I make two bowls of food and place them down before them. They stare at the bowls and then look at me with questioning eyes.

"Go ahead. I don't eat cats and this should help you feel better." They are in better shape than the first two at least.

I am not getting anything from these two either. Their minds are

nearly empty. Even a kit has more memories and thoughts than they do.

One finally sniffs the food, but does not eat. Instead it tries to paw it. I don't understand what it is trying to do. I reach over and invert the bowl onto the floor. It is a mess anyway, a little more won't matter. So many specimens ruined. They have gotten into everything.

The green one manages to snag some of the food in its paw and bring it to its mouth. Instead of licking it like a Cat normally would, it delicately tries to eat the food from its paw. The inevitable happens and it bites its paw to drop the food suddenly.

"Well we can't have you two messing up the rest of the place. Everyone has to move."

I pop all of us back to Brown 2794 and then to the dome. The other two are not awake yet.

"You two stay here. There is enough food and water for some time. Take care of the other two if you can. We will be back when we can."

I move us a few kilometers away.

"I hope we are finally alone." Garfield looks around, but makes no comment.

I make us space suits with full environmental controls and rebreathers with quantum catalytic converters. That should give us at least a day if we can't use psiotics. Can't depend on psiotic power supplies, so I go distributed nano nuclear. Learned that at the center.

"Mirror ho! Sleep tight my little friends. Try not to fight." What am I going to do with five of them? At least Garfield is mostly house broken.

I heard that!

I pop us to the orbit and then to the station.

Enterprise

We are cutting too many corners getting this ship ready. Everyone has lost their patience. Hard to put your love into something that might also be taken out by the First Ones on its maiden flight.

!Commander on Deck! My first announces. All come to attention.

"Let's hope for a better performance this time out Ms. Lysis."

!Yes Commander.! She scowls at the pilots. It was not their fault the aft sensors futzed out and they could not see the space junk coming towards us.

I turn towards engineering, "Sensors all on line?"

!Yes Commander.!

"Back ups on line?"

A sigh, !Yes Commander.!

#Commander, port sensors just went off line!#

"Ms. Lysis, take us back to dry dock."

!Yes Commander.! I leave and go back to my room. I know we are low on TKs just now, but why are we the lowest priority? If only we could depend on psiotics. Damn First Ones. Why did they have to show up and ruin all the fun? We should be out exploring the universe not holed up here hiding from them preparing for their counter offensive. Or rebuilding after the prion attack turns out to be have been effective.

No one died on board, our security is too tight. However, we lost people who had to leave to fill in essential positions left open by those who did suffer. A few of those died at their new posts. I won't let any more leave. But, unless we get our bugs worked out we are effectively neutralized anyway.

I activate my com, "Ehira, please put in a request for Guardian Ron if he is available." Barb would be good too, but I heard she is off trying to make some other species sentient like she did with the whales. I wonder what she chose this time? I am sure it will be a species that is more of a challenge. Aimee, yes, she would be excellent. Hasn't been as long for her.

"Ehira, instead of Ron see if you can raise Aimee. I mean Guardian, you know what I mean."

#Yes Commander.#

I head down to engineering to find Spider's legs sticking out from under a console. Can't miss those. Means Ravi is around here somewhere too. I take a seat to wait a bit absentmindedly looking around. All the

panels are off. They are trying at least. Ravi comes out of one large sub panel. I forget how small he is by comparison. He goes, without paying any attention to me, to a console and checks some readings on a meter sitting on top of it.

"Try it now."

Spider bumps her head and waves her hand around trying to grab onto something. I reach down and grab it. She comes out to see me looking down at her.

"You could use TK Spider."

"Not around here Commander. Upsets the readings we are taking."

"Any progress?"

She sits down, Ravi comes up, sees me and pulls up a chair. Their heads are about even now. Still amazes me.

She looks at Ravi then back to me, "If we could use psiotics, we would have been done years ago, even with the reduced personnel. The reason we are having all the trouble is that electromech, even at the quantum level, is just not going to replace psiotics. Even at the Regional Center they have not heard of anyone who succeeded. It is just not reliable enough. The problem is one of control. We can control psiotics at the speed of our unconscious thoughts. Look around us. The number of control circuits has gone up exponentially. Even if Mother herself was here, she would not be able to handle this much data at once."

"I am sure Mother would have been capable, but I see what you mean. Raising another Mother is not an option either. So, what other options do we have? We can't use a m.o.t.h.e.r. for fear of it being sentient and we can't use psiotics because of the First Ones."

A voice from behind me says, "Then how about some sort of redundant combination of all three. The fear is if any one system goes down or rogue you lose control. The threats are from without and within. The psiotic abilities of the First Ones is formidable. But so far as we know they have not been able to circumvent the Rooi-Silver matrix."

Ravi jumps in, "Surround the ship with the matrix and inside we can use psiotics safely. It would be hard, but I think we can compensate. I'm sure we could."

Spider then adds, "The First Ones fear tech, so we need the best tech we can muster. We need both. We could never take them out with psiotics, but tech, they must have run into the same limitations we have."

I turn to see Aimee and jump a bit, "Thanks Aimee. You got here quick. I am impressed." She is wearing a Ba dress that actually looks good on her. So much does not work cross culturally in my opinion.

Heaven knows the mixed communities try.

"I was in the neighborhood. Rooi apparently came back from the Center and sent a micro report on full broadcast. It is totally empty, the center that is. She has gone to try and sort things out."

"Nothing at all?"

"We only got the short message. She needs time to think is my guess. Best let her do it. Silver will seek her out when he thinks it's right. Or Healer will. Sens she trusts." And we are not them. Understood. I have enough to keep me busy anyway. Because I was on my own with Ly'thn for so long I never got used to non Hu cultures the way the others did. Come to think of it though, Silver was on his own without much contact either. Guess he made his own aliens from what Owa told me. I have to smile. Those two are certainly entertaining.

I heard that Rooi and Silver have also gotten into it, but Rooi does not understand that it is all in fun. Fun is not something I think of when I think Ceph. Given their chances of survival to adulthood, or naming, I am not surprised they lost humor. Still, I would have loved to see Silver turn silver at a word. Very impressive. The things they can do with ceramics is impressive too. They have even worked out some glazes that can change color or pattern based on sound. Hit them with the right frequency and nano crystals, with up to six different colors, reorient. Shape the sounds and you can get patterns. Take the sound away and they hold their pattern until hit again. Not too many things in nature are that intense, though they do eventually go sort of fuzzy gray unless they are resounded.

What was the name of Rooi's instructor? She's the best expert in ceramics that I know. God I hope she was not of the ones gotten by the First Ones.

"Ehira, please see if you find the whereabouts of Guardian Sufi."

"Mei, what's with Sufi? Don't we have enough to do without worrying about the decor? What can an artist do here?"

"Aimee, if you, Silver, Rooi, Owa and the others have taught me anything, it is to think outside the cube."

"Box."

"Huh?"

"Think outside the box. So, now I am curious. I thought you needed me for my e skills, though I am learning the Ba art of leaf cutting. I may be able to add some to the art effort."

"You made your dress?" She smiles and I add, "Oh, it will be an art effort, but not in the way you think. You can start mind chaos if you want. The non psiotic approach to Enterprise is not working. Can't control even

the sensor arrays without something failing at a critical time. Too many interdependent systems."

"Mother could do it."

"I would rather not repeat that mistake. Or at least take that chance. I know the good Mother turned out alright. Or will from your perspective."

"Why did you decide to even try to do without psiotics? Why throw away your biggest asset?"

"The First Ones took out our psiotics first with a limiter. We were dead in the sky. Very easy at that point to bring us down and dissolve the ship."

"Any eight or nine could have done it. Assuming they were quick enough and not noticed in time. An entire planet of them and nothing would protect you."

"We are not likely to encounter an entire planet of them again soon. They seem to have gone underneath and are using stealth now."

"They could though. There must be trillions of them out there. A few hundred or a thousand would be enough."

"They could have hit us with that within hours of our move. Instead they attack mostly the third and fourth gens."

"There have been attempts on the early gens too, just that we always seem to be able to sense it ahead of time and avoid the damage."

"Were you hit?" She nods.

"I have a habit of losing track of time. I can get rather absorbed in my work and projects. Drove Tsing crazy. I was working on a new display for Roo's Projection. It allows you to locate your current location anywhere in the chart and then zoom in for better detail or chart a path between any two points."

"How? I hope you brought one with you."

"Nope. Uses psiotics. Knew you would not approve. I can make one quick enough. The first version was made from scrap. It is the code that is the hard part. I have that on cubes."

"Backed up?"

"In hundreds of locations. Encrypted. Any Hu nine can pass."

"It came from Roo's work, why limit it to Hu?"

"Roo's work is well known and appreciated. Hu contributions are not. Roo is not the only one who understands one hundred and sixty nine dimensional manifolds. We are the evil ones who caused this whole problem. We are the polluters, the over populators, the aggressive ones."

"Right, no other sen is aggressive. I have seen a charging Di and the Ceph Guards are just plain scary." She smiles.

"Impressions and prejudices are hard to tweak, much less change."

"I have noticed that you have no Dia on board."

I open my mouth, then close it.

"They insisted on going when their comrades were attacked. I have not heard from them sense."

"But you did not forbid their going as you have done others here."

"You know no one is here against their will. I would not even try."

"You don't trust them do you?"

I sigh, "No."

"Good, neither do I. I helped raise a Di and I like Dio too. Have not spent enough time with Diu yet to form an opinion except to note they are very different. But, I don't trust Dia, especially non TK Dia."

"Nerdvilla still hurts." It is not a question and she does not respond for a moment.

"I don't hold Bernice responsible. She was duped as well, maybe even more so, knowing how their system worked she still couldn't do anything about it. But, she was taken as well as the other TK Dia. For her alone I would seek revenge."

"Quite. I will need to gather a few more sentients."

"I would recommend Mandhi. She understands the folding nearly as well as Roo now. We will bring Roo in when we have something to show for our efforts."

"I agree. The sentients I want are ones who do not follow the rules. Sens who are willing to take risks. The time for going slowly is done."

"What about Silver?"

"He is the one to bring in when we get stuck. Not the most creative at the start of a project, but a great problem solver. I also want him with us when we go in."

"And where is that?"

"New Paradise/Mirror."

"And where is that?"

"I don't know."

She nods and pops out.

Ba'Eden

~Hernkic, let's get her into that empty corner~

I help her carry Lessa over. Not really enclosed, but no one will see us pop, which we do immediately once we are out of sight. Never mind that several sens were approaching us to help. I am only a level three and not immortal. I am getting old by three standards. I help when and where I can, like with giving these lectures. I never actually tell a lie, just lead my audience down a path where only one location is possible. The idea was to convince everyone, including any TK deprived First Ones, that we were gone.

~I got us out just in time.~ Sussi announces. ~I just hope most of her memory is intact. Will have to let her rest a bit before we try though.~

Lessa number two is lying down next to the obviously rotting number one.

!I would recommend that others find both your bodies near where we left from. The best we can do is hope that they think they succeeded.!

~Who? I saw no one else.~

!The First Ones of course. You said yourself that the smell was accurate. Let's assume it's true for the moment. It will give us some time to investigate anyway.!

~You're right. I am still turned over.~ She proceeds to make a copy of herself, then applies the same degradation that has happened to Lessa one. Satisfied we pop again. We are in a deep forest. I scan about, but have no idea where we are.

!Shouldn't you have moved the bodies to where we were?!

~They are close by and we needed to account for our disappearing. Someone will find them soon enough and the mystery will be solved. You need to go back to make the announcement and morn my death.~

!I was hoping to be part of the investigation.!! Suddenly I find blood and body debris on my arms and feet and I am next to the bodies.

I will come back for you. Time to play your part. Others are coming.

Nines are frustrating to work with for sure. I need to simply retire and forget this game. I sit before they arrive, feigning exhaustion.

!I tried to get them to help, but they wandered in the wrong direction and as you can see I am not strong enough to resist these strong young ones.!

^You were afraid to touch them.^ They are staying well away themselves though.

I show shame then point at their twisted bodies. I hold up my own hands covered with skin, pus and blood.

!You are mistaken. I am simply an old one incapable of restraining two sick and dying sentients showing madness from their pain. I have never seen this sickness, but I am no coward. However, as you can see I am not sick myself.!

^Yet.^ The Ba stays away. Probably wise. I wish I was a five and could see the psiotic patterns, though most would be faded now. Maybe a six then. A Dia comes up. I recognize her from the philosophy department.

#!Seeker Philona, could you please tell the department that I will be late for my tutorial?#! She nods slowly but is afraid to move. I could reassure her with TP, many Di have this ability, so it would not seem strange. Without trying I can feel her emotions.

The Ba leaves, motioning Philona to follow him. A few arns later two healers arrive with him and her behind them. Good, they are maintaining a connection.

#!I told Instructor Yui, she agreed to take your tutorial until this is made correct.!#

#!Thank you Seeker Philona.!# I do a bow from my seated position.

^Instructor Hernkic, do you feel well?^ I nod affirmation. The Ba healer then goes closer to Lessa's body. The Ceph healer maintains a distance.

^I have never seen such a disease. Please tell me what happened. If you are more comfortable, please speak in Di.^

!Thank you Healer. The three of us were having tea after my lecture. Seeker Lessa reached over to touch Instructor Sussi. Upon contact both of them looked frightened, then started shaking. Those sores appeared on the mantle of Instructor Sussi. Seeker Lessa starting foaming at the mouth and attempted to scream. They got up. I yelled for help. They ran from me to this position before they both collapsed. It was only then that I was able to catch up with them. As you can see my help would not have mattered. I tried to rouse them. I am not a healer, I do not know how to tell life signs in other sentients, but I know enough to know both species need to breath.!

~Had either of you met the Seeker before today?~

!No Healer. Instructor Sussi met her after she disembarked from the train. They came to witness my lecture on the First One and Guardian myths, then we all had tea. Neither one of us has met her before then. She said she came from a remote village that had neither Ba nor trains. She

had never been on a train before and thus was late for orientation.!

^Trains are not the most reliable means yet.^ The Ba who arrived first comments. He seems relaxed.

~We can not afford a plague that crosses species. Therefore I require that these bodies be burned, this area to be under quarantine and all of us present to be quarantined for one day. It would be best if we supplied the necessary labor.~

!Since I have already come into contact with them it would be best if I place the wood and twigs on the bodies themselves. I have known Instructor Sussi for many years and would consider it my responsibility and honor.! All affirm my request.

Philona calls out a high pitched signal for wood to be brought, but for no one to come close. Once a sufficient amount of wood is piled nearby the bringers depart. From the opposite direction a containment tent, digging instruments, food and water are brought and left for us. We are drilled in these procedures from first year on, though fortunately it rarely happens. More likely to have a fire, which is feared even more than plague. At least with a plague the precious trees would still be available after waiting the necessary period of time. The Ba do love their trees and if they are not available, the cliffs.

It takes us several eighths to accomplish the burning. Every bone in my body now aches, TK or not. I do not normally sleep, but because others are watching I pretend by lying down and keeping quiet. The Ba healer is the most uncomfortable, being on the ground instead of higher up. They have a racial fear of being caught on the ground when a predator strikes.

Philona notices this apparently, #!I will assume watch.!# The Ba Healer, Nihette, offers much affirmation. I affirm in the dark. You have made a good friend today Philona.

Without remembering when I do fall asleep. I remember this dream very well. Two spheres coming together closer and closer until I am being crushed by their pressure.

I awake with both Healers over me looking concerned.

!I am sorry, did I snore loudly?!

^You are alright? I do not know Di healing, but I did not think that a Di maintained this much heat during sleep periods. Are you similar to Dia? I have been trained in Dia healing.^

!Normally we lose some temperature at night, but I am not used to using these poor old muscles this much either. It might be heat exhaustion. Water would be good.!

Philona asks, #!There is a strange material in the food stores. I do not recognize it. Healer Nighthette do you know what this is?!# She hold it out for her.

Nighthette goes to Philona and looks at the material. Sniffs it and breaks off a small piece to taste, then spits it out. ^Very bitter.^

The Ceph Healer also looks, ~Remarkable. How did someone know? It says in old Ceph that it is excellent for heat exhaustion in Di species in particular. Only the oldest medical texts use this style of writing.~ She hands some to me with curiosity patterns all over her mantle.

As soon as I taste it I know what it is. I scan as far as I can. Confirmed. Sussi has made me a four. Have to show with her about her habit of using styles out of favor. We have to blend in. Well, it looks like these old bones are going to last a bit longer. Have not felt this good in years. Sussi is with Lessa. I can scan far enough now to know that. I relax.

!Yes, this will help. Water would be good too, as this can be a bit strong on an empty stomach.! Not really, but I have to go along with my original theory or they will become suspicious.

^Is is wise to consume the entire amount?^ I laugh, as the Hu say, inside. He really wants to keep a sample to investigate.

!See if there is more in the pack.! I quickly make more. The hardest part was remembering the Ceph writing on the cover. Sussi, you may have started something. Not so sure chocolate would really help heat stoke. Pretty sure it would not.

Philona hands me a flask of water which I eagerly drink.

!I think the water is more important. That and rest. Oh, and keeping out of the sun.!

#!Same as Dia.#! She tries some of the chocolate. #!Strange taste. Might be good with some Ba dishes.#!

^Yes, you are right. This would be good with Baraggic larvae and siyal paste. I wonder who packed it. I would like to know the source.^ Not on Ba'Eden that I know.

Thank you Sussi.

You are welcome. When you are let loose, come find me. I have not found out much yet. The transition was difficult. She is lucky we acted quickly.

I had already woken up at mid morning and with nothing else to do I pretend to rest, while scanning all around us. Lessa might not have been alone.

Eighths later and I have found nothing out of the ordinary. Oh, there

are sens where they ought not be, thieves and lovers. Old games. I would never have suspected Lessa, so I could have scanned another First One operative and never recognized them. On the other hand I may have just alerted them we are looking for someone. If I can tell a TK is scanning me, certainly they could.

What do they want? Why this selective revenge? Given their life span either as individuals or as a culture they must have bumped into other species who were pests like us. They must have backup plans for the frothing. Even at the low tech level around us sens have alternatives. As advanced as they were, they surely would just go to "Plan B" as the Hu say. I would have expected them to either ignore us or destroy us. The latter would have been easy for them as well. So, why go after Sussi and not me? Maybe I am not a high enough level to be a threat. Maybe my 'match' is not here yet. Do I have to avoid all contact with sens that I don't know?

I do a very careful scan of myself and the others around me. I look at the Ceph healer's tattoo, but do not know the Di word for it. She is older than she looks judging from the layers in her odoliths. No wonder she recognized the old Ceph script and could read it. None of the younger healers could do that. Some of her collagen is getting kinked and the telomeres are short. Easy enough to repair both some. I can't make her immortal, but adding a few years as a favor for her kindness seems appropriate.

Nighette is still very young. No gray fur anywhere. No odoliths to read, but his teeth are excellent. Definitely young. He appears to be in charge though, or maybe she is letting him take lead on this one to test him.

Maybe this has nothing to do with the First Ones and the smell was just a coincidence. Maybe the sickness Lessa brought with her from her village causes the smell. Or maybe something she ate. Or even bit by one of those beetles. The Di way would have been to make absolutely sure our enemy is gone. If it was not for Hu intervention there would be no raptors any more. But the First Ones / Paradise incident it was over three hundred years ago. I was not even hatched yet. What is that much time to a culture who has been around billions of years.

I am just chasing my tail. I open my eyes to see everyone looking at me again.

!What?!

^How do you feel?^

!Fine, well rested. I should do this more frequently. Does an old one

good. How do all of you feel?!

The Ceph shows, ~I actually feel very good. Maybe the herb paste you use for heat stroke helps Ceph in other ways.~

!You ate the rest of it?!

~I wanted to know the effects. Trying it myself seemed the fairest way.~ I am surprised she did not try it on an unseen first. Some species can't have it. I hope it does not harm her. I know Ba TKs aren't harmed, but I remember something in class about a Hu species that it actually kills.

^You clearly aren't contagious. If Instructor Sussi was infected in minutes we would have gotten it by now from you.^

#!You used us as vectors?!#

^Not by choice. You were already within a quarantine range. Just your bad luck. You can go as well.^

!Let's go eat. I personally would like something more than emergency rations.! Seeker Philona eyes me.

#!We have done no work. Used no calories other than maintenance. How can you desire more sustenance?!#

!Do you always talk like this Seeker?!

~Stress burns calories too. And we have all been under much stress. However a crowded location might not be the wisest choice for us at the moment. I would recommend a location with fewer sentients.~

Recovering, Nighette says, ^I know a location. Different than you are probably used to. Please follow me.^

We take a long way around the settlement, avoiding living and meeting areas. The gardens are coming along nicely. Looks like we will have a good crop of melons from my home world. Hu call them cattle food, whatever those are. Mildly sweet, but not too much, like most Hu fruit. Roasted or eaten raw, wonderful. I must be hungry. Upgrades do that. Even the rations are starting to seem appealing. More chocolate would be nice. I don't dare remove any from a pocket or sack now though.

This place looks really run down. I am surprised that they are allowed to keep this location. Granted, it is out of the way and not next to any other sentients. Who would want to live in such isolation? High walls, even though there are not predators of note in this area. Strange. I must have scanned it, but never noticed. I scan again. About a dozen inside. Ku! I had forgotten entirely about them. A monastery of sorts.

Nighette motions for us to remain silent. He rings a bell at the large wooden door. We wait.

Ku have a real pride thing going. Lessa said she spoke Ku. I never learned it. Could they be the vector? Something totally not related to the First Ones? Ku do not get along with many other species, sentient or otherwise. Not exactly vegetarian, either. They get worse exponentially the more of them there are in a space. One on one they are almost tolerable. Together they get forced to live apart from others. I wonder what a monastery is like. I might even be able to learn something.

She is waking up. I need you here. Now!

~Healer. I am afraid that Ku cuisine does not agree with me. I would like to be excused. I am also a day behind in my preparations. I promise to not go near anyone else in the settlement. I can prepare in my mind. I will go for a walk. The weather is good and being out at night would do me good.~

^Do not go far and come back here if you experience any symptoms.^

#!Leave your corpse where we can find it.#! She turns to the others, !
#Don't look at me like that. You saw them. If he gets even a kilometer away he would not make it back in time.#!

~True.~ She gives me an evil look.

I bow and start down the nearest trail. I know they are looking at me, but Sussi cannot be denied.

Once I am well out of sight. I TP, *Okay, open a portal or do you expect me to fly there?*

They are too close. A Dia has followed you part way. Please scan before asking again.

Raps, caught again. Philona is a short ways away. I can hear her. Dia are such city folk. I do an old trick. I use TK to make a stomping coming closer to her. It will sound and feel like a large predator. She hears it but hesitates. Raps, she is concerned about me. This is no time to be a hero, save yourself. I have to stop I am nearly to her and she will figure out soon that there is really nothing there. I make one last large crunch and then proceed on the other side of her. She looks up to see if it could have jumped over her and then confused looks around to try and figure it out. I hate doing this. She finally starts to go towards the sound which is headed towards the Ku monastery.

Okay, I'mhere. She DSd me without a portal. I keep forgetting she is a master at this.

Lessa is sitting up but looks confused. I try to read her and it is apparent that she does not remember anything after getting off the train.

!Did you get anything from her?!

~No.~ She shows much frustration.

!Have you ever eaten at the Ku monastery?!

~What? Stay on task!~

!Have you scanned her at the lowest levels?!

She gives me an irritated look. Of course she did, this is a dupe. I was next to the corpse.

!I scanned the corpse. Not much we did not already know. Her DNA was changed to include the necessary prion code. It expressed itself on the surface of her skin. You were the only one it would affect. The perfect assassin.!

~Why? What purpose does it serve to remove us? Revenge? Seems so petty for the First Ones. How did they track all of us down?~

!They had three hundred and fifty years. We need to warn the others. I doubt you are the only victim.!

~I already sent a message. All they could tell me was that others have reported trouble. No one knows the extent of it yet.~

!What do they want us to do? Do we go to a safe place?!

~That is precisely what they recommended. However, we are not going to do that. We are dead as far as anyone is concerned. I intend to use that advantage.~

!All of the psiotic activity we have expressed recently won't keep us a secret for long.!

~Can't you feel it? The spheres below us are still fully active. They won't be using any psiotic abilities on this world.~

!Explains why they had to use the gene trick. From the stories they did have long enough to scan everyone present on Paradise. The fact that they did not like tech might explain why it took them so long. They either had to use the tech present on our worlds or reinvent it themselves.!

~Some Ceph communities could do work at this level.~

!Why Lessa? She was born on this world and there are no Ceph only communities. Tech is limited to four max. So, they certainly didn't do it here. Of course if they used a viral vector, they could have made one for any Dia and given it to her once they arrived.!

~And how did they do that? The DS boxes would have screened out any viral component.~

!Those things even clean out your gut bacteria. Gave me the runs before I was upgraded or I could absorb the local stuff. She showed no signs of any recent visit off world.!

~Then they brought it in parts and assembled it here.~

!How do you do that with a viral vector?!

~Recombination. Chances are every Dia here is infected with some

variant. Lessa was just the one who had the complete accurate package. Many Dia have touched me in the last few months.~

!Any possibility that the vector itself was also binary? She was just the last piece? And what caused her to suffer the same way at preciously the right time? After she had nearly succeeded in infecting you? Fine activator, too fine if you think about it.!

~Genetics is a tricky science. Hard to be that precise. The fact that others have died shows that it can be effective. I also doubt this is the only weapon they can use, or will use.~

!Just the first wave.! I look at Lessa who has finally moved. She looks right at us with some recognition at least.

#!Who are you two and where am I?!#

!Welcome back. How do you feel?!

#!I want to go back. Please take me back to the school.!#

~You will be going to a different school now Lessa. Everyone else thinks you are dead. Do you remember anything?~ She looks around bewildered.

I have an idea, she does not remember anything since she got off the train. What about before?

!Lessa, have you ever been off this world?!

She looks nervous.

#!You can tell if I tell the truth can't you? Di can read minds right?!#

~Yes. You have nothing to fear from us however, no matter the answer.~

#!No one was supposed to ever know. I was conceived on the Dia home world. My parents were shunned for a perceived transgression. The three eggs they had laid were not hatched yet. Two died before the last was rescued. The egg was brought here to this world and I was hatched in a Ba community that had no Dia.!#

!Her egg was left unattended for a time. Long enough maybe.!

~Maybe.~

#!For what? What happened?!#

A stone she was looking at suddenly leaps into the air and she goes, "Eeep!"

!Welcome to Guardian school Lessa.! She freaks. Yeah, I did too at first.

There is not much fun being different from everyone if you can't exploit it once in a while.

She looks at me, #!There are no Guardians. You said it yourself. How did you just do that with the pebble? What are you doing to me?!#

~We did not do it. You did. Get used to it. Come on, we are leaving.
Much work to do.~

#!Where?#!

They DS out. Sussi is not one for small talk. I have a memorial for a dear teacher friend and a new student. Sigh, she died so young. She only wishes she had. Oh well, as the Hu say. I start my walk back to where Philona is probably going in circles trying to find me. Dark enough, I can always say I got lost.

Ku-Ra

I hate breeding time. Everyone acts stupid, correction, even more stupid than usual. They are stupid all the time in my assessment. I am surrounded by idiots intent in only bashing each other's brains out. For what? So they can claim to be the best head basher which of course only brings the attention of others willing to try to bash your head in. Stupid. Breeding time makes all of this more intense, irrational, and more lethal. I want to avoid the lethal part. Especially in regards to my own body. Being taken by force because you were not strong enough to choose means losing twice in my mind.

I live in the wettest part of the coup. No one else wants to live here, therefore I never have to fight anyone for the privilege to live here. I eat the worst food, so I don't have to fight anyone for it either. I am underweight for my age, so I don't need to eat much. Besides I have my interests. I don't have time for food, fighting, or recovering from fighting, much less egg bearing. Too underweight to ovulate I think. Small compensation.

It will be a clear night with a quarter moon. I have been looking forward to this night for some time. So many storms this year. I thought it would never happen. If my calculations are correct I should get a good view of my project. I have noticed some of the lights do not follow the same pattern as others. One even goes backward sometimes. Too many cloudy nights to know if my new project is going to do that.

I only noticed it a few moons ago. It was tiny then. Now it is getting brighter. Does this mean it is getting closer? Most of the rest just go around us in circles without changing much in brightness. I tried tying a ball to a string and swinging it around my head. Normally it appears the same size no matter its position. But, if I swing it the end of my arm instead of close to my head I can place myself not at the center of rotation. Then it appears larger and smaller. So, does my project do the same? Will it reach a maximum size and then get smaller again?

I try to sleep. It is hard with all the activity outside, but I must sleep now if I am going to be awake long enough to see it. The hotter it gets outside, the less activity I hear. When everyone else settles down for a hot day rest I finally fall asleep.

It is nearly dark when I wake. I panic and rush to pack my optics, tube and stand. A Ku carrying materials is taboo, so I have to be careful not to be seen. I don't have a choice though. Babars do not go out after it is

dark. Not that I could keep one without a fight anyway.

+Hey Ka-cao, where do you think you're going? Oh, maybe we need to call you Ka-bar now. What'cha carrying Ka-bar? Don't you know it's dark? Better hide as fast as you can.+

Guano. The smelly brood. I slowly reach into a pouch while maintaining a constant watch on them. One of them starts to move to my left. Classic squeeze play.

I throw the stars. My own idea. Very shiny and dusted with powdered flash metal. They flame brightly but briefly. I am careful not to look. They are instantly drawn to the shininess and are blinded temporarily by the flash. I run as hard as I can into the other direction straight into the thickest bushes. I am small enough and have already worked out a path through them. Too many times. We can't help but be attracted to shiny objects. I wonder why?

I am far enough away. I have not heard them for some time. They can be tricky, but I am out of time. I adjust my path to get to the top of the hill outside our coop complex. I go to the far side so cook fires and party torches do not affect my observations.

I remove my notes from the carrier. I shake a jar of fire flies that I had collected earlier to wake them up. The moon is enough for me to follow a trail I know well, but not enough to read by. They start flashing on and off. It is enough for me to see my night sky map. I set up the far seer to match my map.

This is where I saw it last. Not visible now. Good. It had not moved much in the past, but if I estimate how far it should have moved since my last observation, it should be somewhere near . . . no, not quite that far. Freep! It is much brighter now. I look away from the far seer and look up at the sky without its aid. It is now visible without the far seer. But, it looks like the other lights. I shake the jar. This new light is not on my map in this location. Definitely my project.

It is not moving the same way as the other lights. There are two kinds I have mapped so far, well three counting the moon and sun. Ones that move with the yearly cycle and of course time from sun down. And the ones that don't. They move though. Either faster or slower than the more constant ones. This one though is more like the first, but not quite.

I have to think about what this means.

Guano! A tic has found its way under my thigh feathers. I hate tics. There is not enough light here even with the bugs. I will have to go back to the coup. Once they burrow in it will be days before I can be free from the pain.

I pack everything and begin my way back. I have been gone long enough that everyone else should be asleep. Well except for the juicers, but even I can handle a juicer if they have had enough. I don't know why they don't burn all of the plants that produce those berries. I guess they provide an outlet for those who can't win a fight against anyone else. I avoid them if I can.

I smell the vomit before I get close. I go around only to walk right into someone! I jump back nearly a body length and nearly upset everything I am carrying. It took months to grind the glass for my far seer. I feel around carefully and reassure myself that they are alright.

+I'm sorry.+ I finally remember to say.

+Shh!+ I get in response. I stop all motion and look around me. I see no movement. I start to go forward not understanding why she has said this to me. She holds out an arm to prevent my moving, even without turning around to see what I am doing.

Something moves behind me and I turn to look. With only a half moon I cannot see well, but even after a few moments of careful observation I detect nothing. I turn back to the one who stopped me and she is gone.

I hear something else now in front of me and see one of the smelly clutch looking around for something. I remain still. He eventually moves on, out of sight and smell.

I can't be caught with my far seer. I already almost lost it to them earlier. I think for a moment. I am one of the lightest of the flock. Best if I look up. The bag is nothing special and greenish brown. I climb the nearest hutch and then reach up to grab a branch and haul myself up. A few more branches up and I am swaying under the gentle breeze. Good enough. I tie off the bag and make my way down. Someone inside the hutch stops snoring and I stop breathing. A moment later they start up again.

By the time I am back to my own space I am exhausted. I curl up and am asleep instantly. As I dream the light in the sky that I have been watching turns into the beak of a smelly one coming closer and closer.

I wake suddenly to a commotion outside. I really have not had much sleep.

+Hey you lazy bird, time to work!+

+Hey, leave this poor old finch of no notice alone.+

+There is no such thing as an old bird, just a dead one. Are you ready for flight school so soon?+

+Guano. How late is it?+

+Buzzard brains, the sun has been above the tower for some time.+
+Oh, just in time for scraps.+

+Too late. The babar have already finished them. Just a few buckeye pods left.+ I hate those, they give me the runs. My space already stinks bad enough. My stomach growls, but it will have to do without.

I get up and quickly preen. I don't really care, but I have to do the minimum to avoid notice. Thank the Egg I am too small to mate. I strap on my mating knife all the same. Never had to use it. Glad I did not have it last night. Would not have done much good against three much larger males. Mashed to offal my side of the argument would never have been squawked.

The sun is too bright. I want to check on my far seer, but don't dare risk it. I'll be lucky to use it again in a quarter moon. I make my way to the gardens and join others low in the pecking order moving last night's guano load to the composting area to be mixed in with soil. I never understood why the weakest members of the flock are required to do the heaviest work.

+There you are Ka-caa!+

+I am working. Fulfilling my flock obligation. What ever you want it will wait.+

+Accusations of a taboo violation mean I can take you now.+

The others surround me. I would have done the same for them. He snorts and paws the ground a few times, but no one moves.

+You have evidence?+ Without my bag his threats are lifeless.

He turns and leaves. Now it is a matter of honor. He will be watching me closely. Today was meant to make me nervous enough to check on the bag while he or his brood is watching. No observations for a moon at least now.

I love my project, but not enough to die for it.

+Out again last night?+ I affirm. They know, but I need not fear them.

+They will catch you sooner or later if you don't quit.+

+I know. It's important though.+ I remember my dream, +I think we may all be in trouble. Very serious trouble.+

+Shhh! Don't peep that aloud. Only the Holy Oracles are allowed to make pronouncements of the future. You will get fight school for sure. Proof is not needed for a false prophesy.+

+Only if it is false.+ He is right though. Who would believe we are going to be hit by a sky light. Not like a rock or spear that everyone can see coming if they are looking at it. Soon the light should be visible during the day. But will we be too late by then? Maybe I am wrong. Even

if I am right, no point in dying before I am proved right. I would never survive trial by combat, even with compensators.

At least being in the garden I can eat an occasional seed or berry. Not really enough to make up for missing a meal. A few of the others start to gather edibles and leave them in my path. I am grateful, but have to be careful. If it looks like any of us is gathering we would be in trouble.

I have to wonder what it would be like if we decided distribution by need rather than strength. The five of us here are one step from maggots. Only a matter of time. None of gets enough food. Eventually we are too weak to make it to work. I stop eating and leave the seeds be. They are quickly picked up by the others.

At mid meal, enough left over gruel from feeding the babar to feed one bully, is thrown down partly into the guano, ruining it.

+That was not necessary.+

+Wonder which one will end up taking my place when I am gone?+

+Stay here. I hate breaking in a new gardener. They always think they can get all the food for themselves because they are stronger than one of us.+

+Too dumb to count.+ We all affirm. A few pecks to the head teaches them. I pretty much came here the moment I stopped growing years ago and never assumed I was stronger than anyone.

We save as much of the food as we can and then divide it up evenly. Each eats quickly. If we do not finish our work they will add another without increasing the food supply. I have even heard stories of some crews turning on a new one and eating them.

+Who is that watching us?+

+Huh?+ I look up after swallowing the last of the food mixed with dirt and a hint of guano. A small female is just outside the garden fence intended to keep out runners. She looks familiar. I wonder how she has survived being so little. Our flock is over a thousand now if you add up all six sub groups. Could be visiting from another garden. I see a beetle at the edge of my sight and make a grab for it. When I look up again she is gone. Beetle was not that good either.

We work the rest of the day. Evening meal we are allowed to attend. Not that it helps. We are more easily pushed aside by larger individuals. The kindest are the ones closest to us in size. Worried that if we die, they will be next.

In an episode of luck I cannot explain I manage to snag a crust of actual bread. I hide it under my arm and slowly make my way back to the others, pretending to be still trying and allowing myself to be gradually

pushed to the edges. If I had moved quickly I would have drawn the attention of someone and lost by prize.

When I reach the others they signal to me that they have also gotten food. We retreat to a hidden corner and share our finds. It is more food than any of us has seen in memory. It would be logical to save some for tomorrow, but we dare not break the gathering taboos while I am being watched. Sure enough as we emerge a smelly is watching and goes to our gathering spot after we leave.

+We need to leave something for him next time. Must be very desperate to be looking for our crumbs.+

+Crumbs, did we leave any crumbs? Blessed Sky Soarer that was good.+ We all affirm. I don't remember ever being full before. Tomorrow we will be hungry, today we are not.

+Look there goes a mouse. Can you remember the time you would not have gone after it?+

+When you see one there are ten hidden.+

+Either we or they go near the grain stores it is the same punishment.

+

+Not quite. They don't get tortured first.+ We all affirm. It feels good to be full.

I do not hear the mating party this night.

It is still dark when I wake. I decide I have had enough rest and get up to preen and be ready for work before anyone else. Only I'm not.

+Ka-caa you have to see this. There is a new star in the sky.+

+Where?+

+Near the serpent.+ Not good. I quickly get up, take care of waste and emerge from the coop to see the others waiting for me.

+Who saw it first?+

+I did. I could not sleep. I have never been full before. I did not realize it could be painful. I decided to walk it off some. When I looked up I saw that.+ He points to my sky light alright. It is brighter than last night. The sun will rise soon and it will no longer be visible. It is getting closer. The position has not changed noticeably. That would suggest that it is coming straight for us.

+You don't look so good.+

I answer, +I am not good. None of us is.+ How big is the sky? How big is the sky light coming towards us? The world turns in relation to the light. If it hits on the other side of the world will we still be affected?

+A smelly is watching us. We better get to work.+ The smelly brother looks up trying to see what we are seeing without comprehension.

+We are going to have a red sky this morning.+ I look towards the east. Clouds. We will have rain soon.

+Our job just got harder. How do you stop it?+

+Same way we always do. Let's get out there. The sooner we have the ditches open the less we have to do later.+ We all start running. Strange feeling. Just as we leave the coop area I notice the female again. Who is she? Why is she watching us? She sees me looking and points. The smelly is watching us too. Guano does not run for any reason. We can't normally.

+Slow down, we will be noticed.+ I fake panting like I am going to collapse from the exertion. The others watch and mimic the action. We walk the rest of the way. Another difference, when we reach the garden we are efficient. We all know what to do and without a screech we do what needs to be done.

+They are breeding.+ I look up to where she indicates and all three smellies are watching us now. The rain starts. They each leave in different directions.

+Come quick!+ We run to our youngest member. He is standing over the body of the oldest. He did not have much longer, but he did not deserve to drown in waste.

+Anyone see it happen?+ No one affirms.

+I'm sorry. They are after me, not the rest of you. I should leave you.+

+They are after all of us now, so it does not make any difference. The worst thing we could do now is split up.+

+She's right. We stay together. Evening meal. Something hot I hope.+

We slowly make our way to the feeding area. No more surprises. I was wrong.

They are all waiting for us. The flock parts as we approach to reveal the smelly ones. One reaches down and holds up a pack. My far seer.

+Where did you find it? I have been looking all over for it.+ The female makes her way through the crowd to stand in front of them and between us and the smellies. What?

+Who is she?+ A voice asks on my right.

I answer, +I have no idea.+

A smelly answers, +One more in the trap is fine with us. Never had a flight school with five before.+

+They don't assign flight school for a simple taboo infraction.+

+No they usually assign you to the garden.+ Flight school for us then. Maybe our female watcher will replace us in the garden.

+It seems prudent to open the bag before casting aspersions.+

Intelligent at least. She holds out her arm to receive the bag. Shocked the smelly hands it to her. Surprised he understood what she said. Being lowest in the pecking order means you learn a lot just by listening to others. Not everyone in the flock is like the smellies. There are good birds here too. It is too bad they don't stand up to the smellies. Not for us anyway. They are in no danger of ending up in the gardens any time soon.

It really does not matter. My sky light will be visible soon. It will hit I am certain of it. Does it really matter if I am alive to see it hit? Dead is dead.

She empties the bag onto the ground. The dark tube has fallen apart in the rain. The lenses are fractured into pieces. Useless pieces.

+Explain to me why carrying garbage out for disposal is a crime in this clutch? It certainly isn't where I come from. The one who did this deed would be thanked.+ Thanked? What does that mean?

+Then why did she run?+

+Yeah, why did you run runt?+ Looking right at me.

I want to say I could not stand the smell. I remain silent at first, then think of the perfect response, +I did not have my mating knife. It seemed inappropriate to engage in mating without it.+

The last smelly to squawk regurgitates on the spot. Whoa, that was better than I expected. After working all day diverting molten guano I am sure I am the most beautiful I have ever been. The female watcher shows amusement. So do the remaining members of my gardening club.

+There is no point in making this take longer than necessary. These four are worn out. Time to replace the stock. New diggers are waiting to serve.+ I look over at five very frightened individuals. They can see now what will happen to them when they get worn out.

We are gathered together. I am sorry for the visitor to our flock. They don't take to visitors well unless they bring far more than they will ever consume.

+I am sorry you are joining us.+

+What is this flight school they are talking about?+

Another of our group responds, +They throw us off a cliff. We are not even worth saving for meat or compost.+ He lifts his arms to show his rib cage. More ribs than muscle. Same as I, we all are.

+Why at night? They can not be sure we have died.+

+Not a matter of if, just how long. Pray you land on your head and it is quick. Once I heard a survivor last nearly a day. The screaming was horrible.+

+Everyone worked harder for moons after that.+

It is some ways to the cliff. They do not want our smell to offend them.

+Look, your sky light is huge!+ I look up. It is much bigger. Much bigger.

+They will not live much longer than we will if it means anything. If we had believed in learning instead of always fighting maybe we could have done something. Even hiding in caves with stored food might have been enough. Now everyone dies.+

+Quiet! Or do you want to be tortured first?+ It is said half hearted. The smelly has looked up when we did and noticed the light for the first time. It is bright enough now not to be missed as something new.

The visitor moves closer to me, +What would you do if you could do anything?+

I think about it, +I would like to know if I was right. Are we going to be hit by a sky object? Are we going to be destroyed.+

+Yes on all accounts. I have been following the comet for many moons. It will hit before morning about a third of your world away. It is unlikely anyone here will be alive a quarter moon from now.+ Smelly is listening now.

+Our world? Strange way of stating your knowledge. Are you not from this world?+

+Fa'na'la'ki, you are special among your people.+ How does she know my name? I have almost forgotten it myself. +You alone realize that your world is round, that this world moves around your sun, that other 'lights' might be other suns, that the object coming toward us will hit this world. Considering the quality of your far seer and the lack of this understanding in your culture, you are truly remarkable.+

+We are buzzard food.+ Not as loud as I have heard in the past or I am not listening with enough concentration.

He is ignored by the visitor. She continues, +Most when asked what they want, would say revenge for those who placed them in this position. Why do you not ask this?+

+The smelly brothers are just being used by those in power. Their time will come soon enough. Those higher in the pecking order will also be replaced by those more aggressive and stronger than they will be. All of this is really meaningless compared to the search for knowledge.+

+Well, I have heard enough. Time for us to leave. Are you ready?+ We have reached the cliff. I look over the edge into the darkness. Is anyone ever prepared for death?

+Not that way Fa.+ She indicates through the middle of the assembled

crowd. She is coo-coo. She waits for me to respond. She is serious.

+I will not leave without my partners.+

+Good. I agree. Let's go then, all of us.+

+They will prevent us. No one survives flight school.+ Our oldest would know.

She smiles, +No one will prevent us.+ She starts forward.

+Nothing to lose.+ We follow. The path parts and we walk through the middle. Smelly tries to follow us, but is blocked.

Someone in the crowd asks, +What will happen to us?+ They all turn to face us.

She turns, goes between us to face them, +Nothing that has not happened to countless species before you. Did you expect to be treated as special in any way?+ She turns from them and leads us away. Some try to follow, but stop as if held by a large arm. Panic sets in and they start to scream. We keep moving.

+We will not be saved either. Even if we ran it would not be fast enough.+

She turns to face the youngest, +Very good Ge'ha'si. However we will not be walking. All of you understand the concept of using a piece of wood to assist you to do a task.+

+Of course, Fa's far seer was made of wood and glass. It allowed her to see objects much further away than can be seen normally. We use wheeled carts to move materials, food, supplies, soil.+

Another responds, +Guano. Does this mean we no longer have to compost everyone else's waste?+

+Every species produces waste. Are you advocating that others are more worthy of the privilege of this task than you are?+ She stops and waits for the answer.

He ruffles his feathers in shame, +No, being alive is enough.+

+Moving waste is not the only task you will perform. Fear not.+ I am trying to imagine something worse. Rotting corpses comes to mind.

+You know our names, even though I never learned the names of these fine birds myself. Once you join the garden a name is meaningless. The shame is too great.+

+She means to ask, what is your name?+ I get a shove in response. She would have gotten there eventually.

+I have had many, many names. You may call me Ba'ba'ra. I used to use that name a very long time ago and it feels right to use it again. My first name if I remember correctly.+

+First names are good.+ We affirm to each other.

We come to a clearing. I have no idea where we are. We are further away in this direction that I have been before. In the center of the clearing is a large round object. I am not sure what it is made of in this low light. The moon is slightly brighter than the previous night, but still not enough. We walk up to it. I touch it carefully. Very smooth. No texture that I can feel. I strike it with a knuckle. Hard.

+We enter over here.+ Ba does something to a spot on the surface and an opening appears. She enters. My feathers rise on the back of my neck and head. I look inside while touching the sides of the opening. Where did the opening go?

+If that thing was not coming soon I would not enter.+ I hear behind me.

I comment, +Can't be worse that what was about to happen to us back there. If she wanted to eat us she could have already done so.+

+Nothing but bones back here boss.+ We all show amusement and proceed into the object. Inside it is transparent enough for us to see the moon above and clouds starting to diffuse it.

+Please be seated.+ Perches appear along the sides and we each take to one.

+This is beyond a wooden cart I believe.+

+You are correct Yesh'ib. However, once you learn the principals it is not that hard to understand or use.+

+How come our clutch does not have one of these then?+

I answer, +Because our flock was more interested in power than knowledge. Our world is large, I would not be surprised to learn that others were not as stupid as we have been.+

+Not quite the answer Fa. No one on your world has one of these. This is the only one present. We begin.+

It starts to move up! I don't feel like I am falling, but the tops of the trees are becoming visible. I grab the perch hard. We do not fall though. By the time I relax we are well above the hills.

+Look you can see our clutch. They have a lit a large ceremonial fire.
+

+Look above us.+ Ge says pointing. The death object is easier to see up here.

Ba says, +We can watch it hit if you wish, though I would not recommend it. No one wants to see their own destroyed.+

+Are we the only ones to survive then?+

+No. We have been working for several years to collect those who best represent your kind.+

+Our world, our kind. These are strange concepts. What other intelligent kinds and what other worlds are there? I have never seen any other species close to our intelligence.+

+Oh, I think some crows are as smart as a smelly at least.+

+I think mice might be smarter.+ This is done in fun, but none of us is really amused.

+Rea'ri'os, to answer your question, I am not Ku. I was not born on this world. There are other worlds with intelligent species. Many in fact. We are going to one such now.+

I ask, even though I am not sure this is what I should do.

+I need to see what happens. I understand that this is not a new event for you. You have seen or know of objects from the sky destroying flocks before. If I am to learn, I need to see it myself.+ She affirms and we change direction and increase our rate of movement away from ground. Nothing moves expect the object we are in. It will be a long time before I understand how this works.

+You were right Fa. Our world is round. How did you know?+ The world appears to us now as a round ball. Blue with white smears. Some areas are darker, greenish in color.

+It just made sense for it to be round. It was the only way to explain the way the sun, moon and sky lights all moved.+

I sense a light behind me and turn to look. There is a glowing white object before us. A long tail appears to one side. Roughly round only. Material is escaping from its surface rapidly. We continue to get closer and eventually stop on its surface.

+This is the object that will hit your world. Some species will survive, but it likely it will be a very long time before another intelligent species arises.+

+How long will it be?+

+Your language does not have a word to express this length of time.+ My mind is unsteady. Do I really want to see this?

+Can we go outside?+ His beak is pressed against the side of our cart.

+That would not be wise. The surface does not support life.+

+What's wrong? How come I can fly without full wings?+

Ba reaches out and gently pushes her back to her perch, +Please remain attached to your seat.+ Seat?

We start to move from the surface back towards our world. The object is behind us at first and then she allows it to pass us in its quest to destroy our world.

+If you can bring us to the object. Why don't you just move the object

out of the way?+

+We are still very tiny in relation to its size. Could you move a mountain in time?+

+Yet you have known for years. Surely if you had started to move this mountain then you could have saved our world.+

She considers me for a moment, +Possibly. But what of the consequences?+

+Consequences? What consequences. You said we are alone on our world. Why must we die?+

+You are alive. Is that not enough?+

+No.+

+What would you give me in exchange for their lives?+

+I have nothing but my own life. I give you that if blood will satisfy you.+

+Does not matter what would satisfy me. Interesting to know that you would offer the price though. Just as you spent your life under the rule of others, so do I and so do the ones I serve and the ones they serve. You could easily have killed the smelly brothers at any time, yet you did not.+

+It would not have been right, even if they did deserve it.+

+Precisely.+

+Fa, she scares me. What would our kind have become had she interfered and saved them?+

+Tell us of your kind Ba. How are they different? You look just like us.+

+There is no comet about to strike their world. Yet. As to the world I was born on. I am not able to reach it for reasons that are too difficult to explain at the moment, but my kind, the kind I was born to, will cease to exist in the not too distant future as well. Most do. Life is change. Nothing is forever.+

+It is about to happen. I don't want to watch, but I can't not look.+

The mountain is far ahead of us now heading straight into the center of a half lit world. Our home. It starts to glow bright red at the edges just before it hits. Everything seems to be going slowly yet I know there are countless days walking distances involved. A ripple moves out from where it hit. Destroying everything as it proceeds.

+It will be half century yet before it settles down. Not much to see at that point either, with all the ash and smoke in the air. A couple of years before the clouds clear and then thousands before the temperature comes back up to normal. Rain patterns will be permanently changed because of where it hit.+

+What are you going to do with us? You are not going to take us back down there are you?+ I feel suddenly afraid of being this high up and nearly faint. The others do not look well either.

Suddenly the world below us changes. Completely. Whereas before the world was half in light and half in darkness, now it is totally dark. We start falling towards the darkness. As it gets dark in our cart I want to go to sleep, but I don't want to miss any of our adventure either.

Very quickly there are trees near us again. No moon to help see by. I only see the trees as silhouettes. We stop, I think. I smell the trees now. Not the same though. The smell is different. More something. I remember the ones working in the essence shop. They always had a strange smell about them too. There is a slight breeze.

+Now what Ba? What do we do?+

Nothing. Silence. She is gone.

+Do we wait, or do we try and find someone?+

I hear snoring from two. I settle down into the soft needles and decaying leaves. Smells better than the space I normally sleep in. I do not hear anything else until light appears through the trees around us.

Surprisingly I am the first one awake. I look around. The trees are different. The leaves are not the same shape or length. Slightly different color too, a little darker. The bark on the trees has a reddish color with thick cracks. I reach out and touch. It comes apart easily. A strange sound comes from above me. There is a creature I have never seen before. A sort of mouse like thing, but with a huge tail in relation to it's size, which is a little smaller than our mice. It is clearly upset with me, staring right at me.

+Hello little one.+

A bird flies overhead complaining loudly also. A reddish color. It could hide well against the bark. Which it proceeds to do. I watch it as it goes up the trunk pecking away at hidden cracks. Bugs is my guess. I would not mind a few right now myself. Water would be good too.

When we went to sleep the forest was silent. Now there is lots of noise. I don't hear or smell water though. Best to wait for the others. I don't want to get eaten by something we don't know how to defend ourselves against. Now I really wish I had my mating knife, no matter how dull. There are plenty of branches on the ground, but most look to rotten to be of much use, even as clubs.

+Where are we Fa?+ Sounds strange to hear my name.

I turn to answer and see two are waking up beside Ge. Only one asleep now. Ge sees me looking and nudges the remaining one.

I go up to the second oldest of our group, +May I ask your name? You are the only one not named by Ba.+ The others are watching and listening closely.

+I am not worthy of a name. Thank you for including me in your flock Fa. I am fond of life still.+

+Even after the garden? Amazing.+ We all fluff humor.

+We need to call you something. Not that we ever need a name in the garden, but here it is different. We may actually need to choose one over another for a particular task.+

He thinks for a moment, +You may call me Hussup.+ A kind of carrion worm. Now I know his crime, as do the others. I have never been that hungry, but have been tempted.

Yesh'ib comments, +I am not without shame also. I stole food.+

The oldest, Ge'ha'si adds, +I am guilty of mating against class.+

Rea'ri'os, the youngest male goes next, +I cheated at combat.+ That would explain his limp. They broke his leg at some point in punishment.

I speak, +You all know my shame. I carry things while not at work. I am curious and try to learn how and why things are. I am truly the worst of us all.+ I lower my head to hide my eyes in my feathers.

+If all of you are done feeling sorry for yourselves I would like to take you to the others.+ He is the largest bird I have ever seen. I extend my neck just to see his head.

+You may call me Affik.+ Affik is the name of a tiny little bug that gets into your feathers causing no end of irritation.

I have to know, +Is this your shame?+

He shows amusement, +You can tell me after we have been in the same coop together awhile.+ He certainly is handsome.

I ruffle my feathers, +I must ask. We are on a different world. What time of year is it here?+

He looks at all of us and then makes a very strange repetitive sound.

+Sorry. That is the way the Hu show amusement. Most Ku find it irritating.+

Ge asks, +What is a Hu?+

+The ugliest creature you will ever meet. They have no feathers, they have no fur or shell. They put made materials over their bodies to hide their shame.+

+Guano, then why emulate them?+ He gestures unknowing and starts down a path that I had not noticed before. He pulls something out of a carry pouch of high quality. He must be high up the pecking order. He hands us each a few of the items. I look carefully at it, but do not know

what it is. I smell it. Seems to be a dried plant material. I break it open. A nut of some kind.

Hussup nudges me and points at Affik. He has peeled the shell off and is eating the nut inside. I was close then. That makes me feel better and I try eating mine.

+These are good.+

+You are just very hungry. Usually only the animals raised for food eat them.+

+Then why do you eat them?+

+Ah, because I do not eat meat. I figured if it was good enough for them it should be good for me as well.+

+We rarely see meat ourselves. It does not matter that much.+

+All of you could be boiled down in a medicine cup you are so thin. Amazing to me you are still alive. We will fatten you us soon enough. Your first work will be at the monastery. We make meals for others, but unlike what you are used to, we get to eat the same food.+

+Then we are to be fed to others?+

+Sky Soarer no. It is forbidden for intelligent species to eat one another.+

I ask, +Besides the Hu and us, how many are there on this world?+

He stops to think, +Well, I personally have met Ba, Di, Dia, Diu, Bu, Pink and the Hu I first mentioned. I believe there are about ten more on the list.+

+Eighteen total?+

+Oh, and there are rumors of Guardians, but no one every really can prove that.+ He winks.

+What's a guardian?+

+Terrible beast. You would not last a moment with one. They attack without warning or provocation, from a distance, and in total darkness.+

We just stare at him. He shows amusement. Is he deceiving us?

He knows the path well. Several times I trip on a root or rock.

I see some shapes ahead. Hutches, but they are too straight.

He speaks quietly, +These are the Hu living areas. Ugly aren't they?+

We walk past them quietly. I hear sounds and try to see one, but we pass too quickly.

+Up above us in the trees are some of the Ba hutches. Don't stand directly under one or you can get hit with their guano.+

+Are they birds?+

+Actually they are more related to mice than birds. They weigh about the same as you tiny birds.+ About half what he weighs I am guessing.

+Are they dangerous?+

+All species can kill if that's what you mean. So can we. Doesn't happen very often here.+

+Here is your new living area.+ We walk in past a heavy gate which is closed behind us.+

+Is that to keep something out?+

+Some of the species fear us. They don't know we only collect the gentle ones. Unfortunately size is seen as dangerous by some and I am rather large.+ Too tired now to think about much of anything. Sleeping out in the open was not really enough. My eyes start to close and I look around for a corner to settle into.

Somehow we are led into a hutch big enough to hold all of us. Affik puts covers over the openings so it gets dark inside. He then leaves us. A new world and a new life. I am re-hatched. Amazing.

Mirror to Disaster

We arrive on Mirror and use mass to make bubbles around ourselves. *Nothing here Roo.* I scan the same. Nothing unexpected has changed. The magma has settled down to earth normal. There are a few active volcanoes still, but that is expected. Nothing alive here. That is expected also.

I move us to Paradise.

What am I doing here? I should be trying to find as many of my friends as possible to save them. Except I know everyone who can be reached has already been told via the network. Less than an eighth and it has been much longer than that already. Well, maybe the ones who don't want to be found would take longer. Like Edwin. But then he was not here either so probably not in danger.

I sense nothing but the local plants and those dam insects. Do you know how uncomfortable gold clothing on a Ceph is? I don't know how the Hu stand it. It itches, it bunches, it's hot. I zap as many of the things as I can see, not bothering with ones farther away than that. But they are distracting me.

I DS to the ruins, which had repaired themselves before our eye and now of course are ruins again. Everything is sealed up tight. Not enough time has yet passed for the walls to fall in. I would have thought the remaining First Ones would have at least gotten out to live out their normal life spans. I sense them still in the chambers.

I DS into the nearest. They are arrayed just like we left them. Still ready to service the TKs into froth makers. Inside they are desiccated to dust, but outside they look almost the same. Maybe a little dented in their compound eyes. The surface tension of the water they used to contain would have done that as it dried.

Just chamber after chamber of dead bugs. I can sense the matrix is working fine. They had no TK abilities. Maybe that is what killed them. They could not longer feed. Or maybe they simply just did not care. Even the smartest arthropods species we have found act more like dumb computers. Even a simple personality routine would have improved them.

I do not have much sympathy for beings who would kill so many for their own purpose. Though I too was nearly a victim it is somehow reassuring that even TKs have predators. It was just too easy for us to be without fear. I hated it since hatching, but now I have come to appreciate its ability to sharpen ones thoughts.

There are many who could not be here now in this chamber. They were closer than Silver and I were. They felt them in their minds. Just seeing them would be enough to bring back the horrors. The fact that it felt good at time would only make the memory more intense. Then it went sour. It felt wrong. Was it wrong because the First Ones were doing it wrong, or because we just did not fit.

Interviews with some of the other species suggested that they felt nothing wrong. But, they felt the call as an obsession too strong to ignore. None of us did. Was that the difference? Why were they called? To dispose of a threat? Or broken TKs that would cause more harm than good, to their purpose? What is their purpose? The diversity imperative? Then why did Jesus say they were not the ones he was expecting? Who was he expecting?

Disaster. Disaster does not fit either. Why does it exist? None of the searching by the Enterprise found any other planets like Disaster. Yes, they found smashed planets, but not ones out of sync with the froths. Disaster should not exist. The structures matched Ceph homes. They matched my settlement, almost. A thousand years ago, no wait, it has been another thousand since then already. Two thousand then.

Ah Boss, when are you going to include me in your thoughts?

~We are going to Disaster. Grab some mass.~

He bubbles up with a 'thn shield. I move us.

We appear over the pit. There is a thin crust now, but there are plenty of cracks of molten lava visible. Like veins on a pungu fruit. The sides continue to fall into the pit. There is it still molten. Eventually this world should go cold. Too many of the magmotics have died. Or left. Interesting thought. Where would they go and how would they?

Come on Roo. Let me in.

Just thinking.

Really? About what?

Everything. We need to figure this out. Otherwise . . .

Otherwise what?

I don't know.

The others are waiting at the Ceph settlement.

I move us close by.

A circle of bubbles suspended above, all being careful not to disturb anything.

Roo, White, what did you find at the Center?

White answers, *Nothing.*

No, really, what did you find?

I answer, *Nothing. No one was there. Is Silver here?*
His bubble moves from within the pack to stand out.
We did find one thing. Lyssi left a note. I pull out the sphere.
Have you read it yet?
I thought it best to bring it before the group.
Enfolded I see and no surface marking. Best if you open it, you knew
her the best.
Not really. You two were plotting how to bring me out for some time.
Politeness thus honored I watch as he unfolds the sphere to be another
sphere.
At least it is not another black 'thn or any other color.
Probably not much time. The center looked like everyone just left.
Leaving everything just as they were.
I look closely and written along one microscopic ridge is the message.
I show, *They are not the First Ones. That's it.*
Interesting supposition. Wish there was some explanation or proof.
How do we know they did not write it themselves to throw us off?
If they are the First Ones they would have the necessary knowledge to
fake it. They would have observed the evolution of the Nauti and the
Ceph.
Not to mention the rest of us. I would not be surprised if they didn't
have to go through the nuisance of a group of curious TKs like us every
once in a while.
Yeah, every hundred million years or so. Maybe longer. Yawn, too
frequently if you ask me. Small water bubbles break inside White's larger
bubble as several TKs decide to respond.
Okay, if the sphere is real and whatever Lyssi found is proof, but she
did not have time to expand, then where are they and who were the ones
we did encounter and why were they there?
Yeah, where do you do hide from them?
Yes Roo, we did send out a broadcast. We might not be able to hide,
but at least forewarned we can be careful.
I study the ruins below us. With no air left they don't change much
with time. Just some ash that falls from the churning of the magma and
volcanoes. Easy enough to see through. How did Disaster come about?
The theory is that it is a result of a failed froth attempt. But it was only
about two thousand years ago now. My own calculations say that Disaster
would be absolutely the wrong place to start a froth.
As the sun sets the stars come out quickly with no air. I notice White
watching me.

You are free to go where ever you desire White. Thank you for accompanying me to the center.

As you wish. Take care of yourself. Don't forget.

I won't. He moves to be closer to the friends that he went through training with. You never forget them. I need time with Healer, er, Doc.

Silver, do you know where Doc is?

He and Daniel went with Barb attempting to save and train the chickens and then I think he left to be with Mandhi on Di-Eden.

Ku. I don't like Ku. Glad that we decided not to try and save all of them. But where there are two then they could come back, monastery or not.

What name and form has Daniel taken?

Affik, a very large gentle Ku on Ba-Eden.

And Barb?

I don't know her names, she has assumed a multiple. All Ku if I remember right.

Surprised she has decided so quickly.

She hadn't until the last run she did while you were gone. She found someone special. You might want to meet her yourself if the stats are true. Ku prime is gone. At least for a time.

How high will the species loss be?

Too early to tell yet. Pre impact said thirty percent. Mostly the larger forms.

Any Ku precursors that could make a come back?

Maybe two. We will be watching this time though. Could be several million years before they become a threat.

Have we taken over the First One's role then? He shrugs.

Hu Jesus does not think they are the First Ones. In your travels aboard the Enterprise did you ever find any more of them?

No.

Then how could they be the First Ones?

We can become any species we wish, they most certainly can or could do the same. Sussi reported that she has captured one.

A First One?

One of their puppets. At least she and the TK4 she was with are safe. Since word went out people are ready. I have heard of no more deaths.

They will adapt.

Certainly. This was most likely a test.

Some test, hundreds died.

Only the fourth layer and below. Why was that? Was Sussi the only attempt on a layer three?

So far: No attempts on layer one or two?

None so far. They undoubtedly have something more interesting for us.

Roo and I are the most dangerous to them. They will save us for last. I would have taken you two out first. That way the others would be easy.

Owa pops in, None of us are 'easy'. They are sharpening their claws. Learning our ways. Best to learn against the young. I sense the Enterprise above us. It has added weapons. Many weapons. Something new.

She looks at me, You like them? Mandhi helped. We call them enfolders.

So it is the way of war we have chosen.

We did not attack first. They enslaved ours with intent to kill. If they had left us alone would we have saved the others? Without knowledge I doubt it. We would have waited to see what happened. Then it would have been too late and we would have gone on our way, saddened, but unchanged.

She is very cynical.

I have to wonder. What would have happened if we had stayed and poisoned the mix? Would that have been the greater danger? Did they have no choice? Or have we tampered with something we shouldn't have? Is the universe in greater danger now because of us? Because of me?

Owa looks at me again, Too many questions. Now is the time of the Cat. We have napped too long. No more nice kitty. All but Silver and I go with Owa to the Enterprise. It DSs out of view.

Now that the others are gone, tell me, what really happened here? Where exactly is Disaster?

I wondered when you would finally ask. My best guess is that this was a small scale practice run.

Why my world? This world most closely resembles Ceph Prime. As it was two thousand years ago at least.

You already know the answer to that Roo my friend. Expand your mind in that direction. He points to a location in the sky. I reach out, further and further and further.

It can't be! I ink and hide against the gray ash, adjusting my skin color and texture to match.

They were after me.

Your ancestors at least. Remember this happened before you were hatched.

What stopped them?

You are not the only one who can play with time. Linked with the Magmotics our abilities were magnified millions of times. You see the First Ones never expected the Magmotics to become TK.

You came here?

We came much earlier. We thought maybe to prevent Sauron, but of course you cannot change your own time line. We decided to explore. Ron had worked on an alternative Earth a long time ago, from our perspective. There must be more we reasoned. It did not take us long, a few thousand years. Even after so long we did not adapt to the froth as easily as you have. Still we noticed a pattern. We found Lyssi as you suspected. The Nauti had a prophecy of one that would arise.

Me.

Yes. From among the Ceph, a guided species of the Nauti. Ceph, a carefully watched cultivated species similar to themselves. We learned from the Nauti. We learned patience. Where they failed in themselves they corrected in the Ceph. Where they lacked they ensured in the Ceph. Many died for you to be Roo. So many died.

What happened here? How many died here?

He smiles, Actually none. This is all fake. We duplicated your world and with the help of the Magmotics we moved Ceph One to its current location. Disaster was where they expected Ceph One to be.

How did you make an entire world? And so precisely matching our world?

The basic plan was the same, even after twenty five million years. If you ever looked more closely you would see the continents are not exactly where they should be. It was close enough after a little cosmetic work. You will find all of the settlements look pretty much the same. Only this one had to be perfect.

As this was where I would be when the time came.

Yes.

So, it was not a froth attempt that created this world.

No.

What did they use?

We don't know. None of us were here when it happened. We only saw the result, same as you. Besides, does it matter? Hu Jesus has arrived.

The way of war never works in the end. Hu history is full of examples.

We both bow to him in the Nauti way and he returns the honor.

*Why is White not with you?
The way of war has many attractions. I was too boring for him.
Jesus smiles. You asked too many questions. I understand. Only a fool
remains ignorant and acts without knowledge. He no longer smiles.
Paradise is unchanged. They remain as we left them, only dead.
They are not the First Ones.
I believe you are right Jesus. True First Ones would not have stayed.
They would have had some means of escape.
Something left. Otherwise they would not hunt us. Information left.
Fear is the only thing that hunts those remaining. It is time for the
three of us to find the answer.*

Pursuit

~Pok, get his attention for me. He can't see anything he is not looking at.~

Pok lets out one of the highly irritating Ba screams which causes Nipper to freak and hide behind the nearest bush. We are long past the big trees. Both of us feel vulnerable out in the open like this. Apparently so does Nipper.

I walk up to him, ~How much longer? I am drying out here.~

He sticks his nose into the air. Very inefficient means of tasting the air in my opinion. He then moves off without showing me anything. We reluctantly follow.

Without warning he stops in the middle of the trail and proceeds to clean himself. We stop to wait and he looks up at us.

I clean my way, you do your way. A stream is just downhill from me. He goes back to cleaning. We make our way around him. Pok collects even more seeds by stepping off the trail. Definite disadvantage to having fur.

~There is water down here!~ I move as fast as I can and am soon soaking in wonderful wet cool water. Pok jumps in next to me with a huge splash. He then get worried as the current grabs him. I quickly reach out and hook a leg till he catches his balance.

^Thanks. Feels good.^

I'm done. Which means he is leaving and unless we want to be left behind we need to move too. I am not happy leaving the water. I remember to fill a water bag while I can. Pok does the same.

^Too bad he isn't really a nipper. We would not be walking across the world then.^

~No, we would be dead in a compost pit instead. Remember we were about to be darted.~

^Funny how I can forget something like that. It was so unfair.^ I give him a dirty look. He shows amusement. We make it up the bank and catch up with Nipper who is barely moving. He could go many times faster than he is. I am grateful he is not. I am not designed for cross country travel. Or climbing trees either.

^Even I would like to see one of your crabs right now.^ Ba have a hard time traveling over open ground as well. They can glide short distances, but mostly like to climb, any cliff or tree will do.

~Any Hu would know of our arrival long before we got close.~

^They can also move much faster.^

Even a lazy Cat can outrun a Hu. We are doing fine. We are the last three they would expect to see. Besides they could not see us no matter what we did. They are not on Hu-Eden.

We both stop and stare at each other.

You wanted adventure. You were bored and worried you would end up pushing fish the rest of your lives. Here is your chance. I suggest you take it.

^Fish would taste real good right now.^

~Even the guts would taste good right now, but he is right, we can't go back.~ And I usually give those to the unseen or hatchlings.

Nipper starts walking with his tail high in the air. Nothing worse than the arrogance of a Cat.

We walk the rest of the day. A long hard, dusty, painful day.

~I think I have nearly worn out my shoes.~

^At least you have shoes. My covers wore off a long time ago. I need to spend time making new ones.^

~Those won't last another day? Why?~

^I will use bark softened in water this time. By the morning they will conform to my feet. Might even last a week. I have a feeling we will need it.^ Pok does not weigh much. This method would not work for Cat or Hu.

I give him a Nauti bow acknowledging my affirmation in the extreme.

Nipper is snoring again. I miss the sea, the sound of the waves, but I am tired enough I am asleep quickly.

Wake up you lazy kittens!

I unshield an eye to see almost nothing.

~Wake me when I can see where I am going or you have food.~

I have food.

I raise a finger to taste the air. I expected some dead rotten rodent, but the air tastes like fish.

~How did you get fish without getting wet?~

I am not without talents. Still want to sleep in? Pok and I will finish it then.

I reluctantly boost myself up and reach out a tentative finger to snag a piece.

^Smells like fish, were did this come from?^

There is enough to fill both of us. Nipper does not eat.

~Are you not hungry?~

I ate eighths ago. I hunt at night. There is much game about.

Rotten rodent, though I don't taste it on him. I don't ask. Don't like the taste of mammals of any species.

The sun will rise soon. The first glow appears.

^How much further today?^

Not far. Should be there in a few arn. I don't believe that. Why did we not finish last night then.

~If you hunt at night, as most Cats do, then why didn't you just capture the Hu and be done?~

You have a poor memory for a Ceph. He looks at me concerned. We may not hear well or travel well, but our vision is exceptional, even in low light.

^Hint, they are not on Hu-Eden.^

~Thanks, I remember, but what are we doing if we are not looking for them?~

We are looking for them, but we are also looking for how they left Hu-Eden. They did not leave by way of a transfer station.

^Those have not worked in generations. Some even say the stone blocks are some natural phenomenon and not made by sentients at all.^

We all agree that no one could leave Hu-Eden through one.

~Agreed, but how do you know they left? This is a large world. A lot of places to hide or just get way ahead of you.~

I am a Cat. I know if prey have left by unnatural means. He looks offended. I remember the smell of catnip on him every time we passed and am not as convinced.

Pok hands me out of sight of Nipper, ~Do you trust him?~

I hand back, ~No. Be careful.~

We climb a short ways up a hill with many rock outcrops. Cat grabs a branch and pulls at it.

Are you going to help me or watch? He emits a growl.

I look at the small trees nearby. A little too far.

^Silas, grab a branch and then me. I can make up the difference.^ He is right. I grab him first though. Thus working together we remove the branches very quickly.

When we are finished a cave entrance is exposed.

^You think they went this way? Is there some kind of transfer station down at the bottom of this hole?^

You two are about to find out. I needed climbers I could trust. I know you have had experience with the caves north of the settlement.

I flash embarrassment, ~No one was supposed to know. We were very careful.~

I am Cat.

He pulls on a sack hidden behind some other bushes.

When Pok opens it there are ropes, claw enhancers, and lots of sealed food bags and water skins.

^You are not going with us?^

Cats don't do caves. At least not the crawl on your belly type.

~I think it is time you told us more. I want to know what I can expect down there before I go below.~

^And we want to know everything.^

I can tell by the scent trail they went down there. They have not come back up. I have not been down there and have no idea what is below.

~Wouldn't they come back to steal more objects?~ Pok sniffs at the entrance.

^At least they did not die down there. I don't even smell waste.^

~They must have made many trips to gather all the items they took over the time the items have gone missing.~

^Assuming all of those 'thefts' were from them and not just misplaced or stolen by someone else. Hu misplace things all the time.^

And then blame the Cats. I am going to take a nap. Let me know when you are finished dart chow. Nice reminder.

He curls up on a hollow in the ground, yawns and settles down.

~Cats can sleep anywhere at anytime.~

^I would like to get a start while we still have some light coming in the entrance. Who knows how long the glow balls will last. Try one end of the rope around that large tree over there. I want a path back I know is true. Caves can get confusing as you know.^

~Hey, have I ever misremembered how to get back?~

We tie the rope. I go first. I can fall further if something goes wrong. Having eight arms helps to hold on as well. Fortunately there is a ledge several meters down. The supplies come down using the other end of the rope. Once our eyes dark adapt we will start again.

Pok hands me, ~You don't believe there is a transporter down here do you?~

~No, of course not. I expect we will find either their bodies or their cache of stolen items or both. We will find something I'm sure. Their scent was still on the surfaces of several stones I touched on the way down. Hu are sure stinky as you say.~

~Definitely. It smells real bad of them in here. Like being inside one of their shelters. Can't ever complain though. This is their world. We are the visitors.~

~Also explains why Nipper could not track them past the entrance.~
My eyes can see around me now. Pok clacks a few times to see if that will bring him any more clarity. His echo location will be very useful later on. He can even tell what mineral a cave is made from sometimes, without tasting even. Of course I can tell more once I taste it, but from a distance I am no use. I hated ceramics instruction. I was good at identifying the materials, but don't like getting burned.

For instance the rock here is all limestone, as expected for a cave, but this close to the surface there is a good mix of organics still. Bay, oak leaf litter mostly. On the rocks the Hu touched I can tell they are especially fond of wild onions and prefer snails to the more usual birds that Hu and Cat are so fond of. Can't stand birds myself. I noticed our Nipper likes them though. Nothing worse than bird breath, uncooked too. Explains why he did not eat any of the fish he caught for us.

~They went down this shaft.~

~Lead on faithful Pok.~

~As you wish Master Silas.~ We both hand amusement. He throws the rope down and we use it to help ourselves navigate the passage into the dark.

~As long as we can smell them I suggest we avoid using the lights.~

~We should also stay as quiet as possible in case they are still down here.~

I am fortunate Pok learned hand so well. It was what convinced us to cave explore in the first place. There is much beauty down here. The only place that is truly quiet in a noisy world. I can't imagine the noise the tellers said this world was once like. Mech gone crazy. The taste of the air must have been horrible. Even the paint they use on the boats makes me sick. Too much copper for my blood.

~They ruined the stalactites in this section. Hope they did not ruin the whole complex. It will take thousands of years to repair this damage.~ I guide Pok's hand over a section and he acknowledges he understands.

He hands me, ~Piss to the right. Don't want to touch that. Will last for eighths.~

~Your air does not taste good either Mr. Guano.~

~Yeah, Ceph poop is not roses either.~

~Any idea what a rose is?~

~None. Saw an orchid once. In the Matriarch's receiving chamber. Smelled good.~

~Right, when you were there as a cleaner. Made your way up to fish pusher. Good job Si.~

~Look whose handing.~ I give him a gentle nudge. He lets out a clack.

~Whoa, long drop to the right and it appears they went down that. Must be twenty meters at least. The rope will not last.~

~Can we pipe it?~

~I am too small and the sides are too slick.~

~Just means you get to ride. Hop on.~ With all my suckers and eight arms it takes awhile, but we make it down.

~Now I am stuck. You had better survive this.~

~I hope to.~ I really do.

~They ate here. Lots of litter. Smells like they did eat more than snails. Dried grain products. No insects, low protein then.~ Ba and bugs. Tasty for sure, but I am not obsessed with them.

I taste them, ~Full of dried fruit and nuts. They sure like sweet things.~

~When they don't save it to make alcohol.~ There are worse things than a nipper or a mag.

~What do Ba use to get stupid?~

~We don't talk about it.~

~We are not talking, technically.~

~Right. This is a clan secret understand?~

I acknowledge. I can ask no more questions. What he tells me will be what he choses to ask, no more.

~There is a certain centipede. Not native to this world. My ancestors smuggled it in. Fortunately it doesn't really like it here and will not breed outside their jars. No defenses against those blue birds. They really really like them. I think it might affect them the same way it does us. Anyway it is used in initiation ceremonies and other special occasions. I had to consume one at my naming. I don't remember much.~

~That seems to be true of all species versions. I have done mag a few times, but don't like the lack of remembering. What if I upset a high official? Too dangerous.~

~Ever try another sentient's stuff?~

~We are warned never to go near alcohol. Will kill us quick.~

~What about mushrooms?~

~I have been shown that they give you a horrible brains ache afterwards.~

~I have heard they make you puke your insides out. No thank you. I have seen the birds feed their young. Glad I am not a bird.~

~I don't taste anything beyond this chamber. There is something I

don't recognize over here. It has no taste at all. I have never experienced anything that has no taste.~

~Let me try.~ He clacks many times, closer and closer, then farther away.

~That is the most solid material I have ever experienced. What could it be?~

I go up to it and feel all around. Spherical, at least the part sticking out from the limestone. Then I find an opening.

~Found something. An opening. I am going to probe it. You might want to stay back.~

Instead he lights one of the glow balls.

Before us appears part of a large sphere at least ten meters are visible and much more hidden. It is semi-transparent with a slight yellow cast. This could very well be because of our light also being somewhat yellow in color.

I remove my hand from the inside and look more carefully at the opening. Not large, many four or five centimeters in an irregular shape. It is amazing that I found it in the dark.

^Look here. On the ground. They were here.^

Hu footprints. No other sentients. Off to one side is a smashed Ceph sphere. That took some effort. I would not have thought the limestone was strong enough, especially wet the way it is.

~They must have had tools with them. And took them when they left. I don't understand why they destroyed it.~

^There is an old Hu belief that there is treasure hidden in the center.^

~Ridiculous. They are only used to record information. There is nothing inside.~

^The belief persists. Hu show their true spirit in their greed.^

~So, how did they leave and what is this wall? Are they related as Cat would have us believe? This is the Cat home world as well. Do they know something we do not?~

I stick a hand back inside the wall. There are structural elements inside, those that I cannot see I can feel and taste.

~It tastes of Hu.~

From above me Pok comments, ^Not the only hole either. This one has a line of insects going into it. Look like ants, sort of.^ He tastes one and spits it out immediately. Normally he likes ants.

~Let me taste one. Knock a few down here.~

They taste like silica. I know of no life form that tastes like this.

^We need to get back up top to tell Nipper. This is beyond our

knowledge.^

Something inside clicks as I am absentmindedly twisting around inside trying to understand what I am feeling.

^What did you just do? Look!^

I turn around and see a shimmer edged dark circle.

~What is that?~ I take my hand out and it disappears. I put it back in. Nothing happens until I find the spot and press against it again. The shape comes back. Pok goes up to it and sniffs. Then reaches out to touch it. His hand passes into it.

~There was a wall there a moment ago.~

^I know. My hand feels normal though. I think this is how they got through. There must be something on the other side.^

~How do I get though if I have to hold the control?~

^Find something to hold it in place for you.^ I remove my hand, the hole disappears. We both look around. Not much down here.

^Maybe something we brought with us.^ Pok goes through our packs, but either it is too large or too soft. I finally notice the sphere shards and reach for one. Using my beak I bite off small portions of an edge to shape it gradually. I will wear down my beak before I finish if I am not careful.

~Got it.~ I pause to examine my work. ~I think.~

You are not leaving without me.

Should have figured a Cat would be listening in on us. We do all the dirty work.

Pok thinks he is funny though and says, ^Sure. Just waiting for you to catch up. Come on down. As soon as you get...^ Nipper appears in the largest open space down here. That does not leave much space left.

~You got skunked!~

Ah, you noticed. Thought there was a reason to avoid that species.

^How do you propose we sneak up on your Hu smelling like that. I can barely breath.^ Pok coughs several times. I know I am absorbing the smell through my entire skin surface.

~Go take a bath first Cat.~

Tried. Doesn't do any good.

^Why did you need us if you could get down here yourself?^

He holds up a paw. *Does not fit into the hole.*

I fit the piece I had been working on into the hole and click it into place. The hole appears and seems stable.

~I don't know if it will hold. It is wet down here and it could slip. Any vibration could move it.~

Very carefully Pok lifts the packs and motions us towards the hole.

Nipper enters first. Never known a fearless Cat. They fear anything bigger than themselves or unknown. Must be safe. I motion Pok though next. If the piece slips I can place it again. He cannot.

I am alone. Do I really want to leave this world? I pass through.

When I look back I see the cave and the light we left behind. It will burn out on its own. Nothing to burn inside the cave, so it should be safe. Still it seems wrong to leave it. I reach back into the cave to retrieve it when I feel a vibration. I instinctively remove my hand as fast as I can. The hole disappears. That would have hurt.

Pok fumbles in the pack and retrieves the last glow ball and lights it. I am facing a stone wall, clearly a constructed artifice. Not well done either. I turn around to find the others looking at a metal lattice. There is a weak light further off. It flickers like a flame. So crude?

^We are trapped in a storage cell.^ I notice rough bags of rotting vegetables in one corner.

~Why lock up rotting vegetables? Not even a desperate Hu would want them.~

Nipper sniffs the ground, *The trail goes this way*. He moves up to the metal and pops to the other side. Explains how he got down to us in the cave. I wonder if he did it in one pop or several.

Pok looks at the metal lattice. ^Hinges means it is meant to be opened. And here is the latch.^ He sticks a claw into the hole from the other side and moves it around.

^I can't quite get it. Help me out.^

I come up and enter a finger into the hole on this side. Does not work well, so I squeeze though the lattice and work on it from the other side.

^Whoa, I did not realize you could do that.^ He concentrates on the lock. My being out here will not help if they can't get out also. "There. Hold that piece as still as you can.^ We manage after several attempts. The latch clicks and the portal opens. We follow the Hu and the Cat prints from Nipper through the rough stone hallway. Who has dirt floors any more? Reminds me of Hu structures, only even more poorly done. Good that the Ceph have had a positive influence on them.

I almost bump into the other two when I noticed they have stopped and are looking into a room.

~What is it?~

^I am not sure. They are protecting it behind another metal lattice. They must be doing very well to afford so much metal. And the contents must be either dangerous or important.^

Nipper sniffs the air. I don't know how he can taste the air with that

stench. It is all I taste.

That is a Hu. Barely alive sitting in its own waste.

~Did it get locked in like we did? Should we free it? I already have my finger in the lock and Pok reaches in to claw the latch open. We are getting better at this task. I go inside and remove the cover to see two eyes looking at me. It screams in the most horrible way.

~Why are you upset? I mean you now harm.~ But seeing me show this only makes it scream even more.

^Must be the smell. Hu are particularly sensitive to skunk.^

Just leave the portal open. If it wants to leave it can. We have work to do.

~You did notice that there is no special wall on this side. No hole to activate a return.~ Being at the back they do not see what I show.

^I notice only Hu and Ba prints. Not even Cat. I would expect Dia at least. They are everywhere. So, whose home world is this? We were on Hu-Eden and I know enough of my own culture to know this is not Ba-Eden.^

How can you tell being below ground in a made structure?

^The metal. Ba do not refine iron. Too much pollution, usually from burning sacred trees.^ Hu again. To make the iron stronger they mix it with carbon from partially burned wood.

I stay still as I hear voices. As they get louder I push myself into a corner and assume the texture and color of the wall. Pox climbs up to the ceiling using his claws. Hu never think to look up. Nipper starts to clean himself.

"What is that stench? Did the old man finally die?"

"It was your turn to check him last."

"He was still moving a week ago. I can't stomach the smell to check any more often than that. I will get some servants to clean out the remains. Only good he will have ever done, composting."

"Probably ruin that too." They make sounds of amusement. Explains why the Hu was down there. Must be a dangerous person and we just let him go. Why do they keep such sentients? Why not just dart them and be done with it?

They nearly walk into Nipper who responds, "meow" And starts purring! What is he doing? They hold very still and remain totally silent. Just two of them. Nipper goes up to one and starts rubbing his head against him and meows again and more purring. He looks up into their eyes, then licks his whiskers. That does it. They turn and run out as fast as they can.

After a few arn, Pok comes down and pokes me to unhide.

^Now they will come back armed and we have no way out.^

"I know a way out that they won't use. Neat trick that one does."

Startled we turn around and see a female Hu pointing at me.

~Who are you?~ She is behind a metal lattice and in rags barely covering her ugly form. Either grow fur or gain some weight. Nearly naked and bony is too much to see at once.

"Sorry, don't understand what you are communicating, assuming you are."

^He asked who you are.^

"Ah, so he is intelligent. I do not know his species. Not from here anyway. Never seen the big furry thing either. He intelligent too?"

Do not let her know I can mind speak.

~Understood.~

"What did he say?"

^The 'furball' is called a Cat. About the same level as a large dog.^ I immediately look at Nipper, but he remains ignorant looking.

"About the same as a two year old then. Where do you find the meat to feed him?" She says this nervously. Don't look too stupid Nipper or you give yourself away.

^He likes Hu meat, but that is against the rules.^ He pauses, ^Not that we care much about rules.^

"I understand. So, you want out of here. So do I. They won't take long to return." We wait. "Look, I saw you open the other cells. I know you can open mine."

I don't think we have a choice. He licks a spot on his back leg.

Pok and I work at the lock and it snaps open.

She points at me, "He understands what I say doesn't he?"

^Yes. Which way?^

~They must have Ba on this side if she understands you so easily.~

I agree. That makes two species. How many others?

~At least dogs. Though not sentient they do represent another non native species.~

"You need to translate if we are to continue. I have no reason to trust you and I am out numbered. You also are likely healthier and stronger than I am."

^We can always let kitty have a snack. Live with it. We have no reason to trust you either. Sentients are not locked up for no reason.^

"You are not from around here are you? If you were you would know anyone can be locked up at any time for any reason. Sometimes just

because of the way you look that day or because the Master is having a bad day. You two would not last a week here without help."

~What is a week?~

^What is a week?^

"You don't know what a week is? Whew! That secret passage must be to another world. A week is seven days."

^How strange. We use a unit called an eight day.^

"Close enough. This way. You will have to unlock a few more doors."

~Don't ask. Just go along. I am surprised she is not more fearful of us, but she may have no choice.~ He hands affirmation as she takes the lead.

We have to unlock and lock again three more portals. She insisted we lock all the ones we unlock, even the one to her area. She says that will confuse the caretakers. Not sure why. If someone is missing from an area it is obvious locked or not.

We finally come to a smelly grate over a waste water system. I can see why they would not suspect this way out.

~Maybe it will cover the smell on kitty.~ Nipper growls. She immediately stiffens.

^Don't worry, he is teasing the furball and furball doesn't like it.^

"Is that wise?"

^No.^

Thank you Pok. Take his advice Silas. I have no problems eating molluscs.

~Eight arms are better than four and this beak can chew through bone.~

^Let's just get through this you two. We all need each other.^

"That is very true." It is easy for me to navigate the sewer system, wet with slick surfaces are easy to grasp. Nipper and Pok are not happy by the time we reach the outside. I am glad Nipper did not pop out. That would have been hard to explain.

Outside it is not full light. I can't tell yet if it is morning or evening. The vegetation is somewhat different than Hu-Eden. Definitely not near the cave we entered. That was lots of oak trees. I have seen representations of the world. Still, could we be on Hu-Eden, but a different continent? There are many different ecologies present on any one world.

"We need to get further away. I know people who will help us."

And give her a number advantage. We did not bring weapons.

~We don't need any. Are you strong enough to move all three of us if necessary?~ The female Hu sneezes. Is she sick? That is the third time.

Only if you two are touching me but don't try it. He growls lowly.

"What was that?" She is nervous.

^Thought he saw a dog. Good to eat if you get them young enough.^

"Been a long time since I could afford dog, old and stringy, never mind a puppy. Only royalty could afford that."

Royalty? Like in old Hu history? We are going down the hill rapidly. I have to watch carefully to not become further behind the others. I would rather go slowly so I can see more of the plants and animals here. It is getting dark, so we must be near sunset. The sky is overcast so I don't know when the sun actually sets.

"We are here. Let me go in first. You three are not ah normal guests. Oh, I never told you my name Silas. It is Maggie. Pok already knows." How did she learn my name?

When she goes inside there is a lot of noise from others emitting sounds of excitement. Nearly as bad as a Ba party. Nipper goes around the back sniffing around. Our smell has nearly worn off which makes me think that Nipper only got a glancing spray from the skunk. Or maybe we have just gotten used to it.

There are seven Hu present, from young to old. I would guess they are related. Smell is similar. There are also Dia present in the next structure. I am going to investigate. He is already out of sight and it is too dark to see well. There is light coming from cracks in the doors and walls. This place would be cold even for me during a winter.

I hand Pok, ~There were no Dia in the rooms we left. Were they kept elsewhere? With the skunk I could not taste the air well. Nor were there any Dia foot prints on the dirt floor. They should have shown up easily.~

~Unless they were covered over by more recent activity. They are here. Any Cat could smell them out.~

Nipper comes back just as Maggie opens the door. He sits like he was a good Cat and never left. They can deceive nearly as well as a Hu.

Three Dia, weak and thin. Maggie is not the exception. Offer them the food contents of the packs. I can hunt for whatever we need now that we are out of the caves.

An older woman says, "We do not have much, but you are welcome. Please come in out of the cold. You have saved one of our own for which we will be eternally thank full."

When we enter however they are clearly frightened by our appearance. Two species totally new to them.

"This handsome one is Pok." Pok bows politely. She knows his name too. Was I that far behind? Good that she started with the known species

though.

They immediately bow to Pok like he is a Matriarch.

Maggie gets them up, "He is not a Master. Interesting isn't it? There are places where Ba are not Masters. But, Silas is our strange one. He is nice and never hurt me or did anything else since we met. He is called a Ceph. His kind came from the sea. He is smart though and understands what we say. He communicates by patterns on his skin."

She goes up to Nipper and gives him a big hug. I would not have attempted that without permission.

"This is their companion. His name is Nipper, but he will not nip you."

~Just how much did you tell her?~

Not now. They are watching you. Nipper tries to look as harmless as possible. Then he yawns. They back up in a hurry and are trembling now. Those fangs are impressive.

^We brought food to share.^ Pok starts to remove the packets. They come closer in spite of their fear. ^Nothing needs to be cooked to eat. We were traveling fast and did not have time to stop and set up camp.^ They seem to know Ba well enough. Probably know Dia as well. As he hands them the food they quickly figure out how to open them and start sharing the contents.

"Please, share with our guests as well. They have had nothing to eat since we left the dungeon." Interesting word. Not one I have heard before, though the context is obvious.

^No really. We are fine. We have other means to obtain food.^
Everything stops.

The old woman comes forward, "Maggie has told me that you are not from our kingdom and probably don't know our ways." She carefully undoes her thin covering and lets it drop. The others avert their eyes. She is covered with scars. I move closer. She does not move back. I carefully and gently touch her. The scars are of many ages. Some no more than a few eight days and others years old. Some probably happened when she was a child.

She continues, "Anyone not of the royal family is a servant. They are our masters. They can do anything to us they want at any time for any reason. We can do nothing about it. Even leaving would not do any good. Except for the food that we raise for them in the surrounding fields the food here is poison to us. As our food is poison to the other life forms here. Not that it does not stop the young monsters from trying. You should share this fine food with us. It may be the last you see."

Ask them where their masters live.

^I would like to ask where these bullies live. Obviously not among you.^

Maggie answers, "Above the cells where you found me. It is called Castle Tothkin. Our masters are Hu and Ba. There are no Ba servants as they are the most royal and never do any work, even work that a Hu master might do."

~What do they have over the Hu? The Hu are clearly stronger and could easily over power a group of Hu.~

Maggie comments, "Silas has asked Pok a question. That is how they talk." Almost, we show, not talk.

We need to leave. It is obvious that these sentients are not our thieves.

^Nipper thinks you are not thieves. Do you know who might be?^

Maggie turns quickly and looks at Nipper, then laughs, "You had me fooled. Very good. I would guess you are their group leader." She looks straight at Nipper who ignores her.

^Don't worry, that is their way. Thieves?^

A little one says, "They have metal. They make devices that hurt. The ones who hurt are . . ." She counts on her hands, "Six at once. There are more, but always in groups of six. Always Hu." A Ba group number. My guess is that the Ba control the metal somehow. There are only six weapons in Hu hands. Maybe one or two in reserve, by a control Hu?

~What about the Dia? Where do they fit in?~

"Interesting. A question always starts with that same shape. Can you show me my name please?"

^He wants to know about the Dia.^

"We don't know that word."

Pok thinks for a moment, ^The ones that look like giant lizards.^ Still nothing. No lizards here either. They are all over back on Hu-Eden. ^The ones with no hair or fur, but have bones. Their skin is covered in scales instead. Blue feathers on top of their heads.^

"Ah, the Despised. Their head feathers are removed at puberty. They are treated lower than us. They are nice though and we have no problems with them. They are sick a lot." Not that any of them seem healthy. A lot of sneezing and coughing. Too thin too. How can they reproduce?

"You are going to go to the masters aren't you?"

Pok emits air, ^We need to find the objects they stole from us.^

"They will kill you or make you into servants. After they torture you to be sure you understand. We get new people from time to time. I think they bring them in through the way you arrived, though I did not see this

when I was there. No one is there long." Meaning she did not expect to survive.

~Will they come looking for you?~

She stares at me the entire time, "Another question. Must be related to what I just said. I am guessing you are worried about me. You are most kind. Do not worry. I was a farm servant and they don't notice us enough to ever learn who we are. I will wear someone else's clothes until they are used to me again. As long as I work hard they won't care. I would worry more for the two guards. They are likely to be killed and fed to the dogs."

^What do the Ba wear in the Castle?^

An older male answers, "Most wear tool belts, same as you, but much nicer. They may also wear some clothing, especially during the winter. The Hu masters wear very detailed clothing that I would not know how to describe. Fortunate none of you are Hu."

We need to leave. There are lights at the Castle. I do not want to wait until morning.

^Nipper says we need to leave. We hope you find happiness.^

"My sister works at the Castle. I will go with you and introduce you to her. She can bring you in all proper like. I assume you do not want to pretend to be servants." It was not a question.

The older female comments, "Maggie, it is too dangerous. You might be recognized this soon after escaping. Let Pauli take them. He will not be missed in the morning." Pauli is a small male child. He seems excited by the chance to play a part. To him she says, "You can sleep when you come back. Be careful. The dogs are out. They won't bother you on the way there, but you will be alone on the return. Climb a tree and wait if you need to." He nods understanding.

We exit quickly. The air has cooled and there is a slight breeze. No stars, but there is enough of a glow from a full moon through the light clouds to see by. The three of us are good at seeing in low light, unfortunately Pauli is not so endowed. We end up following Nipper with Pauli hanging onto his tail. He is really a kitten at heart.

Dogs are coming. He does not mind show this to the Hu. I can easily handle a single dog if caught out in a field, but I would not attempt a pack.

^How many? I hear three maybe four distinct voices.^

"I don't hear anything." Too loud. He just told them where we are. He would not survive to naming at our settlement. Sure enough the dogs get closer.

I do not want to waste the time. Take care of the pest. He pulls free

and runs off quickly.

^Can you climb a tree?^ Pok asks our nuisance.

"Small ones. Not good at the tall ones without help." Meaning not at all.

^He is too heavy to carry. Over to that large tree then. We will shield him if necessary.^

Before we even get to the tree though we hear an enormous battle as Nipper attacks the pack. No doubt who is winning.

We go. I will clean myself on the way. I hear a rustle among the bushes and see his two eyes glowing in the low light.

"Tis way." I say with great difficulty.

"You can talk!" He exclaims with glee. I ignore him and make my way as fast as I can towards where I saw Nipper. I hear Pok emit amusement as the Hu grabs one of my arms to guide him. If he pulls it off I will eat him, code or no code.

Going uphill is harder than downhill or I am simply exhausted. We have had nothing to eat and no rest. Nipper owes us at least a good meal. I taste a few leaves as we pass. Does not taste inherently bad, but I accept the Hu wisdom for now. Many poisons can go undetected.

I hand Pok, ~We are nearly there. We will not pass for leaders.~

Do not worry. I have an idea. We need the small Hu's help to know which entrance to use.

^Pauli, please take us to the Ba entrance.^ He looks at us frightened.

Do not worry for him. The dogs will not bother anyone for some time.

^It's alright Pauli. The dogs are resting.^

He tugs me to one side. I hand Pok, ~This way.~ Not so hard you idiot!

^Slower Pok. We must arrive rested with dignity.^ Thanks Pok.

"Don't understand, but go slower."

We arrive to a heavily manicured path set with flat stones and plants along the edges. The Hu like to do this kind of thing at settlement too. Nature is never neat, why do they have to be? Their enclosures are always in a row too. Crazy. There is enough light from the openings in the castle walls to see easily now. I hear voices and other sounds inside.

"I will knock. Ba never do work themselves." Not even knock?

That means you must be our leader in this Pok. I am your pet and protector. Don't get too demanding or your pet will turn on you.

I hand him, ~I will be your companion, friend and servant. Not quite the same level as the starving slaves we have met.~

^Like the Matriarch's first helper.^

~Yes, that works. Ask me what your schedule is once in awhile and I will make something up. Ba are not good at deception, though these may have learned in the years they have been here. The stone of the castle looks very old.~

It would be wise to present them with a gift.

~I had forgotten completely about that. What do we do? It is considered to be very rude not to present your hosts with a gift at high Ceph functions.~

They have been stealing objects from our settlement. Give them my medallion. It is made of gold. It might interest them.

~It will also show we understand the game and their desires and that we approve. We will blend well.~

^You may announce our presence Servant.^ Referring to the Hu. He bows and turns to the door like he has done or seen similar actions.

He knocks, but nothing happens. He remains at attention though, not moving. Eventually the portal does open a small ways and a thin, but better covered Hu pokes his head out only to sneeze on the night air.

"Kind sir, the Master before you has had some difficulty and seeks your Master's assistance." He looks out at us and upon seeing Pok immediately stiffens up.

"Of course, please come this way."

Nipper goes first, in case there is any danger, or this is a trap. Pok next and I in the rear as the faithful helper not worthy to walk beside him. Without a sound, Pauli leaves us, presumably to make his way back to his shelter. Hopefully Nipper is right and the dogs will not cause him harm.

We are led to a large receiving room. We must still smell some as the servant does appear to have noticed in spite of the fact that I am sure they are trained not to show any emotion. At least that is how it would be serving the Matriarch. I am sure we are being observed. Time for me to act.

I look around, notice several Ba perches and pick out the best looking one. I carefully inspect it and remove imaginary dirt for a few arn. I then signal to Pok that his place of repose is ready with grand gestures and colorful flashing of my mantel. He ignores me at first as he slowly takes in the surroundings and obvious show of prosperity. He finally makes his way over. I remain motionless until he is positioned. I then proceed to groom Nipper as best I can. He sits motionless as I do this with high Cat dignity. As soon as Nipper growls I stop and disappear into the surroundings.

A Hu with fine coverings enters the room and sizes us up. Pok ignores

him. He smiles and leaves. A moment later two Hu servants arrive, holding the portal cover aside. A Ba Master slowly makes her way into the room obviously displeased at the smell, making a big show of it by holding a cloth over her mouth and sense organs.

Please excuse us fair Master. We were chased by dogs, then sprayed by some obnoxious creature. As we were being cared for, other horrible creatures stole our finery. It is most embarrassing and humiliating to be seen in such a state. I do apologize most sincerely for the offense. We were most fortunate to have gotten here when we did.

The Ba says nothing, but makes a very brief hand signal to the Hu servant who addresses us.

"You will be cared for immediately. When you are presentable we would be happy to receive you. Being out at night is just not safe any more I am afraid." The Ba leaves and the servant who addressed us waits for us to follow her. Interesting that no comment is made as to Nipper and I not being creatures who normally live here, nor Nipper's means of communication if they even knew it was him. I am guessing that they are pretending they know all about us but rapid conversation will commence once we are out of range.

"You are perfectly safe here Master. We would be horrified and deeply insulted if you were to come to any harm. Please come with me."

We stay. Servants go elsewhere. I almost followed, but it makes sense that we would not be bathed in the same facility.

A moment later someone with far less refined coverings comes in and eyes us over.

"Well aren't you two a pair. What exactly are you? Never seen the likes of you before." She does not wait for an answer but beckons us to follow. We are led down much smaller and darker passage ways than Pok is being led I am sure. We enter a small noisy room.

"You will both need baths, so who is first."

It would be best if I went first as Servant Silas cannot tolerate warm water well.

She stares at us with her mouth open. She looks from one to the other, but neither one of us gives it away. She finally decides, "Makes no difference to me. There is the tub, hop in." We pause to heighten the effect, then slowly Nipper goes over to the tub and climbs in.

"Well, aren't we the royal one. Haven't got all night you know." She holds out a brush for Nipper who looks at it like it is a stone for all that it matters.

To me he says, *This is actually surprisingly nice. I might have to stay*

awhile.

~Just let me know when it reaches room temperature, then it's my turn.~ I go ahead and remove my shoe. Others in the room stop to watch. I do not move with as much dignity without it, but I am too tired to care. Someone reaches out and grabs the shoe looking at what must be a very strange artifact to them.

"Exactly what do we do with this thing?"

"Wash it, same as them. Can't exactly replace it now can we?" He rushes off to a smaller tub and begins to scrub away at it. That water will be good for nothing else afterwards I am sure.

I am nearly asleep when Nipper finally climbs out to be greeted with rough dry towels. He is purring up a storm by the time I slip over the top and in. Tastes like Cat, but that is much better than skunk. Hint of some kind of flower as well, but I don't recognize which one.

Should I tell them you want the same treatment when you finally come out?

Frantically I gesture ~NO! They would rub my skin completely off with those things.~

How about next to the fire then? Oh, he is clearly enjoying this.

~Just explain that my normal state is to be damp. I will work it out from there.~

When I climb out and plop unceremoniously on the stone floor I see that most of the others are laying down near the fire with a surprising number next to Nipper. He must be in heaven. Certainly snoring loud enough. I instead choose a quiet dark corner and blend in. Not as nice as my depression in the dorm, but I will adapt.

It seems like only an eighth when I sense others moving about. One of the main reasons that servants and unseen are so tired is that we never get enough sleep. We are expected to continue after the Master has gone to rest and be up before them to wait on their waking. Very unfair as the Hu say. Ceph just accept that this is the way it is. Being only recently an unseen, habits quickly come back. I taste the air to determine the location of the waste area and add my own contribution.

Fresh from there I seek out food and water. Of course Nipper has found both first. He is lapping away at a bowl of something that tastes good from here. I go over to investigate and am greeted with a growl. He gets waited on and I have to find my own. Part of the problem with being Ceph in a Hu world is that so many things are well about my eye level.

Finally someone takes pity on me and inquires, "Do you eat the same food as we do?" How am I supposed to answer that?

I try, "Fish" but it comes out more as a command than a question.

"I don't know what you said, but try this and see how it goes." A bowl is placed on the floor for me. I carefully cover it as well as I can with my legs and arms. I refuse to visibly eat in front of them no matter how they themselves behave. Nipper is disgusting in the amount of noise he makes. I am going to be one small Ceph after this is over.

The servants here look better fed than the ones we met outside the castle, but only by a small amount. The Ba and the Hu masters looked well fed indeed by comparison, though not as fat as some at settlement. That means is it not exactly great for them here in spite of the advantage of others working for them. We probably do fit in on the basis of our size and weight.

^I am so helpless without them. Please send my helpers back to me at once.^ I hear Pok's voice very calmly said.

Nipper is licking his face and paws. Mine is clean now and I place it where I saw others return theirs, gathering Nipper's as well. Never met a Cat yet who cleaned up anything but themselves and maybe a kitten or two.

"Wait, you can't go out there naked." Naked? In her hands is my shoe. At least I think it is. I can't believe how clean it is. I come closer to examine it. She holds it out to me and I reach for it and place it on the floor, then turn to her and the others and give them a full Nauti bow.

You have just witnessed the highest honor his kind can give to others. He is deeply appreciative of the kindness you have bestowed on him. Of course Nipper couldn't care less, but it is well that he told them how I feel at least. The room is silent as I get into my shoe. A little tight, but use will loosen it. I turn to look at Nipper, who is being fitted with a bow on his neck. He looks like he thinks he is royalty. I show amusement.

I did not laugh at you. Show some respect.

~A bow for the great warrior?~

No dogs here. I have to play my part.

He turns to the others, *We are ready. Please show us where to go.*

"That's easy. Straight ahead. Your Master is waiting, best hurry."

A Cat hurry? I don't think so. Sure enough he slowly, with head held high, makes his way towards the door. I though up my arms. The others are becoming nervous. Once though the door, he speeds up though. Not stupid.

We arrive at the back of the room and try to be unnoticed. There I have an advantage. To most it probably looks like Nipper is alone. Once next to Pok, I take one side and Nipper the other. I fuss about for a

moment to be sure Master has everything he needs and looks presentable. Just for show. I then settle down and disappear again.

^I must say Master Pok, I just have to get me one of those. What did you call it?^

^A Ceph, Master Munch. Rare in these parts, they prefer the ocean shores. Have to keep them off the mag or they are ruined.^ Munch shows a quizzical look, but quickly hides it. Score one for Pok.

Another asks, ^So, how did you find our humble abode?^

^Beside being my protector, the Cat beside me is an expert tracker Master Lispic. It was not just my finery that was stolen last night by the wild dogs, but weeks earlier several very important artifacts were stolen from my home. Clan honor requires that they be recovered.^

^And you were chosen. How unfortunate.^ It was meant as an insult.

But Pok adds, ^For those who took the artifacts most certainly. Did you hear the dogs this morning?^

^Why no. It was wonderfully why is was quiet this morning.^

Right on cue, Nipper opens his giant mouth with a yawn and then licks his whiskers.

^Oh my.^

^Indeed. They were fine specimens. Now we will have to find some other way to keep the farm hands in their enclosures at night.^ Like being exhausted is not enough?

^Finery can be replaced. It put them off our scent long enough . . . ^

^Yes, well played then. This Master might be perfect for the Games. It has been so long since we had a real challenge.^

"So true. If only we were at the Capital instead of out here in the backwoods."

Capital? That suggests they came over some time ago.

I hand Pok, ~This might be a test. The damage to the wall was not great. It is doubtful that they have been here longer than a few generations at most. That wall was very hard. It would have taken a lot of time to make the hole and then figure out how to use it to get here.~

He hands me back, ~Not to mention setting up a system of going back and forth. I would imagine the first ones through were a bit surprised when they could not go back, nor eat anything here.~

Your reasoning is sound. This is a test. They know where we came from.

That is almost certain. Where else would a Ceph and Cat come from?

~They have learned many Hu methods of deception.~

^You must mean the one on Hu-Eden as we are in the Capital on this

world or has there been some politics last night that I was not informed of?^ Risky Pok, we don't know this is in fact their capital.

^So tell me, on this other world, who are the leaders?^

^Currently the Matriarch is Neesangi. However, you did not ask that did you? The true leaders are the Dia. Same as on all worlds they work.^

~Crabs and Sharks, where did you come up with that one?~ He does not hand me back.

^Neesangi? I remember when she was just a minor official. Wasn't it in the immigration department?^

^This game bores me. Do you have anything else to do around here? How about I choose one? Cat, who has the cookie I hid on them.^ This gets their attention. Curiosity anyway. Nipper looks up at him.

^Be sure and check everyone thoroughly. Give each a nice big lick. You may eat whom ever has it.^

Nipper does one of his exaggerated stretches he is so fond of. This time extending his claws to full.

^That won't be necessary. I believe I have the cookie. He is more than welcome to it.^ He tosses it to the center of the room well away from himself.

Nipper looks at him and then towards another.

^I believe I have one too. Imagine that.^ She tosses hers into the center.

Eventually they all toss one into the center.

^My, that was fun. We will have to play again tomorrow. We can play everyday until the artifacts are found. Now I am tired and wish to retire to my room. This time my servants will attend me. They understand my special needs.^ I unhide and get up to assist him from his perch. With Nipper in front and me behind we start to go towards the rooms.

"I am afraid there has been a change in plans. We really need you to stay here." Six well armed Hu arrive all carrying long swords. The Ba leader is showing amusement. Stupid.

I think it might be time for a new leader in this community. Silas, are you prepared? I affirm as I remove eight hidden darts from my shoe.

This time Pok has to watch the show. We all move to the center of the room and take up positions of defense. The six surround us moving slowly in a circle. They will be easy to dart.

The glass looks fragile in this room. What?

Pok lets out a scream that nearly knocks me out, but it has the effect of bursting several of the fire globes around the edges. Won't do much to the stone walls of course, but the finery, ah, now that burns well. So does

Ba fur and Cat fur if we are not careful.

Gather. We get as close as we can to him and he pops us to the grounds below. Several servants look up from their work in surprise, but upon seeing a Ba they immediately bow and look especially busy.

~Now how do we get the artifacts back?~ A hand with a sword in it is on the ground next to Pok. That was close.

Simple. He and I pop back into the center of the room leaving Pok outside. Everyone is running out of the room, even the five armed Hu. One is dead on the floor. I am guessing from blood loss, which is everywhere. Nipper sniffs the air and we pop into another room.

~Where are we?~

The treasure room. They should be in here somewhere. I will find them. You guard the portal. How would they know we are here?

A moment later I hear sentients coming closer. Someone is putting a key into the portal.

~They are here.~

Over there. Grab the sphere. It is the only thing we really need to bring back. I see an image of the sphere on a table in my mind. I orient until the image matches the table, but I don't see the sphere. I realize that I am much lower than Nipper's eyes. I do a sweep of the top and connect with the sphere and bring it down.

Don't drop it!

~How would I do that?~ I hold the sphere up, arm on top and sphere below.

Suckers! They come in the door.

"Get them!" More sword advance towards us. We pop out. Back to the ground.

~Where's Pok?~

^Up here. What took you so long?^ He is halfway up the sides of the castle looking into one of the openings. ^They are really mad.^

Suddenly he is on the ground next to us.

^What? What happened?^

Get used to it. If we can see it we can also pop it to us. We pop again. This time we are in the middle of a forest. Actually not that far away. I can see the castle between the nearest trees. There is some castle wall on the ground next to Pok. Apparently the method is not perfect and there is a limited range.

We need to move. They will be searching for us. I am going to make several jumps so they can't track us easily. Soon we are well away from the castle. Nipper looks tired. So, there is some effort involved as well. At

least when moving two others.

~You are putting yourself at risk for us.~

He looks right at me, *Exactly how was I supposed to carry the sphere?*

^You could pop it ahead of yourself as you went.^

Too risky. Come, we walk from here.

While we travel I look at the sphere and make out some of the writing. It seems to be about some medical problem. Lots of terms I don't know.

~That's strange.~

^What?^

~There is a hole in the sphere.~ I push a finger tip into it and am met with a bite! I withdraw quickly and look into the hole only to see movement. Another bite on the finger tip that I had withdrawn. I hold it up to see one of those strange ants clinging to it. Tastes of silica. Same as the ants from the cave.

~Those ants from the cave have eaten out the center of the sphere.~

Nipper stops, *Can you still read the information?*

~All except where the hole itself it. But it weighs less than it should, so a some mass is missing.~ I hadn't really noticed that before now.

Fragile. Be careful. See if you can kill the ants. He never even looks at me.

^Dust often suffocates them. Works to get rid of fleas anyway.^

I scoop up dust from the trail and try to get it into the hole. Not so easy, but I have time and continue to add more slowly as we walk. Wait, ants make tunnels in dirt. This won't bother them and suffocating a bug takes forever.

I snap my hand. It is the only way to get their attention when I am behind them, but Pok is the only one to notice and turn around.

~I need water.~

^Silas needs water.^

Soon. Be patient. Like a Cat is ever patient. I hear a growl. Of course he can read my mind. Have to be more careful. Probably used to it though. I think about how much my life has changed in less than one eight day.

^How will we be able to eat out here?^

~I want to know how we are going to get back to our settlement.~

None of that will matter if they find us. I need to rest. That will take time. If they find us soon I will not be able to help much.

^Rest is good.^ My legs and arms certainly agree. I think I will wear

out this shoe soon. I was hoping to save enough work credits to get a better one. I wonder if there will be a reward for returning the sphere. I wonder why it is so important. I start reading it again.

Each sentient has allergies and each of us reacts in different ways, but we all suffer. Hu mostly suffer from pollens, Ba from leaf litter, Dia from dusts of various soils and lastly my species. Our allergies are mostly water borne. The things that other species suffer from can all be washed off, not being of the water in the first place. Water borne materials are designed for water and know how to stick to us. The red rock fish is my own fear. The flesh itself I can eat and suffer no ill effects, but get a scale stuck in my skin and I will form a large boil around it. Itching and painful.

I remember the Hu we have met. They were all sneezing and coughing. Could they have been suffering from allergies?

I hand Pok, ~Ask Nipper why the Dia were sick.~ He affirms and asks Nipper.

I am not a healer, how would I know.

~What were the symptoms then?~ This is passed to him.

Their scales were all puffed up with sores and slime on their skin.

Could be a virus, could also be allergies.

They scratched themselves raw.

Definitely allergies. I read more. It seems this world was found by a group of Ceph scientists some two hundred years ago. They too used the cave apparently. Part of this is over the hole the ants have made. Ah, they have some kind of control device that could be locked into position to insure the portal stayed open. A secret project. No one knew what hazards might exist and our laws against polluting could not even be ignored by the most powerful Matriarch. No one has power except what we give them and everyone would turn against a Matriarch that polluted or allowed it to happen.

So, they had to be careful and the portal was kept open as little as possible. The castle was built as a way of shielding this side in a controlled manner using materials that were present. Apparently there must a quarry near by. Ceph developed severe allergies withing a few eight days and had to retreat. From then on only Ba, Hu and Dia were present. The Cats were not interested as nothing worthy of a hunt has ever been found. I am thankful for that at the moment.

The Dia patiently tried the local plants trying to find ones that might be useful. It was they who found the sticky weed. It apparently has properties that relieve the allergic reaction. But, the effect is more

effective in mammals, and best of all in the Ba. The side effects are pretty extreme. It makes the consumer lethargic and dim witted. Oh, it also makes one vomit. Explains why it never worked with the Ceph. We can't vomit easily.

A Ba figured out how to extract the necessary substance from the sticky weed that actually provides the relief. Hmm, looks pretty complicated. Have to let the sticky weed rot in the presence of a carefully applied amount of ash. The resulting juice that collects at the bottom of the specially designed ceramic container is then filtered and distilled.

Several Ceph died obtaining this information. There was some kind of political fall out and the colony on this side destroyed the control device that allowed easy access between the two worlds. After they took the sphere of knowledge that described the sticky weed that is. This last part is poorly written. Not a Ceph scholar. Wow, their description of the Matriarch is nasty. She must have been horrible to them.

~STOP!~ I snap my hands repeatedly.

^What is it?^

Nipper continues. He probably already knows what I found. He most certainly does.

~The last sentient through the portal we found was over fifty years ago.~

^Before we were born, er hatched.^

~Long before. Nipper knew exactly what he was doing. I want to know why?~

He turns and faces us with teeth bared.

You want to know why? You two were chosen because you would not be missed. Not needed. Replaceable. One step from the compost heap. This mission is not expected to succeed.

^We are on a suicide mission?^

You are. I intend to survive.

~We need to find something called sticky weed.~

^Are you trying to be humorous? I have been pulling this one plant off of me since we got here. I also saw the farmers gathering it and boiling it in pots on the fire.^

~Unless it is distilled properly it makes you sick and lethargic.~

^That certainly fits the Hu we met.^

~It does not work well on Ceph.~

^Guano, how long have you got?^

~A few more days before symptom start to appear.~

^And he is taking us away from the portal!^

It does not matter you idiots. How would we activate it from this side?

^What do you intend then?^

To get someplace that the itching stuff can't affect us.

~That would be home if memory serves me.~

No, but this might do. Before us is a large quarry. A vast open pit of bare stone. I can see where they carved blocks out to make the stones for the castle.

^They could fill us full of arrows without trying.^ It is rather open. We follow Nipper down a narrow path along the edge. It slowly spirals down. We are nearly around the entire perimeter before we reach the bottom. Hidden from where we entered there is an entrance to a cave.

^Another cave? Coincidence?^ We go inside.

~We are not the first ones here of course, but it looks like others have been here recently.~ There are containers. Crude ceramic shapes, ash from cooking fires and scraps from inedible materials. I taste water and go towards it.

It is cool, but feels great. I bring the sphere with me. Let them try and breathe under water. I watch as the dust that I put into the hole slowly descends into the water. One or two ants follow. I repeatedly turn the sphere to let more mud out and water in. Soon no more bubbles. Water won't hurt the sphere any. Would not make sense for a water species like us otherwise.

^There you are.^ He puts his hand into the water and then tastes it.

^Get out of there now Silas! Didn't you notice this water has a high mag content? I thought you were better than that. Bad enough we were deceived by a nipper. I don't need you drunk too.^ I do feel kind of relaxed. I slowly make my way to the edge.

~I need to get the sphere.~

^Forget it. No one is going to bother it down there and if Cat wants it so bad make him get it.^ He is right of course.

Once outside the pond and I drip dry splayed out like a pancake. I love pancakes, especially the one Ba variety with roaches. Very tasty. The mag is starting to affect me. I am glad that I am out of the water. That is the last that I remember. No, something about the ants. Why were the ants in the sphere? Why were they in the wall?

Brown 2794

"Garfield there are now over three hundred of them! What are we going to do?" We? Who said anything about we? As long as they can't pop out of the cage I don't care what happens to them. The way they are going at it you would think this was the first time they had ever mated.

"I have work to do. I can't be making food and cleaning up after them constantly. Who sent them here? Who are they? Why aren't the others responding?"

We are not responsible. Just leave. Let 'em sort this out themselves.

He looks at me, "I am not a Cat. I can't do that."

Stupid monkey. They are Cats. Let them be Cats. Cats don't interfere.

He smiles at me, "Unless there is something in it for them."

Of course. Your scratch? They got you as a slave. What more could they want?

"So do you. Don't want to share do you?"

I hiss, *Maybe not. They mean nothing to me.*

"I don't know. Some of the females look awfully fine."

He's right. There are a few I would not mind riding. When I look at myself though I realize that I am too old and fat to be among the chosen. I stick my tail in the air and walk away. They mean nothing to me.

He stays. Suits me. Outside there is nothing to see of course. I need some air and air is air anywhere. I am over the small hill next to camp before I run out of breath. I am hidden from sight. It is enough. The sun is warm. I pad out a soft spot in this Cat forsaken dust bowl.

"Garfield. What's going on here?"

I'm sleeping. Go away. Wait, that is not Edwin. I open one eye to see who's there. A Hu. Big fat hairy deal. I sniff the air. It's her! I open both eyes and quickly get up. I can't help myself. I am rubbing against her and purring as loud as I can.

"Ah, you are happy to see me."

The only Hu with a valid Cat name. She also brings treats. I look up giving my best poor kitty look.

"Yes, well, I suppose it always boils down to that doesn't it?" She reaches into a bag. The Bag. I am drooling like a dog. I lick my whiskers.

"Here you go oh corpulent one." She tosses me a snack. Ah, real meat. Nothing made, canned, duped. Once was a living creature with blood and oh my this is so good.

"Don't choke on it. I still want my answer when you can get a thought

in."

I swallow and look up.

"Nope. Answers first."

Whom serves whom here? I try my sad look again, but she is clearly holding out.

You can scan. There are many inside the camp. We don't know why they are here, who they are or where they came from. We have collected them from ten worlds.

"Browns?"

Or nearly so. He has been studying the edge. Says there are changes too fast to account for.

"That is not the only change. You heard about the deaths?"

We got a report. Nothing here though. Only the ones we collected and they behave like pre TKs.

"But full size. Strange coloration though."

Smell different too. But they behave like house cats. Many fights.

"I had best say hello. Are you coming with me?"

I go where the goodie bag goes. Stupid question. I get up, stretch and yawn. I was only dreaming a moment, but I still have some dignity.

"You need to loose some weight. No more snacks for you." What!? Outrageous! See if you get any more help from me! Never mind she is right. I am winded again when we reach the camp. Too much exercise in one day.

"You can't go ten meters with passing out. You need more exercise too." Oh the pain, the misery! This kitty is in hell. What could I have done to upset the Hu overlords so much? I am just a poor little kitty stuck in the middle of nowhere. No friends. All alone. I hold my head low. Poor me.

Ah, not exactly alone am I? I look up and nearly pass out from the change in blood pressure to my head.

I can't go into that pride like this however. Exercise is for fools and the non TK enhanced. Now if I can just remember what I am supposed to look like. I cheat and scan a few of the better looking males behind the door. Easy enough to remove the fat and tone up the muscles. Only my skin appears to have stretched some. It hangs in a fold against my side now, reaching all the way to the ground. Not dignified at all. All that beautiful fur going to waste. Oh well.

"Whew! What's that smell? Smells like rotten rancid fat and fur. What died?" I finish up my new form just as he notices me and stops.

"Well, well, we do have some pride after all."

She turns around to look and nods approval then turns back to him.

"You said you had a problem here? Looks like the two of you have it covered."

"Finally. I sent the message out nearly a year ago. What took so long Pushy Paws?"

"Over three hundred TKs have died at the hands of what might be the First Ones. Sussi has captured a live vector, though unlikely an actual First One."

"They don't like to do the dirty work themselves. How did you know it was them? TKs do manage to kill themselves occasionally." Referring to the froth device. Glad I was here. Or on one ten worlds anyway.

"We don't know for sure, but we had to investigate. Too many of our own gone at once has made admin more challenging. None of the tier one, two or three. All fours and younger."

"But there were tier one through threes at Paradise. How come only the newest ones?"

"We don't know that either. But since Sussi was attacked it is likely it was just because we are a little more cautious or have had enough experiences to avoid them."

"No one has come here."

"Garfield has told me. He is a tier five is he not?"

"But not at Paradise. Still it might be wise to be cautious. You are here to help me? I will pack my bags."

"Help is not the reason I am here." But he is already gone. She turns to me, "Don't even think about leaving or I will track you to hell and back."

I didn't do all of this to then waste it on some other brown dust bowl world. My admiring harem is about to bow at my feet.

"No." She is nine and I am six. Not good odds. I might as well be happy then. I make myself some duped copies of the goodies in her bag. I don't dare steal them. But as I suspend them in the air before my tongue they disappear one after another.

"I need you to get in there and figure out what is happening."

What? Alone? They out number me! Poor kitty indeed.

"I will be going with you." She starts to transform. It is one thing to tweak a little fat away, okay, a lot of fat. But still to change forms entirely. Wouldn't it have been easier to make a new form and move? That has to hurt big time. She never complains though.

You're gorgeous! A beautiful tawny red that those inside will not be able to see and appreciate.

Don't get any ideas. We are not here for fun, she hisses at me.

She pops both of us into the middle of a fight. I get bit on the flank and just miss a swipe to the head.

Hey! I pop to a clear spot, but it does not stay clear. I am immediately set upon by three others and held down while they try and roll me over. I hide my nads as best I can and use a TK shield to be sure they don't get them.

I am just about to pop out of the compound when they all start to fall asleep. Hmm, I could use a nap myself.

Not you furball. She does not have a mark on her. I have scratches all over. She proceeds to exam each and every one of them. What a mess. Fur, blood, urine, feces, and chow. Oh, the waste! They even got the good stuff.

Clean up while you are at it if you are not going to help. What me? No Cat does clean up.

Would you rather find yourself on a black world? I start popping all the garbage outside the camp. She growls. Okay, okay. I dissolve the stuff instead. Everything gets converted to water. This place could use a bath. My paws are cold and wet before she finishes her examination. Monkeys, even in a Cat suit are still monkeys.

She comes over to me transforming at the same time. I am in awe! It is one thing to transform while sitting or laying down, but to do so while moving is extremely rare. She rises up on her hind legs. Her front legs get shorter while her hind legs get longer. The paws turn to hands and feet. Her face retreats into her head and the fur on her head lengthens and turns gray. Before me stands the old woman who first arrived. I have no idea why she maintains the old looking form. Monkeys are strange that way. I am impressed all the same.

She is without the usual monkey coverings and her body looks old, but in good condition. Even her stomach is flat. Sigh, mine will be large again in a few months at best. That's why I don't usually bother to trim even with TK. Besides, it is warmer. Right.

"We need to move them." Coverings begin to form as she moves towards the door. Is this what they teach at TK school now? I am so far behind being no where.

"You will need to take care of them while I do a search. I don't want to break them up or lose them among others. I have a theory I need time to work out."

What? Do you know why they are here?

"I don't know why they are here, but I may know who they were."

Were? Wait, three hundred dead and three hundred cats show up in our worlds. I can't believe it.

How would they know to choose our ten worlds? There must be thousands of brown worlds.

"Millions actually. Many, many millions. But look at them." She waves her hands over the crowd of sleepers. "The greenish one with the blue feathers on her head, she looks like Bernice. The one next to her must be her partner, Jake. And those two, the beige one and the dark brown one, that has to be Ozi and Pu." Even as a six I can't comprehend that large of a number and I have no idea who she is talking about.

Wait, what do you mean I am to take care of them.

She is gone. Fleas! I turn back to them as some are starting to wake up. Maybe I could just keep them asleep till one of them returns. Stupid monkeys! Poor kitty!

Luna City

"Spider, we have incoming from E1. Bubble ship coming in at high speed. ETA five minutes." Guardian. I wonder who. No one made an appointment.

Ravi, we have incoming Guardian in five.

Roger that. I will finish up here and meet you in reception. I scan him. He is working on the new personal quarters. Foamed 'thn shield material makes excellent radiation shielding as well as super strength. Up here we don't have to hide our abilities at least.

The new reception area is almost finished. Inlaid polished moonstone on the walls and floors. The design represents the sentient species and their home worlds. Subtle, but beautiful. Ravi and I are not artists ourselves, but given the design we can do almost anything they can dream up.

Several sentients pass me. We have reps from all of them here. Some are temps, some perms. Most of the Hu are perms. At least I am not the only tall thin one any more. There are several that are taller even. The Dia would almost be normal sized if on Earth. Here they are still the shrimps.

Still have the name of Spider. Everyone just got used to calling me that. Of course generations have passed. We had the hardest time when we refused to extend individual lives. Most live to be near two hundred as it is. Less gravity, good diet and excellent health care. Osteoporosis is our biggest concern. All sentients are affected. Stress training is mandatory. But how could we let them die, friends all, when we could save them.

We gave them a choice. Stay here and live out a normal life or be Earth adapted and live out a normal life without Guardians to remind them of the difference. Of course a typical life span down there is nearer fifty than two hundred. Most elected to stay. The ones who left are long ago buried. It hurt to do this, but up here we need everyone to be creative and at peak. Guardians tend to take the long view. Norms can be faster to recognize changes and they come up with answers from a different perspective.

The First Ones scare the shit out of me. First they try to sacrifice a million Guardians, hundreds of our own, and now they have killed many of those same Guardians. Roo reported in that the Center has been evacuated. We were clearly not the only ones affected. One nasty species.

"Sorry I'm late. The shield material can be tricky." I know.

"Not late, they will be here in three, two, one." I extend out my hands

just as Pushy Paws DSs the last distance to embrace me. Even I am surprised. I grab air instead of her.

"Pushy Paws?" Ravi cuts in and gives her a hug too. At least he matches her size. She only comes up to my navel. Short even for an Earth bound.

"How are you two?" Always polite.

Ravi answers before I can open my mouth, "We are fine. How do you like the new reception area? A lot of sens worked on the design."

"Sort of a United Sentients sort of thing." I add.

"Impressive." She reaches down and feels the design with her eyes closed. I always loved her for just this kind of thing. Even as a Guardian she continues to surprise me. She is actually tracing a design with her finger tips.

She rises, "Whose idea was it to embed each sentient's history in their own language in microscript?"

Ravi laughs and points at me.

"I figured something might happen to us. I wanted there to be a record. Maybe some other sentient species would eventually find this site."

"And how would they know how to read it?"

Ravi, "That's where I came in. The wall is a dictionary and Rosetta stone. The same words in all of the languages. Where there is an equivalent anyway. Of course if we are all destroyed . . ."

"Don't forget E0. It is possible that eventually the library would be visited by someone curious who would then make the trip and find this."

"Aren't they locked out of our worlds?"

"Not forever, just until when they left the future."

"In other words twenty five mil from now." She nods.

"The shield material should last that long. Especially if this place goes vac." I shudder. Even though I can live out there now I still respect it. Yeah, I have had a few close calls. Even a Guardian can die. I have to remember that.

She does not look happy to be here. I ask, "Why the surprise visit?"

"I am researching an idea. I need two things. I need to see psiotic recs for the last few years and I need a green world, unpopulated, to place some sentients on for a time."

"A safe one I assume. We have been holding a few in reserve for overpop or problem cases. Needs council approval to use."

"How about a less safe one?"

"Depends on how less safe. Can these sens take care of themselves?"

"They are natural hunters, but solitary, not packs."

"Well if you don't mind that a few won't come back, then I think we can find you something."

"How about the first request?"

"We will have to go the Array. We have been so busy with the deaths, Guardians passing through and then this new complex. Our pop has been growing as we ramp up for dispersal. I am afraid the Array has been on automatic for a time."

"No one thought of accessing the logs in relation to the deaths?"

"No one asked. I am not sure how it fits either." I wish we had been allowed to install the data lines to the array, but fear of the First Ones has prevented that. Did not want to take a chance they would intercept and change findings. Of course, they could do that at the array itself, but we think we have it covered there. Quantum encrypted, impossible to duplicate or transmit without destroying the data and we would notice that. We hope.

We make our way to the airlock. We all gather enough mass from the surface to make bubbles and then PS though the outer lock doors. Sens get upset when we just pop out of a room. Here we are hidden from view. Little courtesies.

Where is the Array currently?

No idea. It randomly DSs though the known green worlds and a few selected browns and blacks.

How do we get there then?

Ravi adds, *The change was made when the First Ones started attacking us. We have a caller that will bring the Array to us.*

It is still a few more arns before we reach the Array coordinates. Ravi does the deed and the Array appears before us.

You have also enhanced it. Bigger than I remember.

Ravi is proud of the changes, *We added some new ultra sensitive psiotic detectors figuring that maybe there were able to exert some control even under the Rooi Spheres.*

I add, Besides, they have a unique signature that this can pick up, even if they are resident for less than a second.

We enter the Array housing, a pod at the extreme end of a long arm. 'thn shielded. The only way in is by a level eight or above. Of course there are FO limiters in place inside. One of the reasons it has to be so far away from the Array itself. About the same size as a small office. Normally we don't spend much time here and when we do, it is usually just one or two of us. Three, even with Pushy Paws small size, is a bit

cramped.

"Good thing we can make our own oxygen. This will take some time Pushy Paws."

"I think we should ask what she wants to see first Ravi." He looks up at me with his mouth open, then blushes.

"Of course. How silly of me." He brings up an Earth map. We are at E1 and the continents on the screen match what I can see out the portal.

"Since the Array is here, aren't we missing data from the other worlds?"

"We are currently scanning over a seven thousand worlds. The Array is here only one seven thousandths of an arn. What you see is the support structure, not the sensors themselves. Actually another security feature. If you approach the office in any straight line you end up mince meat. Not pretty in the tests."

I change the subject, "So how are the UNA doing on Ceph Prime?"

"Very well thank you. The interesting thing is that they are starting to develop tech. Nearly a thousand years after starting over. Who knows what would have happened had Europe been slower at developing tech themselves."

"Weren't they contaminated by knowing what was possible if not actually handing down some tech ideas?"

"They were washed for several generations. Amazing what you can forget while trying to survive in the wild and your only teacher tells you the ways of the Great Father, Spider Woman and others and nothing about the white devil."

"Fifth Age. Tech was evil and against the wishes of the spirits. It was what caused the downfall of the fourth age."

"Yes. The most fascinating thing is that the lessons have been learned and the tech is not the same as European tech. It is not guns, cannons, and other methods of violence. It is far seers, medicine, psychology of a sorts and many others, some we have not seen before."

"You mean they have stopped killing each other?"

She laughs, "By no means, just much more civilized about it. It is all about honor and honor does not allow tech."

"But brutality is still allowed."

She smiles, "The ability to suffer much pain without complaint is a very high honor."

"Yeah, full honors at your funeral."

"I did not say they had reached perfection, just different."

"Okay, I am ready. On the 3D is the current state of E1. What would

you like to see?"

"I would like to see the Array readings at the time and place of each of the Guardian deaths."

Both our mouths open and we chant together, "Why didn't I think of that?" She shakes her head.

"I am calling up the recs on the monitor. Might as well start with E1, since we are already on it. Okay, I have the dates, times and locations. Turn your attention back to the 3D. If we go backwards in time from now till the time of Ozi and Pu's deaths." It's impressive to me every time. All of the psiotic changes lighting up. "That's strange."

"What?" I look closely but see nothing, "We just started. Nothing has changed yet."

"We have gone an eight day backwards actually. It shows that the Rooi Spheres are compromised. Very subtle, not enough to set off any alarms, but definitely off spec. Let me see when it happened exactly."

"Isn't that getting us off track?" This is not my favorite place to be. My mind keeps going back to the reception room and what we have yet to do.

Pushy Paws holds my arm, "Let him look. I have time." Great. The display zooms in to a coastal area. Isn't that where the lab was?

"Whoa! Did you see that? Seven days ago. In the hills above the lab. The Rooi Sphere buried in the hill spiked off the charts." He taps away at the keyboard some more. "This sphere appears to be the most off spec. Several adjacent ones are affected also, but this is the worst one. Ah, the spike is actually two spikes. One short one, only a few seconds and the second one nearly a minute. Ah, sorry. I still think in the old time scale. Fractions of an arm. We almost missed it because it was so short and in an unexpected location. No settlements there."

"Any indication what caused it?"

"No, someone will have to go down and make an investigation in person. Definitely not Guardian in its signature. No life form I know of. Appears to be the sphere itself, or very close by. Resolution through that much rock is not so good."

"That would mean calling someone back who understands the spheres. Not me, that's for sure." She smiles when she says this.

"We both sort of understand it, but Mandhi or Rooi would be better."

"What about Simone? Isn't she still around?"

"I think she went to check on the Mars colonies, but I'm not sure. We were concentrating on the new construction."

"We can check when we get back to reception."

"I will go back to reception. You two keep downloading the data. I will meet you here with or without her. We will save time that way." She pops out.

"I hope she did not get hit by the Array. But being a nine she probably went way past it to be sure."

"Or DSd to a brown or black froth." That might work, if it was not one on the list. I worry too much.

"I am going to find when the sphere was compromised."

We go back in time noting when the spikes happen. The first were about a hundred and twenty years ago. Coming forward in time there was a rapid rush of incidences then at about ninety three years they stopped abruptly. They did not pick up again until a few months ago. The occurred at four day intervals and stopped seven days ago. The last one being a week ago, two days after the previous. Out of sync.

"I think there was a consciousness behind these spikes. I don't think they were a malfunction."

I think about it, "I agree, but I think it was not all one person. Too long a time period. An initial burst of activity, nothing and then a brief period of regular activity. Very regular, almost down to the arn, until the last one."

"Yeah, that suggests three sets of sentients. So, what were they doing down there. Sens say there is a cave system that reaches the sphere. Explains how they got there, but how do you affect an enfolded 'thn shielded device? No tech I know of short of Rooi tech can touch it."

"We had better look at the Guardians deaths before she gets back."

"Okay, give us Ozi plus or minus five arn, no wait, I remember the report. Make it plus or minus twenty. They did not both die at once."

We run the loop. They died nearly at the same time. Less than two arn apart. But that was not the strange part.

"There is a spike just before each dies. Can't explain that. Looks like it might be their signature. Certainly associated with each of them, but it is not an exact match to the database on them."

"Hey, they were in horrible pain according to the witnesses. That can make anyone behave differently."

"Go back an eighth. This was a setup. Find out of if there was anything that triggered it. Why then and there? Certainly there must have been other opportunities. Pu even worked with the Dio that was the vector."

"Pu was undercover. They may not have come into physical contact until then."

"He hid next to the Matriarch herself. The Dio was part of her personal guard. If Pu was undercover then he would have been searched by the Dio at some point."

"They must have known. No way a personal guard would let a Cat hide behind the throne."

"True. Hadn't thought of that. Well I don't see anything. Might have been a visual clue, like what Rooi did to Silver."

"Or something we can't pick up. Being inside we only pick up psiotic and IR."

"And microwave or radio, nothing though. Nothing expected of course, tech is too low yet. IR barely shows the Ceph. Makes sense, nearly coldblooded. Pu is brightest there. Look at that."

We watch a loop over and over.

"Superimpose on the psiotics." We do and they match. There is a sharp instantaneous IR glow around each of them just as the psiotic spike happens.

"I didn't know we did that at death."

"Neither did I. Probably too short for us to notice. When was the last time you witnessed a Guardian die in person?" Never and you know it.

"Whose is next?"

"Bernice and Jake on Mu-Eden, then Afred and Natci on Dia-Eden."

We run the loops and see the same effect.

"Bernice and Jake were not inside, but still hidden in thick trees. However Afred and Natci were in the open. Zoom in on the vector."

"Yeah, right there. Good call. The appendage that touched Afred sparked. Then when Afred touched Natci the same thing happened. A few arn latter poof."

"Go to Sussi on Ba-Eden."

"Who was with her?"

"Hernkic the log says. A level four?"

"Don't bother looking it up now."

"They were out in the open too. The female Dia, name of Lessa, is about to touch her. There is the spark, but no contact. Look the Dia is dying. Classic psiotic signature. Did they not know that Ceph don't like physical contact with strangers?"

"Maybe the spark was premature. Ceph body temperature might have thrown it off."

We do several more Guardian deaths before Pushy Paws returns alone.

"Simone is coming. Not enough room in here for everyone." Certainly

not a full grown Di.

"We found some interesting details."

"Simone has to get back ASAP. We do the sphere first. If it is compromised we need to fix it before the First Ones find a way in."

I nod. We pop out to our bubbles and then move them out of the Array's reach to wait.

Where is she?

Patience. It takes a bit of time for someone to come from Mars.

Dust, she is coming all the way. I was hoping she was still Lunar. I concur with Ravi.

We see a psiotic flash a few clicks out. Then she is next to us.

Two hops. She announces.

Three, if you count the last little one. Ravi notes.

I was. Could have done it in one, but might have scared all of you to death. Been too much of that. So, what have you got?

I remember to close my mouth. I keep forgetting she really does understand the 169 dim math. Scary.

Bad psiotic repeller sphere we think. Will take a physical presence. Might have been exposed to local life forms.

Shouldn't matter. What could touch an enfolded 'thn shield?

That's what we thought. Something has though. We have records of failures.

Could be sensors are acting up.

Maybe, but unlikely, as this one sphere is the only one showing up consistently. Others nearby are only suffering, but likely only from compensation effects. She nods her understanding.

So, which one?

E1, Sub 0519

Ah, the one closest to the Originator's Lab.

Not much left I expect.

She pays no attention and I find myself suddenly crushed on the ground. These super Guardians are disconcerting even to me. I compensate for the gravity and heal a few sore muscles and bones.

Ravi is doing the same, "Hey, warn a guy next time. That hurt."

Bright sun is no picnic either. Next we are in a dark cave. Eyes have to dark adapt, so I depend on psiotics.

"Hover, I don't want the ground disturbed." She lets go of us as we each take care of ourselves. Simone makes a light.

"Best to use all senses." Her accent is perfect. Helps to be raised by a Hu community.

I look around. Typical earth limestone cave complete with stalactites and stalagmites. They would be pretty if most were not smashed by someone.

The sphere is before us. I am surprised so much of it is visible, but I guess they couldn't place it where they wanted. The specs are tight on that. Simone is already squatted down next to the line where it meets the local rock.

"Interesting. These don't belong here." She TKs a large ant like creature up. Not that I would know. I scan it without thinking.

"This is not earth normal is it?"

Pushy Paws, "Paradise fauna." Simone nods.

"No psiotic activity. Immature First Ones?"

"Wrong species. But we know that the entire ecology was supporting their position on Paradise."

"The important thing is they have compromised the sphere somehow. They should not have been able to, but the proof is before us. I suppose we should not be surprised. We are dealing with a very old species. They are bound to have seen something like this before." I look between her legs to see the small hole in the sphere with more of the ant things going in and out.

"What are they trying to accomplish? The sphere is clearly still working and the pulses we have recorded are not long enough to do much. The longest is only nine point five arn."

"Ravi, she needs to know it is more than that. There was a large number of events at first, then nothing for years, with activity again recently. Last one was nine days ago."

"Seven," he corrects. "The point is that we believe they were using the sphere for some purpose. If it was just attacking it, then they should be done by now."

"They don't want the sphere off line permanently. We would notice that immediately. So, they are using it for something else. What?"

We all look to Simone.

"Well, the spheres are enfolded in 169 space. I got here in two jumps by making use of the same phenomenon. The most likely use would be to jump somewhere. If you look at the dust you can see partial Ba foot prints. Looks like they know how to tweak the sphere into a portal. The possibilities of where are infinite though. We would need to catch them doing it to know where exactly."

I am poking at the hole and teasing the ants. They just work around me as if I am a rock that accidentally fell into their path.

"Ow!" I suddenly jump back, "One just bit me."

"Can we repair the damage?"

"Not that bad of a bite." I suck my finger.

"No, can we repair the sphere?" I knew that.

Simone looks thoughtful, "I am not sure we want to. If we repair it, they know we know and we learn nothing more. We do need a stationary sat above this location to keep a more careful watch. I want to know the exact configuration used when they jump."

Ravi comments, "We would need equipment in this chamber to do that."

I comment, "Hide the sensors in the rock and microsquirt to the sat, then to the Array. They hate tech. That means they probably can sense it, even here."

"And there is no background tech to hide in."

Pushy adds, "They are still limited by the sphere while here, so as long as we disturb nothing what you propose should work." She is looking at the other walls and then the floor. She then adds, "A Cat, a Ceph and the Ba I already mentioned were the last ones through. I will ask about locally to see if anyone has gone missing."

"Ravi and I will set up the sensors and route it to the Array for analysis."

Simone nods and pops out.

"Busy, busy. Glad I am not an expert on this stuff." Pushy Paws smiles but makes no comment.

"Now tell me about the others."

As we work on the sensors, we fill Pushy Paws in on what we have learned.

"Interesting."

I turn around to ask her why but she is gone.

Ravi gets my attention. He is holding an omni.

"Where did you get that?"

"Always have it with me. Never know. The sensors are responding fine. We need to set up the sat next."

We DS to the surface. Near sunset now. No one about at least. We grab air to bubble and DS to where there is a nearby sat to dupe.

We don't need very much. Just repeating the signal. He strips out most of the dupe.

To the Array!

We speed off having fun playing Star Wars. This time I am Darth Vader.

Back in the Array cabin we sync in the sat.

"We need to set up an alarm that sends this straight to Luna if we get any action."

"All that is left to do is wait. Back to the reception area?"

"Might as well. Wish I could sleep. Going non stop is no fun."

"We are almost done. Not much left but the polish." I smile.

"Right. I bet they have something new waiting for us."

"Want to go to Mars and see what Simone and the others are doing?"

At least 2x Luna is not as bad as 6x on Earth."

"True. I'll think about it. Best not to be gone too long. I don't like leaving the norms alone without a backup, especially if the First Ones are watching us and waiting for an opportunity."

"Party pooper. We could always go back to Enterprise." I smile. I know how we both feel about that sorry experience.

"No way. She is nuts. I don't know how they can be so prejudice."

"We are not surrounded by so many alien life forms. A few ambassadors is all we get. It might be different surrounded all the time by people who's actions don't always make sense."

"Mars has more than we do."

"And we are not on Mars, I get it."

"I hope all those mods we created on Enterprise will work here."

"At least we got something from the experience."

@ Sea

Two years, seven eight by eights, plus five. We sail through the southern seas. The seas of ice and cold. Five years into the reign of our Matriarch. An expedition of inquiry. She wants to know our world. What lives here, what areas might be good for new settlements. Nothing in a hurry mind you. This old Hu will be long gone before this ship reaches home even much less sees a new settlement. The Ceph move very slowly.

I am the first mate, naturalist and healer. There are only eight and two of us, so everyone pulls many duties. We were three more, but, well, voyages do have their price.

^Ice off the port bow!^ The Ba make good observers. Fearless of heights and good sight in day and night. Makes for a great scrimshaw artist as well.

~Steady as she goes Healer.~

Sigh, "Aye, aye Captain." I think she likes being in command. I am sick of tech, I want to do something as non tech as possible. You need some fun I say. I really got myself into it this time. Never have a Ceph master. The power goes right to their mantle.

I have to admit I have been having a good time. I think I needed this as much as she did. Who would have thought I would live to be over a millennium and be sick of it. Bored. How did the first gen do it? Some say they didn't, that they are all mad. Maybe. They seem very Hu to me. Same limitations, same delusions.

Being at sea gives you time to think. There is quite a bit of time between stopovers. When we do stop, when the Captain determines we need to investigate, there is no time to think. Most of the crew goes out to provision us. Three, myself, the Captain and our chronicler, an old Dia with a tight clean hand do as much as we can to find and record what plant and animal life we can find within a day's walk of the shore.

We are on Di2, Di1 being off limits to us because of the time paradox. Ron declares that our Di is very similar to what his looked like when he first arrived, so divergence is not that great yet. Very little but insects actually flies, though it appears that gliding is common and evolved several times. With so many trees, large ferns and other plants, it has not handicapped them. They may not be able to fly, but they sure can climb fast. Beaks have happened, strong enough to crush bones, but most is claw and tooth.

The insects are insatiable. Normally confronted with scales evolved to

thwart them, my own soft pick skin is a special treat. Mandhi, they have a harder time with. Soft skin, but the copper in her blood is poisonous to them and she does not smell good either. Still, enough try as to drive her crazy as well. The more dino among us shrug it off as background noise. The Ba seems to be immune, they not having any idea what to do about the fur and the glide flaps, normally hidden, with very little blood in them anyway.

There are so many lizards and small dinos that finding food is never a problem. The hardest part is convincing our cook to part with a specimen we have not seen ourselves. I think I have finally convinced the hunters to stick to species they see lots of.

We avoid all amphibians. Enough are poisonous as to dissuade us from taking a chance. I thought the giant buffo frog was large, but here it would be a tasty snack. There are pancake toads nearly a meter wide. The bright red fire salamanders everyone avoids. We handle those with gloves carefully. They can squirt their poison two meters with deadly accuracy. We lost our first Hu cabin boy to one who thought it was a prize. There were burns over the top half of his body with an expression that even the Di among us will never forget.

The plants, ah the flowers. Not much in the way of colors, but the smells! We have sweet tiny intoxicating wonders and really awful smelling stink pots that attract large volumes of flies and carrion eaters. To their death, to be sure. They pollinate and fertilize at the same time.

But now we are in the land of cold. Here fish and the giant slow moving vacuum cleaners of the sea, the giant sea monster like turtles, rule. We are all wondering why the largest creature we have seen has a hard shell, a shell large enough to make a home from. The only reason for a shell is because something even larger must feed on it. Or did. That would be large enough to do serious damage to our ship. The crew sighed relief when the Captain turned us hard of starboard and pointed us North again.

Mandhi and I both know what could eat the sea turtle and have taken turns turning them aside. We will leave their study to a later crew. It was scary enough seeing a beak from one lodged in a rock reef where it must have gotten stuck by accident. What was it chasing to risk that much? We did not go ashore at that location, but marked in on the map we were building. Mandhi and I know it as a giant squid. I suspect that what it was after was a very large land crab.

We are at the time of perpetual light, the summer in this cold part of the world. The sun makes only a token dip towards the horizon each day.

Not even close, at the same time it is frightfully cold. Mandhi has to wear a coat which only makes her look like Jaba the Hut from Starwars. Of course no would know what I talking about, but the image remains in my mind and I smile every time I see her bundled up. She has to sign of course, her mantle being carefully hidden from the wind, she uses mostly hand/arm signs.

~Ring the bell and wake up the lazy sleeping ship borers.~

"Aye, aye Captain!" I ring two bells repeatedly. Finally Cook appears with a warm bowl of lizard soup for the Captain and a steaming mug of lizard stew for me.

"Much obliged Cook Gee, much obliged."

!Any problems?!

"Nothing but the cold." He acknowledges.

!We will get you two below soon enough. The crew is appreciative of your sacrifice. Getting us through the ice is a true wonder.! Not really, but we don't tell him that. We maintain the illusion of honor.

Could we have saved the lives of the two that were lost? Possibly, if we had sacrificed our own duties to keep constant watch, but then there would be no honor to tell of when we return. Considering our course, a voyage without any problems would be an admission of cowardice. As you might guess, stories get larger on the telling. The logs however are kept as accurate as possible. Our Matriarch insists and Mandhi and I agree. To be of any use to the future they must be as accurate as the sentiments of this time can make them. Not that some of the descriptions of creatures are more guess than knowledge.

So for someone to ask for the log is tantamount to declaring someone a liar and guaranteed to start a fight. Now only the Guard of the Matriarch touch the logs upon return and everyone knows this. Saved the lives of many a sailor.

A Ba emerges from the hold and slowly climbs the ropes to the watchers perch. Once he makes himself secure the Boson blows the whistle and I ring the bell three times. Our shift is over. Pulling a double shift is normal for us. We claim to not need much sleep, but we are careful never to do a full day shift unless the ship is in danger and everyone is awake and doing the best they can.

Below it is warmer at least. When we get close others move aside so we can claim a place near the cook fire. Others slowly disperse to go about their duties. Cook goes to making the days rations for everyone else. He will move about distributing food to each according to his own method. Everyone will have enough to sustain themselves. No one will

get more than their share unless they need it for some reason, such as an illness. We are all thinner than our landed counterparts, but none on board would trade places for all the food the world holds. All are volunteers. Chosen because they have the wanderers sickness, the need to see what is beyond the next wave.

Unlike Hu ships, this ship has no Captain's cabin. We all share the same space. No secrets. Mandhi unrolls a map and calls me over.

~I want to plot our next eight day's course.~

!#The plant life here is interesting. The lichens are much more colorful than the dull gray green ones from home. The berries are red because they are toxic and not because they are ripe. What seed would not want to be planted with a large load of fertilizer?#!

^I am just happy that there are no raps this far south.^

"Here, here!" I add. Sneaky bastards. I have the scars to prove it.

~Remember that time you and I went ashore at that tropical port. Those raps were small, but they could run.~

"Rub it in." I rub my behind to much amusement.

!#Does it hurt less than losing part of your tail?#!

"I doubt it. How about we look for islands instead of hugging the coast this time?"

~And you know exactly where one is?~ Yes I do, but I could not explain how I found it to anyone but Mandhi. Too bad. The Falkland islands should not have any raps on this world.

~They would probably have poisonous snakes.~

Several look at her.

One finally asks, !#What's a snake?#!

Shit Mandhi, there are no snakes here. At least none we have seen yet. I scan a small holdout nearly half a world away, but we passed without stopping there.

"A mythical beast. As long as a man, but no legs. Eats small animals by going into their burrows or hanging from trees and snagging them as they pass. A single bite paralyzes it's victim."

^After a great deal of pain of course.^

"Of course. No law that says you have to be kind to your dinner."

They turn and look at Cook, but says nothing.

Without turning around he adds, !Have to start the cooking em while they are still alive or it comes out horrible tasting.! Di cuisine. I shudder. But I eat it.

Our latest cabin boy comes down and hands to the Captain.

~All hands on deck. Now!~

We scramble to find the rest of the crew already at the rail. I look up to the view mast. Our Ba lookout is still there but also looking in the same direction. I finally turn and see it.

!An Omen of misfortune.! He touches his top feathers and then licks his fingers. Sailors are a superstitious lot.

~Strange it is so close to the sun now, yet no one noticed it before.~

"Not your normal comet for sure. No tail, so it is coming or going and not currently near the sun."

The Ba comes down, ^Why do you say that?^

"A comet's tail goes away from the sun. Solar radiation pushes it away."

Real smart Healer.

"Ah the light that comes from the sun repels the tail of the comet."

!Why?!

Yes, do tell us.

"It's a mystical thing."

^Does anyone else think it is getting bigger?^

Bigger? I try to scan it, but still out of range.

!#Probably just our imagination.#!

I hope so. With that trajectory, if it is getting bigger then we are in it's path.

Hook up with me. I want to reach out as far as I can.

I link minds with her. She then goes into an enfolded sense mode I don't understand. I know minds but not those multidimensional things. It all just looks like pretty colors to me.

It's coming this way alright.

How long?

Not long.

~We are going to make a run for it. I want full sails, everything we've got.~ No one asks they just react.

It is nearly an eighth before I can sense it on my own.

"It's coming in very fast! Everyone get down now and cover your eyes!" We both put up as much of a shield as we can, but we can't block the flash.

It hits on the Antarctic ice shelf. The flash hits us moments later as kinetic energy turns to heat and light. One sail catches fire, but is quickly put out by an agile Ba scrambling up and beating it with rags. I look to the south and see a huge plume of ice and vapor being thrown up into the air and beyond.

~The shock wave will be here in less than an eighth of an eighth.~

I am holding the cabin boy tightly.

"We all need to get everyone below and reef the sails. When the blast hits it will shred them otherwise."

~Turn us north Boson Mik.~ She signs. Headed north she then signals for the sails to come down and be lashed tight.

"Everyone below." I yell.

^What about you two? We can't afford to lose either of you.^

"I'll be watching and come down at the last moment or hide behind the main mast. You don't really think anything could hurt her do you?" I indicate the Captain.

^Reckon not,^ he says with a smile.

"Get below, it will be here in a few arn."

^Someday I gotta learn how you two do that.^ He scrambles all the same.

~I want to use the blast to push us to shore north of here. The next thing that will hit is the tidal wave like this world has never seen.~ She forms her shield to act as a giant sail to use the blast energy.

"I'll watch the water interface." She acknowledges. "All that ice suddenly melted and vaporized is going to mean a lot of clouds and rain too. Nearly all the ice in the Antarctic is gone. A hundred meters maybe of sea level rise?"

~Less, this world is already warmer than E1. I am alerting the coastal settlements to get to high ground as fast as they can.~

"I want to know how come no one saw this coming and diverted it."

~We didn't stop it on Ku-Eden. No one here has the necessary tech to deal with it on their own. Not even close. We are not gods to be deciding the fate of a world.~

"We have not been doing so well I agree. Does this logic apply to all the worlds? None are high tech enough to do it on their own right now. We are not much more than observers now. Still, they would have told us something. I can't believe they didn't know. Didn't they get a few off of Ku before one hit?"

~Barbara did. Very different trajectory. Could see that one coming for decades before. She got enough off to keep the gene flow healthy, barely. There will be survivors here as well. Not going to be pleasant for a few years though.~

"She does like to experiment. Wonder what she is planning this time? I never would have guessed whales could become the masters of the known universe."

~Will happen, hasn't happened yet.~

"Here it comes. Unless you want to explain another miracle we need to get below."

We close the hatch just as it hits. The loudest sound I have every heard in my life. It passes quickly, but none of us can hear a thing afterwards.

Coming out I see we have lost everything not tied down. A few lines are loose.

~Good thing we all learned Ceph signing. We would be deaf without it.~

I sign back, ~Unable to communicate. We are deaf it would appear.~
Some tease him for his remark and show amusement at mine.

~Now what Captain?~

~Tidal wave in a few eighths. The winds will change direction then. I want to make as many leagues as we can before then. Heading north-northwest Bosen if you please.~

~Aye, aye Captain!~ He goes about giving orders for the sails to be unfurled. The wind is still going at a good clip and we are bowed over nearly to the railing in a high swell. Everyone is hanging on for dear life. I did not let the cabin boy topside. He can help Cook. Everyone is going to be very hungry before we make landfall.

~Healer, I intend to use the tidal wave to surf as far north as possible. We should end up eventually beached well up from some shore line. This is the last voyage this ship and crew will make. Once beached, we need to gather as much food as possible and then ration what we have.~

~Not going to be pretty.~

~No. It will be tempting to cheat more than we have already. Try and resist.~

~Not going to be easy.~

~No.~

~Unless we get permission.~

~Not likely. Who knew this was going to happen? Everyone else is tending to their own projects.~

~Likely. That wave is coming awfully fast.~

~That's why we are still out at sea. The shore will be hit hard. Very hard. Here it will be like suddenly rising.~

~That will scare the freep out of everyone below.~

~Captain! Bow yardarm is busted. Split.~

~Get everything else up first, then work to repair or replace. Try tying it first. Get the Yeti to help.~ Good choice. He is the strongest physically.

~I'm going to make rounds. These soft mantles won't come to me. I

have to go to them. Some got bashed around good and it is likely to get worse.~

~Get that suicide attempt about to happen off the watch perch.~ She points skyward. Our fearless Ba is up there looking about.

"Hey, Issis! Get down." Then I remember no one can hear anything, except us. The psiotics have already healed us. I sigh and make my way up the rigging. Two thirds of the way up he finally notices me. I wave him down. He resists. I wave repeatedly in a threatening way. He finally starts to make his way down.

~Something weird out there. The horizon south of us is a dark line.~

~The tidal wave. Prepare to stow the sails on my command. The tidal wave will likely wash over us and the sails would take us under.~

He looks at me questioningly then acknowledges, ~Aye, aye Healer.~ Still an eighth away by my estimate. They nearly worship us. We do cheat too much, but I can't handle letting people die if I can prevent it. Given we are actually making this voyage. People die anyway of course, like the two we lost to accidents. We can't be everywhere and see everything. Maybe that is all that happened with the comet. We lost too many to the First One's revenge. No one new on this ship at least.

I smile. If the crew knew they would freak. I often spend my 'nap time' on the space station catching up on the latest news. Mandhi does not approve, but we are both nines, so we leave each other to our own decisions. I should have been up there by now, but during this crisis it would be noticed that I was missing. Easiest time is when everyone else is on shore searching for new creatures for me to study. Of course we both had to attend the all hands meeting a few eights ago.

We could use tech, except there is no privacy on board a small ship like this. Sooner or later someone would find it. The Ceph would see it as a violation of the tech levels, but at least would not fear it. The rest, well, let's just say that witch hunts are making a come back. The last of the pre-industrial thinking. This voyage took nearly a generation to get approval. Change is not sought by everyone.

It was finally an ultimatum from the Hu and Ba leaders that forced the issue. Mammals do not have a good rep I am afraid. Too curious and always experimenting. A lot of tech has already been invented many times, but suppressed for a variety of reasons, usually because of the pollution laws.

I have argued that sometimes you have to go through a dirty stage to get to a clean one. They acknowledge, record the information, file it and then of course forget it. Frustrating.

~All I want is a reliable clock. Then we would know where we are at all times.~ Starboard, a Dia missing a few claws on his right hand comments to me.

I sigh, ~A good clock would be nice. Can't count on my intuition completely.~

~Never seen a Captain or first mate who could do better, but I hear ya. Er, I mean see you. You know what I mean. Not being able to hear is dangerous.~

~That it is. Keep your eyes open.~ He tips his hat and goes about his tasks. Hats, a Hu thing that caught on. Everyone gets tired of sunburn and a Ceph shader is too hard to handle unless you have all those extra arms. A good hat with a ten centimeter rim and a tie cord. All you need. Keeps both rain and sun off your head and out of your eyes.

The wind is nearly with us on this tack and we make good time. We can't get too close to shore until the wave hits, then we need to get in fast to follow it to the highest point. Going to be tricky, even for us. Still, I feel better being as far north as possible. Anything south is likely destroyed. I just hope the communities north of us can get to higher ground in time. Fortunately most settlements are north of the equator. Just like on E1, the north is where most of the resources are.

Was the sat array operating properly when you were last there?

Oh, so now you are glad I was up there. I smile, but get no acknowledgment from Mandhi. Oh well.

Everything was fine. The Ceph improvements to the Hu tech have been working flawlessly. We should have known it was coming.

The trajectory was a strange one. I know of no other comet on that path. Unexpected. Bad luck or purposely done? She rubs her lucky charm. I can't believe the Ceph Guardians still have those. I guess cultural imprints are hard to give up. I wonder what behaviors identify me as Hu even when I am not in a Hu skin?

She continues, *The First One Array went off line when the comet did a direct hit on one. I got it back up, but there was a window of opportunity. To many distractions of late.*

You think it was the First Ones?

Roo has doubts that they are the First Ones.

So does Jesus. We probably should start referring to them in another way.

Bugs works for me.

For Hu that would have a lot of prejudicial implications.

Does for me too. I share Roo's aversion for crabs now that I have

seen what they can do.

Wonder where they originally came from? Not from earth. No life form we have seen yet comes close.

Horsetails are high in silicon. That's weird.

They are not animals. Forgive my imprecision.

She acknowledges, then adds, *Don't forget their ecology. The other animals and plants all used high levels of silicon. Granted there is no lack, being one of the most abundant elements, but they are distinctly different. Even the Pink, as strange as they are, are still mostly lacking in silicon use.*

They are higher in germanium if I remember correctly.

We best get ready. Stow the sails. She adds, *Don't let your guard down.*

~Stow the sails!~ The command propagates quickly and we soon watch the sails reefed, pulled down and go below.

~Maintain course Boson!~ Strong for a Ba, but even he knows when he can't handle something. He calls over our Di to assist. No honor lost in doing the right thing.

~Everyone else best get below.~ No one moves.

Someone shouts, "He she comes!" Surprisingly most hear and turn to look. The rest seeing the others turn, turn themselves. A black wall approaches. What they can't see it that the wall is not as straight up and down as it would appear.

"Lash yourselves down if you are above deck. Warn Cook to put all fires out."

!Already out Healer.! Good to be thinking.

"Keep the cabin boy below deck Cook. I don't want to lose another one. I don't want him washed over board."

"Aye Healer." Cook does not like being submerged. I have given him a way out of facing his fear. The ship seals well. We made sure of that in spite of all the teasing we got from the other captains.

#!I may not live out this day, but I have to see it Healer. I have to see it.!#

"Are you sure you are not part Hu?"

#!No reason to insult me sir.!# But he shows amusement and I smile in return.

~Quiet. All hands hang on. Be prepared for the ride of your life!~ A Ceph shouting is a beautiful sight. Right, I shield us against debris. There is a lot riding the wave along with us. A lot of ash too. The water is nearly gray with it. The comet hit bedrock then. That means nuclear winter if it

does not wash out with the rains.

I look around. The deck has a fine layer of ash as well. Only the finest material had made it this far yet. Everyone's lungs have ash as well. Nine one one disease if we are not careful. A notice a few coughs in the smaller individuals. They have more rapid breathing and are sucking more in.

I stop a crew mate making his way past, "Tie a rag around your mouth to filter out the ash. Pass it on." The only one not likely to have a problem with ash would be a Ceph. They are used to dealing with silt in water. They can flush out their oxygen exchange system with clean water as soon as it is available. Of course the only Ceph on board is Mandhi. Not sure she could suffer having another on board.

"Do you miss the tech?" I ask her.

~I needed to clear the salt from my gills. I was too absorbed in my work to see all of the implications. How about you? You are usually surrounded by lots of sens. Why pick a lonely voyage with a limited crew?~

"Same reason I guess. The worlds are changing. We are no longer needed. And if I remember right you worked hard to convince me to come."

^Excuse me Captain. Which Saint should we be praying to?^

"Everyone is getting nervous." I gesture towards the wall approaching.

~I will not deceive you.~ Several crew are looking. More stop what they are doing to watch what she shows. The wind is still strong, but it seems quiet too. The sky is becoming darker as more ash fills the air and we get closer to sunset.

"Does it seem to you that the sun is setting early today?" A few acknowledge. I wish we could use clocks.

~The world as we knew it is gone. All of our homes are gone. All that we knew is different. We hope that friends will make it to safety, seeking higher ground. But, do not think fancy thoughts. We are in a different world. It will take a lot of work. We are a long ways from home. Most here will not live long enough to ever see our loved ones again. Some will not survive another year. Such is the way of life.~ Everyone is deathly quiet with heads or eyes lowered. Funny how that is universal. Well maybe the Blu don't do that. Who can tell what they think.

~Saints. Never put much thought on saints. I suppose the one we need the most right now is the one who is the most lucky. It will take luck more than anything to survive now.~

The one Dio on board, nice guy, but the two Di are suspicious of him

and bully him when we are not looking. Anyway he answers, !!Saint Rooi Captain.!!

~Of course, a Ceph, think I would remember that one.~ She shows amusement and everyone relaxes some. No one believes she has actually forgotten.

^Saint Ron and George for their quick wits and pray we don't need to call on Saint Doc.^ Hey, that hurts.

#!Here, here!#!

~Saint Rooi, hear our prayer in this time of need. We are a small insignificant boat on a turbulent sea. Make for us a safe passage to a safe harbor. Not much to ask in the change in the probabilities. Such a small change.~

"We will pray to Saint Ron and George when we make land fall and need their help to survive the wilderness."

!How do we ride this wave Captain?!

~Well, the technic is the basically the same. We have seen many a storm with high waves before. In some ways this will be easier. We know the direction and that won't be changing on us. Just keep the keel pointed forty five to the wave and let her push us to shore eventually. There will be more waves behind the first one. So, don't worry too much if we slip this one and it gets ahead of us. Just be patient and we will ride this out. Besides, it is pushing us north. The direction we want to go. The further it pushes us, the faster we get home.~

"Come on crew, we are going surfing!" Everyone scrambles to their position. We have practiced this maneuver many times. I just hope their spirit holds out. It is one thing to ride out a rough storm, it is quite another to ride this monster.

~The ship is like a cork in the water. If you hang on tight, nothing can hurt you. A little water never hurt anyone, right?~

A weak 'right' is returned. Captain does not push it, but straps herself into the wheel and anchors herself to the posts set up for just this purpose. She always takes the wheel during the roughest stretches. My job is to patch injuries as they invariably happen.

"Retrieval ropes on everyone. Myself included."

^Right you are Healer.^ In my mind I secure a few loose items below that were somehow forgotten. Cook and the cabin boy seem to have tightened down things well where they are. The boy is strapped into his hammock.

"Here we go!" I shout. When the wall hits it does not so much hit us as suddenly lift us. We must be pulling several Gs nearly straight up. The

bow leans forward steeper and steeper.

"Just like a cork in a puddle. Enjoy the ride me maties! Yeeha!"

The rest wave their arms into the air and yell 'Yeeha' in return.

Mandhi turns us into the wave some and in a few arn the top of the wave in the high wind washes over us, drenching everyone. A moment later we are on top of the first wave. The view is spectacular. We can see the setting sun amidst the mountains to our left. It is like we are suddenly in a very small pond and those are really just small hills. We fall into the trough and become weightless. A few did not hold on tight enough and are held in the air by their retrieval lines. Going to hurt when they come down. More work for me. It becomes very dark as the sun is blocked from our view and not reflected by the ash filled sky above.

How are you going to explain how you can see the waves now?

Won't have to. I can 'feel' them. Born of the sea, I am one with the sea. The smallest hatchling knows as much.

The sun is setting early. The axis has shifted.

I noticed. A lot of life forms will have to adjust to much smaller seasons. It's going to get colder quickly. We were also pushed a little further away from the sun at the same time. We are not that far from what was the Antarctic circle. We should be having short nights, but instead this one will be a full eight long.

How come we don't keep turning then?

Gyroscopic effect. A wheel in motion resists being being moved off of it's axis. It must have been some hit to move us that much. Didn't they teach you anything in TK school?

I must have been asleep. We have always had seasons. Not good. Most species will not be able to adapt.

You give life too little credit. Life always adapts. It is we who have the hardest time. ~This is likely to go on for days. I want to get as far north as we can. Best get some of the crew in their beds for some rest. I want an awake crew come light.~

"Aye, aye Captain." I make my way among the crew tapping the most tired to go below.

"Boson, tell Cook to hand out hard tac to each who comes down. Include yourself first if you will. You have been up for nearly a day."

^Thank you Healer.^ He goes below ahead of the others. Captain will have him at the wheel when he awakens. Best he get some rest.

The wind is very high when we are on top of a crest and still at the bottom of a trough. Those who decided to try and ride it out are now going below when we are the bottom. Not much relief there though. The

angle of the poor ship is nearly vertical going up or down, even with Mandhi's expert steering. The walls of water are kilometers high. There is no way we would have survived without our special help. Just have to be careful to make it almost believable.

When do we give up and just move this beast out of the way of the monster.

Not yet. I want more practice. There is talk of a race on Blu-Eden. Any TK is an automatic forfeit.

We will lose our entire crew at this rate. I have treated contusions on nearly everyone.

Issue willow bark tea. No such tree here. She means pump them full of opiates and such. I pop the ship forward one wave. Everyone is below and won't notice, but of course Mandhi does and I find myself in the ocean. I pop myself back, dry as if nothing has happened. The ship is back to the wave I popped us from.

Instead of a pain killer I put everyone into a suspended animation state and secure them down better. No more bumps.

"You want practice fine, but I will not let anyone else suffer."

~The waves have reached the most southern settlement. Everyone made it out, but the homes are gone.~

"You mean underwater. Ceph homes are indestructible."

~Even our homes have limits. Never intended to face waves larger than tens of meters.~ Oh only.

I scan the Di settlements in the southern continent. They are further inland. They don't like the cold of the shore line. Good for them. Only it will be cold for some time for everyone now and they will not have gotten their harvest in yet. The Hu and Ba sens are moving inland too. A lot of hungry sens soon. Most of the farmed area was in the lower areas now under water.

Don't we have a moral obligation to provide for them, given that this is likely the work of the Bugs?

Possibly, but that is the council's call. You did inform them didn't you?

And exactly when was I at the station last?

Go now. I will cover for you. Everyone is asleep thanks to you.

I scan above. Not there. I reach out further. Shit, on the other side at the moment. Not going to wait. I have scanned the destruction of course, but there is nothing like seeing it first hand. I make a bubble and pop to a high orbit. I go south and over the impact site. It of course is covered in ash clouds. The crater itself is much smaller than the dino killer that this

planet did not experience. It will still be cold here for a few years. Not something the Di will find easy to deal with.

Nothing left of the comet itself. I do not sense any unusual signatures, but I am not a chemist or geologist. Mostly water to me. It is said most of our water on our earths came originally from comets. It would also be very easy for a TK to manufacture a comet from any available mass. Question is why didn't we see this one coming. It came in very fast, having been sling shot around the sun at just the right trajectory. A one in a billion chance.

Of course there are billions of froth earths. But two hits in less than five years? Both with sentients? That does not feel like chance to me.

I enter the station. Not as elaborate as the one around Hu-Eden, but it works. The rule is that you leave with less mass than you arrived with. I had made my bubble thicker than it needed to be. Really, I don't need a bubble at all. I leave it attached to the outside. When we are less stressed we can make something of it. No telltales, so at least no one else is experiencing what we are. If there was a third world under attack I would be convinced it was not chance.

I type in what happened and request permission to start rescue efforts. Send. Done. Looking around I realize we are not ready to receive guests. I clean the place up, stock the food keepers and make lots of dark chocolate to set out in a tasteful array on the conference table.

"All for me?"

Startled I turn around to see a large bird like creature. No idea who this is. I don't remember any TKs birds.

"Sorry Doc." She morphs back into a Hu form. Barbara.

"Good. I was hoping you would hear about this."

"Don't be so sure, I voted not to interfere at Ku-Eden."

"But you saved enough genetic diversity to keep the species going. I hear you have plans for them. Our whales?"

"No whales. I chose sens who are curious about their surroundings, even to the point of being in trouble with those in power. No philosophers this time. I am frustrated by the E0 experience. You would think that after twenty five mil we would know and understand more than we do. This combined species approach has yielded much more understanding at tech four than we got to at tech nine."

"Even from my perspective I see your point. Roo and clan certainly have added a lot. And let's not forget the Blu contribution. Better than any super computer we had."

"Except Mother."

"She did not understand or even know of one sixty nine dim."

"If she had, none of us would be here."

"We would all be slaves or dead."

"Slaves likely."

"So, what do you think the Bugs want?"

"Bugs?"

"We don't think they are the First Ones. Neither do Rooi or Jesus. And he would know if any of us did. So Mandhi and I are calling them Bugs."

"Not wise to use a derogatory designation. Tendency to underestimate them."

"Scan about you and tell me I have underestimated them."

"You think they did this? Ku too? We were watching that one for years before it hit. Remember all the council meetings?"

"Maybe not Ku. Used that one as a cover for this one. It came out of no where. None of the sensors saw it. Used the sun to hide most of its trajectory. It was a perfect hit. The axis is nearly repaired. The climate will be permanently changed after the nuclear winter is over with. A change that no species adapted to this planet has ever experienced. What are the odds of hitting with just the right force to correct the tilt? And to do it without our seeing it ahead of time."

"Considering the effect, it would have to follow the path it did for this time of year. The funny thing about probability is that it is really only good at predicting what might happen, not something that has. The fact it has, given any odds you want, the result is still the same."

"That is why I chose to understand the mind rather than math." I sigh and she smiles. Barb does not smile often.

"You called a council meeting?"

"Yeah, you are not on it this century?"

"I begged off to work on the Ku project. Mei was going to take my place, but no one can find the Enterprise. I can't remember what number they are up to. So they are one short at the moment. No big deal."

"Twenty five million years and you still say, 'no big deal'? I am surprised."

"Picked it up again. Maybe Aimee?"

"I heard she was on the Enterprise too."

"No matter." I smile, but she does not get it.

"I had better get back. Mandhi is alone down there. You can come with me or stay here till others show up."

"Won't that make for questions?"

"I put them all into a suspended state. Mandhi is using this time to

perfect here sailing skills."

She chokes, "On two mile hi waves? Is she nuts?"

"Oh most definitely." I smile and she shakes her head.

Suddenly we are both on the deck of the ship to a startled Mandhi. Without TK I would have been crushed at the sudden crushing acceleration upward.

~Welcome honored one.~ She does a tiny Nauti salute. Can't really let go of the wheel. Barb does a more proper one in return. On a pitching desk without TK that is impressive. I know I was not supposed to scan her, but I am curious.

"You have done this before?" I have to ask.

"On countless worlds. Remember I was a whale for most of my existence. Waves are normal for me." I nod. That certainly explains it. I think.

"Surfing the cosmos." She gives me a dirty look.

"You are making good time. I doubt any ship of this class has ever gone this fast."

~Not much opportunity fortunately.~

"The waves are not as high."

~We are well behind the front and have slowed considerably. We will will barely make the equator.~

"When do you want to turn inland?"

~We have to turn in before the reflection returns, but I want to get as far north as possible to make the return easier.~

"You think the 'Bugs' did this as well?"

~No proof, but it is strange. Are we that absent minded that we would let this happen with no warning?~

"It might have been a mistake to focus so much on what was happening on the earths instead of more attention to what was happening up there." She points straight up.

"Mei seems to think the answer is out there."

"You would understand her better than I would. She was all alone with a 'thn for a very long time."

"Others are going along with her quest. Doesn't matter to me. She will either piss them off and bring them out into the open or she won't find anything. Nothing lost."

"I heard that Spider and Ravi have quit. They are back at Luna City. That place is getting big."

"So is Mars. Won't be long before they want to leave the solar system. All the more reason I need to get going on my own project."

"I get the hint. Let the others know. We need a quick decision on whether or not to help them here."

"Understood, but when was the last time you saw our lot make a quick decision?" We both smile.

~Quick decisions are always wrong in my opinion.~

She laughs, "That's the kind of thinking that sees whole Ceph communities disappear."

~I don't understand why that is a problem?~ Barbara and I both shrug and shakes our heads. Mandhi goes back to concentrating on the ship.

Barbara pops out. She undoubtedly scanned the situation. If the comet had hit the arctic instead, a lot of sens would be dead already. Instead it may be just a much slower death, but with the same end point. I know as a Guardian this should not bother me. I don't know how Barbara could let Ku-Eden happen. Maybe in another million years I will have a thicker skin, but I hope not.

~Stop it! You know it is not allowed until the council decides.~

I sigh. Unconsciously I was making food stashes in select places. I can't help it. Why did Silver make me a Guardian if he expected me to act out of character?

In suspended animation our crew slept it out. We however experienced every up and down. Gradually diminishing it was still harrowing and boring at the same time.

Finally after at least one eight day, ~Wake them up, we are approaching the equator. We will need sails from now on here.~

"And how do I explain it?"

~You drugged them to keep them safe. The two of us took turns at the wheel. Have the Boson take over for me and I will 'rest' in the store room. I will meet anyone coming in to help at the station.~

"Aye." I go below and start waking sens up. Cook first so he can prepare something for them to eat. Suspended does not completely shut everything off. They will be very hungry. As soon as he starts the prep I see him shoving dried food into his own mouth. Even if we don't get hit by the return waves we will have to go ashore to restock.

It should be much warmer at the equator, but the cloud cover prevents the sun from doing it's job. No snow at least. I don't bother mentioning where we are. Better not to depress them on how bad it is until we have to.

"As soon as you are fed and have taken care of personal needs, help get the sails back up. The reflection is about to hit us. We will go against it as long as we can, but soon we will be turning west to land this ship for

possibly the last time. From there we will be land lubbers and have to live off what we can find. It will not be easy. Everything will be hungry. What we do find will not be in good shape. Grain and fruit is likely to have rotted."

!Make a guy feel good about being alive Healer.! More grumbling from others.

"Hey, you can always jump ship and take your chances swimming." That get amusement.

Mandhi has timed it well. We only make sail for two days before, out of frustration, we wait for a good wave and ride it as high up the shore as we can. A few more waves push us a bit higher, then even they seem to be getting weaker. I guess the reflection is not as strong as the first set. Hey, I am not a physicist either.

Getting what we can carry out of the ship proved to be more hazardous than riding the waves in the first place. Reminds me of the remake of 'Mutiny on the Bounty' when they are trying to get to shore in the rough surf.

"Sorry Cook, your stove is too hard to carry. At least long distance." He reluctantly sets it down in a dry place.

!Maybe someone will find it and be able to use it.!

We spend our first night near the ship to get our land legs. Even I find it hard to adjust to the not moving ground below me, wanting to instinctively sway where there is no need. We spend the time fashioning packs, each according to their ability to carry. We stuff Mandhi's tool belt as best we can, but even though she certainly has the strength, Ceph bodies are not designed for carrying things. At least not on land.

^Doubt we will find a crab for her to ride this far south.^

#!Can't hurt to keep our eyes out for salvage. They could not have carried everything with them. Crabs can handle some seawater for a time. Likely some escaped. Could happen.!#

The fire is the only thing keeping us warm. We all 'sleep' in even though they have been asleep for an eight and we don't need it. Their muscles are not back up to full strength either.

Cook comes running up panting. Not used to running. I smile. Di normally love to run, but on board ship there is no where to run. One of the reasons he spent so much time in the hold. Said it hurt too much to see all that space and not being able to run in it. There are scratches on his scales in several places.

"What's up Cook?"

!Issis found something strange and then this very strange creature

showed up. The creature talked in our minds, said for Healer and Captain to come quickly. Everyone else is to stay here in case it goes bad.!

~Someone knows us?~ I scan frantically and find Issis, but sense nothing near by.

You get anything?

No. I think we had better investigate. Stay alert.

No kidding. We follow Cook who has recovered enough. The trees are tangled from the blast even this far north. A lot of uprooted material. It is slow going even with Cook squashing the same path a second time. As we get close Mandhi and I slow down to allow a better response, in case something goes bad. Cook keeps going.

We arrive in a clearing with a shaking Issis holding very and still holding a clear sphere about ten centimeters in diameter. Shit, shit, shit.

"Carefully put it down Issis."

^Creature says no. I am afraid sirs.^

"What creature Issis?"

Beg pardon. Not used to communicate your kind.

I freeze just like Issis. Before us hovers a slowly changing multicolored amorphous.

~Just like in the journals. A multidimensional creature. Six dimensional if I remember right.~

Essentially correct. Designate this one as Meep.

"The Meep? The one in the stories, Meep? How can that be? Shouldn't you be forbidden from this froth by the time directives?"

Know this one? How? Never meet your kind. A projection points towards Mandhi.

~Maybe they are all called Meep?~

Only one designated Meep. You psiotic node. Need help.

"They are multidimensional. Maybe time is not an issue for them."

~Shhh, it needs help.~ Gender? There was something about gender. Something weird.

No me. 'thn needs help. Please wake.

I float the sleeping 'thn from Issis who promptly collapses.

!You two are not normal are you?!

"No Cook. I am, how do I say this?"

~He is Saint Doc and I am Saint Mandhi. We are Guardians. Tell no one.~

!No one.! He promptly faints too.

I concentrate on the 'thn. Our two crew are fine or will be. I am not exactly happy about meeting a 'thn under these circumstances. And

definitely not a sleeping one. They tend to form an attachment to the one who wakes them.

~Think we can wake her?~

"Do we want to is the question." I don't.

Please help. Die soon otherwise.

"Maybe, just maybe, if we both wake her, she will not form the attachment. I wonder who her parents are?"

~On the other hand, what is so bad if this small tip dies. Won't affect the whole any.~

Thought you psiotics? What wrong you?

"You do not know us Meep. If you did you might not want us to wake her. We are part of the group that brought the Black 'thn to the 'THN at the end of time. We know what the 'THN is. Mandhi could take us there if you want." I am not sure she could, but Meep does not know that.

Meep flickers and then is gone. I thought so.

~The 'thn is very weak. We need to make a decision soon.~

"Oh hell. Wake her up." I make a staff. Mandhi makes an enfolded circle that is hard to look at, but accomplishes the same purpose.

"You need to teach me how to do that some time."

~Even easier than the kind you make. Enfolding only requires that you understand the thirteenth dimension.~

"Only. Let's do this."

We aim our enhancers at each other and then bring them down onto the sleeping 'thn. The usual light and 'thn glow happens and she wakes up.

Floating on her own in front of us. We wait.

She comes closer to me as if sniffing me. She then backs up and goes to Mandhi.

You are anathema. She pops out.

~That was easy.~

"I thought so."

~Best get these two back to the others.~

Excuse. Thanks for awakening.

"Meep is back."

~Why are we anathema? I thought finding the Black 'thn was a good thing.~

The colors change to a deep violet and blue.

Honored for service to 'THN. Anathema for enemy, the Piskon Hive.

"Surely others have misunderstandings." We now have a name for them.

None more dangerous than Piskon Hive. You are anathema as result.
Meep pops out again.

"Anathema suggests that others know of our relationship to the Piskon and are avoiding us as a result."

~So it would appear. Might explain why Roo only found one person at the center. If the condition of anathema is 'contagious' then no one would want to associate with anyone else. Sounds like these Piskons are a real nuisance. Besides trying to use a million TKs for their own selfish reasons, they are very vindictive of anyone who interferes.~

"If they were responsible for the comet. We only have suspicions, no proof."

~They are waking up. Time to get back to camp.~

^What happened? Where are we?^

"It would appear the two of you wandered off and ended up here. We found you both asleep."

Cook wakes up groggy, !I had the strangest dream.!

~Tell me about it. I enjoy good dreams.~

He looks at the two of us, !It was silly. You two were Saints. Imagine that.!

"Actually I find that very hard to imagine. I might be a saint, but Captain. I doubt that very much."

Mandhi hits me with a squirt of black ink.

"I rest my case. No saint would do that would they?" Both Cook and Issis show amusement. No doubt the story will be retold to the others along with the dream.

~Back to camp. We need food and rest. Then we need to decide where we go next.~

^Choice? I thought we were going home?^

"That could take some time. Possibly more time than most of us have. Captain is the only female and I for one am not going to mate her." More amusement and some obscene gestures.

!If we stay here, we will not find mates either. At least on the way we might find others. There is strength in numbers. The raps will be hungry. Best to keep moving.!

^Cook is right. We stay here we are stew meat.^

"Raps know how to cook their food now?" I show amusement, but they only show horror. Hu humor does not always translate.

~They are right.~

I know. There is a pack near by. They smell us. Soon they will decide on an attack strategy.

!We were safer on the ship.!

^We could go back to the ship and hide.^

~Until we starve to death or die of thirst? Best to confront your fears, not hide from them.~ Oh, the great Ceph are a such a good example of that.

^Too bad you two are not really Saints.^

"It would be useful."

#!Well, what did they find out there?!#

~A nap, the lazy slugs. Gather round. We are moving out. There are nasty creatures about.~

^Any of them good to eat^

!Now there is an idea. Rap is not that bad. Tough, but cook them long enough . . .!

"When was the last time you saw a rap hunting alone? What do your think our odds are? We are seven and a cabin boy."

Without crabs, we decide to carry the Captain in a sling to make better time. Waiting for a Ceph to keep up is not safe right now.

It is hard going. Any semblance of a trail is gone. I hope it will be equally hard on the hungry raps.

"Cook, keep up with us."

!Don't worry about me. Just increasing the odds.! I scan him to see him setting crude but probably effective lethal traps. Amazing how fast he is with a simple knife. I decide to follow his lead and make a few more to either side of our trail. Raps like to hit you from the side.

Cook comes up to me, !They will be too hungry to be cautious. Once one goes down, they will stop to feed on a sure thing.!

We soon hear a snap and a shriek, followed by a pack of growls.

^Hungry aren't they.^ Our Boson is scared. So are the rest, even Cook.

!There are three still following us. They will call the others as soon as they finish feeding.!

"Don't they usually sleep after eating?" The cabin boy has become one with my side. It is not cold, but he is shivering all the same.

!Not when one scrawny rap is divided among so many. I heard a dozen at least.! Actually more like fifteen, but I am impressed all the same. I would have thought being on ship for several years would have dulled his senses. Guess something that dangerous you don't forget.

We hear another snap, but no shriek or growls. They are not waiting now. They can always go back for their colleague. Punny male is not worth it I guess.

~They are going to our sides and pacing us. Be watchful.~

!Here, take these.! Cook and the other Di, whom we call Aft because of the size of his, ah, aft section, have been making simple sharpened sticks. Everyone gets one except the Captain, who declines. Not every weapon works for every species. The two then quickly demonstrate the most effective way to stop a charging rap.

!Remain motionless. Angle the spear thus, just like in our training. Remember, they can't see something that is edge on well. Don't worry about anything else. Just maintain this angle and point out. They will try and circle around. Don't worry about that. Stay your post. We will form our own circle with the spears facing out. Only when they are upon us can you adjust your spear to be most effective. Aim for the heart. Anything else you are unlikely to penetrate with a wood spear!

"We can't out run them. As soon as we reach the clearing up ahead, they will try and attack. As soon as we reach the center, assume your position. Remember your training."

!#Wouldn't we be better here? They have a hard time climbing over all this debris.#!

I smile, "But we would not be able to use our secret weapon."

^What secret weapon? I don't see anything.^

"And they won't either."

"Don't say anything Hairy. I want everyone concentrating on their own task." Hairy of course is bald. The only other Hu is our cabin boy whom we call Spittoon. Three Hu, two Di, two Dia, two Ba and a Ceph. The two we lost were a young Di an older Ceph. The Ceph was our chronicler. Mandhi had to take over for him. Mandhi is the only female, but she has already been through the mating so immune to the salt in seawater. Or so they believe. I don't want to lose any more now.

Spittoon and I are gathering small stones. It keeps his mind off of our danger and we will need them.

Cook and Shovel, our two Di, stop us just at the edge of the clearing.

!Now we need to do this quickly and smoothly. We will, take the lead and tail. Captain, Healer and Spittoon in the center. Issis and Clingon to the right, Port and Starboard to the left. Hairy, you are with me. Okay, let's go.!

When we reach the center of the clearing Cook yells "Kneel down and hold your position. Go." Everyone does their job just as the two raps enter the clearing. Spittoon and I do ours. Captain is in the center, far enough in to see the raps clearly. We put small piles of stones near each outstretched arm of the Captain, then take up our spears and enter the circle ourselves. I put Spittoon near Cook. If anyone survives, it will be

him.

With the lack of movement, they are cautious. They expect prey to run from them, not wait for them. Easy to take down running prey. They circle around us a few times.

A few shrieks to see if they can startle us. Hey, we just lived through two mile high waves, this is a picnic. A potentially lethal picnic. I am not sure I could save them all if they attack the way they should. We are far enough apart that one could get into the center. If they were to take out the Captain we will be lost. Mandhi would be okay, another body hidden in a safe place, but this body would be gone along with the expertise.

They feign attacks to several of us, but no one moves.

Issis squeaks at a very high pitch. The raps are confused and thrown off guard. They shriek and circle again.

They will attack now.

I know. I'm ready.

They attack from opposite sides in perfect unison. They don't even reach the edge of our circle when Mandhi lets loose with a barrage of stones as if from a Gatling gun. Every stone hits square on a forehead. This causes them to flop over backwards stunned. A moment later they are back up on their feet looking around carefully. We bite. They are warned now.

This time they attack in unison at one location at what they think is the weakest point, the two Ba, but are thwarted again when the Ba immediately fluff up to full height with the glide flaps open to the max. High pitched screams follow. Unknown species, unknown risk.

They fall back again and circle around to the Dia side. These they recognize as juveniles Di, a potential weak spot. When they rush Port and Starboard move back and to the side, keeping their spears between the raps and themselves. The raps snarl at the sticks. One grabs an end and ends having it shoved halfway down its throat. That has to hurt. Still she makes for the center in what appears to be a clear path to our exposed belly.

But Mandhi is ready this time with something much sharper, high strength high tech ceramic. They did not have a chance. There was blood all over the place.

Everyone is shocked.

Aft comments, !I thought the raps were the danger. Good work Captain.!

~Would not have worked unless everyone had not led them right to me. We are a team. A good one.~

Cook huffs and goes up to the raps, removes one of the ceramic knives and starts cutting them up. I go up, remove the rest of the knives and give them back to Mandhi. She cleans them using TK. No one complains that we are going to eat them. I look around. There is nothing out here. No wonder the raps were so desperate to attack a heavily armed group that outnumbered them five to one. Everything is wet. Doubtful that anything would burn to cook them. Not safe to eat this meat raw and it will spoil fast.

I turn around and Cook has a fire going!

"How the freep did you do that?" Being TK I am truly shaken. How did I miss this?

He turns and looks at me like I am crazy, !I'm a cook. I know you need to cook food sometimes. My pack was full of dry wood from the ship. Won't last long, but we need our strength right now. Am I wrong?!

I laugh, "No Cook. You are wonderful. I could kiss you!" He looks like he is going to throw up and Di can't. Wish I could say the stew was as good. We will be chewing it for eighths. Better than nothing.

I go up to Mandhi, "We are not going to find enough food around here to survive."

~That's why we are not staying. We are all of the sea. We need to return to the sea, at least the shore.~

"You don't intend to move the ship back do you?"

~Trashed and too far from shore now. The water has gone down quite a bit I suspect.~ We both know exactly how far it has gone down and will continue to go down as the tsunami subsides and the poles freeze up again. Likely to ultimately end up much lower than it was before.

!#What about the row boat. That could still be useful. We could move that if we all worked together. That would give us something that could get us across streams, river mouths, even do some shore fishing.#!

Mandhi looks at Port, ~I said we have a good crew. I meant it. Great idea.~

"We have a plan folks. Back to the ship. Let's make time."

We see no more raps on the way back at least. They may have been the last ones, at least in this area. Law of attrition. One by one they ate each other until those four were the last. And now there are none. There are going to be a lot of rats soon. We may be seeing the end of the saurosars and the dawn the mammal age. Sixty five million years late, but done in nearly the same way. Makes me wonder if the, what did Meep call them? Piskon Hive. Were they on E0/1 then? Did they send that comet into us as well? We play with small communities, they play with

worlds?

The raps are not completely gone of course. That may take years. They are good scavengers as well as hunters and rats are good to eat when you get hungry enough. It will be the cold more than anything that will get them. Or this rot. Amazing how fast everything begins to rot. The cold will slow that down too. If the damn council waits too long, there will be nothing left to save. Probably wrote this world off. There is the one Ron found his first time around. That will be enough to give these species a chance.

"Maybe it would be best if we just evacuate." Unthinking I say this in Chinese. Long's influence I guess. I wonder how he is doing with Rachael and James on the Enterprise. Ever the warrior.

^What Healer?^

"Just thinking to myself."

^Others talk. They say it is part of the healing process. We don't always understand the words you use.^

I sigh, "There was a time when the Hu spoke many languages. I have learned a few of them, as part of my training. There are ideas that don't translate well into standard Hu."

Issis thinks about this and adds, ^There are concepts that do not translate well into common knowledge for the Ba as well.^

^Like the spiritual practice of leaf cutting.^ He bows very low. Not a Ba thing, but I understand. The Ba word for leaf cutting is very difficult for the normal Hu mouth to form. I must have said it near correct for him to acknowledge. Malak has taken their art form, but not the spirit, combined it with Arabic calligraphy, and done some truly startling work. Our two Ba have taken the leaf cutting, combined it with scrimshaw and done the same. We are better working together than separate. The spiritual aspect remains a Ba only tradition so no one is hurt by the exchange.

When we reach the ship everyone heads straight for the water kegs to replenish their own water bags. The only fresh water in the area for now. Near the sea everything is contaminated with saltwater and in the mountains it is ash. Water is going to be our biggest problem.

"Don't forget the salt filters." A Ceph invention. Apply enough pressure to these ceramic constructs and you get drinkable water out the other end. A lot of work, but better than dying. Cook goes back to his kitchen and grabs a few more items and leaves a few. Nothing like a few days to get a better idea of what we are up against.

~Anything we have that can catch a fish too.~ Fish being a fairly

generic term. A reptile or amphibian would be equally sought. I am already sick of rap jerky. I am sure the others are too. The jerky was nearly impossible for Mandhi to eat. Too tough. No wonder she mentioned fish.

"Not going to find any wasabi."

!What is wa-saw-bee?!

~Yeah Healer. What is wa-saw-bee?~

"Ah, an herb using in healing stomach trouble." Mandhi shows amusement. More likely to cause it if you eat too much. Would be nice. I am beginning to think I may need a vacation after this is over.

Getting the shore boat removed from a tweaked desk proved to be interesting. We finally had to cut the deck itself. No one wanted to do it, even though we all knew she was doomed and would never float again. It was like killing a suffering person near death. You know it is the kindest thing to do, but you still hate doing it.

The boat cannot hold all of us except in an emergency. Actually only has to hold nine of us. Mandhi would be faster in the water than we would be in the boat. Of course rowing fully loaded is not easy and most of our supplies would be sacrificed. Let's hope we don't have to do it.

Since Mandhi does not travel well on land, she Captains the boat. I am in charge on land. The others take turns, even though the Ba are not good swimmers and are excellent tree climbers. Not many trees near the shore. The tsunami haven taken them out. Unfortunately the trees did contribute. They littered the water and made for hazardous going in the boat, especially near shore where buried snags could poke a hole in our boat easily. Good thing the Captain is as good in a row boat as a full ship. She worked hard to master all the Hu boat and ship forms, including ones not invented yet on this world.

On land it was not easy either. No beach, no shore rocks, just lots of tree limbs and stumps at odd angles. Took us all day to make a single kilometer. I had forgotten the debris field from a tsunami looked like. When I scan I can see it is nearly world wide. Only areas free of trees at the two thousand meter elevation level were clear, but only above the shore. Lots of logs on the shore line itself. And of course the ash. Like cement, it is gluing everything together at least temporarily. Enough to prevent most seedlings from sprouting. Lack of sunlight isn't helping either.

"At this rate it will take three hundred years to reach home. We need a faster way."

^We will starve to death and die of thirst first if that helps any.^

!#At least you are a long lived species. Not like us.#!
^Only increases the suffering time, not the outcome.^

The Center of Centers

~This is our only chance. There was nothing on them in the library at our center. Ci'lan says that this is the place where all knowledge eventually comes.~

"She would know. All of this is still amazing to me and I have seen a lot."

~There are some who say you must be First One.~

"Possibly I suppose. I don't remember much from before."

~Before when?~

He laughs, "My birth of course."

~How? What? I am confused.~

He shrugs, "Many are. Shall we go in?"

At least here there are plenty of sentients. We are anonymous. No tattoo visible on our mantles to scare anyone. No one running away.

There is no portal, just an open hallway, yet when we approach we are stopped by some kind of barrier.

No one may pass who has not been admitted.

~Oh, that makes sense.~ I scan, but sense nothing.

Another sentient comes along and passes in without effort.

I TP, *Please, how does one become admitted?*

The sentient turns and faces us I think. The form does not make sense to me physically. Parts move as it TPs us.

Only species whose 'lan has deposited their history may enter.

You mean species who are extinct except for their TKs.

What is TK?

I think. Not everything translates of course. I think about all the cultural problems I had with Doc and Silver.

Ones with high psiotic potential. I make a ball using available air as mass, then push it towards the sentient slowly as I make it smaller till it disappears. I do not want to appear threatening.

Yes. Only those with potential, no relations and with history inside may enter. The sentient makes some movement in acknowledgment and then moves on further into the library.

"Too bad. My species will qualify twenty five million years from now."

I study the air around us. It is different somehow. I watch another sentient move through without effort. I see no one else like us try.

~I need you to try entering Jesus.~

"Certainly." He casually passes through without effort and continues on without me.

Frantic now I look around me and pick another sentient at random.

Please, are you allowed in the library?

Of course not. There are still many of my kind alive. I have gotten lucky. A long lanky species that would probably fall apart under our gravity.

Would you please try to enter.

That would be a waste of effort. None who have living ones may enter.

I know, I just need you to try so I can study the effect. I then think of something that might help. *I am an intensely curious species that likes puzzles.*

Oh, you like puzzles! We are masters of puzzles. We should work together on this one. Great, not the way I wanted this to go. I need to work quickly or I will have a life long friend.

Good, just walk ah, five arm lengths in that direction. I point with one arm.

Must be useful having eight arms. I can reach far with my three, but . . . It keeps TPing, but I lose interest and concentrate on the effect when it hit the . . . THUMP . . . wall.

Oh, now that is interesting. There is a minor reflection when I scan. I can't see anything visually, but when scanning there is a second stick creature. I move closer myself. When I get to about one point seven meters distance I start to see an out of focus scan of myself. As I get closer, it gets sharper. I have never seen an out of focus scan before. That is the interesting thing about scanning, it is very sharp focus to the limits of your range.

Sticks watches all this with whatever senses it has and proceeds to duplicate my own actions.

I cannot scan the wall itself. What is it made of? I sense no material substance.

What level are you?

That is considered rude at the center, but I don't mind. I am an eight. I am hoping to attract the attention of a 'thn, but they seem to be absent right now.

You are missing one type of psiotic behavior.

This puzzle is boring. Unless you have something more interesting I will find someone else to find amusement with. No hiding it's feelings.

There is no wall. I comment.

It turns back around and looks at me. I think.

How are you at dimensional travel?

The one I am still missing. Finally some good luck.

Good, then you can't follow me. I do the enfolding. Only thirteen dimensions. They are obsessed with thirteen for some reason. I walk through as Sticks watches. Interestingly it looks the same visually from the other side. I touch the place where the wall should be and it is here too. My theory is confirmed. Now where is that pest who tried to leave me behind.

Reminds me of a Hu library. Very quiet. Most are wearing some kind of olive drab cloth covering. Are they helpers or scholars?

A 'thn comes up to me. TK eleven. Sentient at least.

Your species is not recognized. You will leave. Further, you will tell us who let you in.

I let myself in. No one brought me in. I am Rooi, the bringer of the Black 'thn. Your simple thirteen dimensional gate keeper is pathetic compared to the enfolding necessary to visit the 'THN. If you like I will make this an open broadcast.

As it would be impossible to exclude you I will let this pass. Please be kind enough to follow the rules. I will assist you. Watch me you mean. Pests!

Good, I also wish to spend as little time here as possible. On that we agree. First I need to know where a Hu who came in before me is.

I will take you to him. He does not belong here yet. She says yet to him but not to me. Interesting.

We pass many rooms that appear in different forms. I am guessing, like our quarters in our regional center, that they are adapted to whomever is using them at the time. I am led to a room that appears very much empty.

Since your species is not known to the Library, we were unable to properly prepare it.

All the same, Jesus has apparently fashioned a wood desk and chair. There is also a raised platform near the desk that would allow me to work with him. I raise myself to the platform and ignore the 'thn.

Not nice to be rude to them. They may not be real, but they do know where things are here.

Is everything you say confusing?

Try this. He pushes a sphere towards me. I look into it. Similar to the library at our center. I do the opening TK and it proceeds to project a vision into our minds. Really the only way considering how different everyone is. I wonder where they keep the originals and who does the

translating. I would imagine that a lot of ideas would not translate.

"Pay attention Roo."

Little is known of the species referred to as the Piskon Hive. The exact origins of the Piskon Hive are unknown. They are known to be intimately connected with the froth event. Yeah, we kind of figured that out. But no one understands how or why. Remnants of dead species' TKs are drawn at regular intervals to an unknown destination and are never seen again. See Froth Event. That's something new. Only dead species' TKs. They have no end library entry. This can be because they still have live non TK members or simply because they have chosen not to have an entry. This would be the first case, though theoretically possible. Home world. That's either scary or an opportunity. I place bets of they didn't want to. They seem too nasty to still have live members.

The TK members are the highest order mimics and deceivers. They are the most dangerous known species with the possible exception of a few Earth TKs. Hey, that hurts. Normally the Piskon Hive members blend in with other cultures and species and though parasitical do not cause lasting harm because of their low concentration, normally no more than two per world.

~Two? That information needs to get back as soon as possible.~

"Shhh!" I am showing, not soundings. No noise?

It is not known what their ultimate goal is nor any of their other motivators. They are as likely to help a culture as handicap it with no apparent pattern. However, occasionally a species becomes of particular interest to them. None has survived to record what the interest was. The narration ends. Not much.

~I don't like that last sentence. It would certainly appear we are of special interest to them. Not sure how taking out a few TKs is going to make any ultimate difference though.~

Jesus hands me another sphere.

~What's this one about?~ He raises a patch of hair on his face. I know from experience I should just start.

Not much is known about the Froth Event except it's location, see multiverse coordinates in appendix, and its frequency, approximately [number of cycles of something]. All spacial locations are affected. It is thought that though the Piskon Hive members are somehow involved at present, they were not the originators of the event. It is hypothesized that the Froth Event is inherent to the structure of the Multiverse.

~We know what the 'THN is.~

"Remember, this is a secret to most species. Not all are as great as the

all seeing Ceph Rooi." He smiles.

~I did not mean it that way.~

"I know that, but these spheres are not adapted to user's previous understanding."

~I wonder why not? It would seem to be a simple thing to add to a device that already sends telepathic information.~

"This tech is simpler. Maybe it was enough. The easiest security method would be for the information to not be present. And we all know who decides which sphere we get to read."

~Yes. I had not thought of that. Good idea. I am disappointed. This is all there is? We know more about the Froth than this and only slightly less about the Piskon Hive. We need to get back to inform the others.~

"Go ahead. I want to do some more research. If I find anything useful I will come back to tell you."

~The First Ones? You have met them?~

He smiles, but says nothing.

Mu-Eden

Two warm/light cool/dark cycles to my goal. It has been a good walk. Much to taste and observe. The Others say that patience is a virtue, yet they are as impatient as spring tails. Should expect this from a group that only has one thought for patience. There are so many different kinds, how could they only have one? Unimaginable.

Their slime records are used to try and preserve information. What a strange concept. The information is incomplete and fades quickly. Why do they not live the information they gather? Then they could trade with others easily. Yet, they refuse to trade information in the more efficient manner, even when we offer our information freely. All they return is base level information on their mind/body state. How does one separate mind from body? Why do they think they are separate? Why do they think they are separate from others, from the world around them? Too attached to identity. It is hard to believe they consider themselves sentient.

I near my goal. I remember the leaf litter here well. Just underneath the Green Bubo clan. They are particularly fond of the green bubo fruit that grow in abundance above. Their fertilizer contribution has much undigested material indicating rapid eating. Most inefficient. I enjoy completing the process so the trees may flourish. Mixed with the molding leaf litter the aroma and taste is wonderful. Much pleasure.

This dark fungus nodule is interesting. A new variant. I have tasted this before. The goal will confirm these thoughts.

I circle around to come from area of lowest concentration. This takes another warm/light cool/dark cycle. The patience paired with care is important. The spreading has accomplished its purpose. The individual components are now easier to identify.

Now it is important to use the patience paired with discrimination and wisdom to discern both the what and why.

The Hu and Dia sentients identified as Jake and Bernice are imperfect mimics. Too much of their former forms are present. The Mu degradation is imperfect. In the three cycles of season there should not be so much complexity left.

By contrast, their companion, is nearly perfect Mu. Nearly. If I had not feasted on the dark fungus I might have missed it. Comparing the flavors I can tell that the fungus feasted on a limb torn from the nearly Mu and dragged a part day away by the holy scavengers.

They only attack the near dead. There was no fear present in the near Mu. They hesitated about the nearly Mu. They were fearful. At first. They waited until no movement and the beginnings of rotting confirmed. They then feasted on the partly rotten, now easily torn apart corpse. No one holy scavenger could take away the corpse for themselves. They do not like to share, but better to share than risk being food. There will be further evidence about if needed.

Have tasted many Mu transformings. These are they only three that don't match expected variations. The skill is in how they don't match. The Hu and Dia are obvious, having shared for information on their transformings. One part in five says so. Attachment to their minds was their failing. If they had done the same as the nearly Mu they would not have been detected by the nearly Mu.

The only part of the nearly Mu that was not Mu was the specific Hu/Dia toxin and the intent. A strong single purpose for existence.

Sharing must occur to confirm. Were the other assassinations the same? Past knowledge of colonial organisms that bud off differentiated forms as needed. Confirmation needed. Gather more evidence to confirm what is suspected from information collected.

The Cave

^About time you woke up. Nipper took off. Did not want to get caught. The Hu grunts came looking for us, but are afraid of the dark, or at least this place. I dragged you deeper into the cave. They came in part way waited a bit and then left after rubbing themselves is dust and mud.^

~Deception is honorable.~

^Only if you don't get caught. I think the Hu are second place to the Ceph in that regard. You even instinctively take the shape and texture of your surroundings. If I did not know where you were I would not find you and I can see quite well under this light.^

~But Hu can't. I am still weak and very hungry.~

^Don't look at me that way. Nothing but bones here.^ I show amusement.

~Too furry. Nothing in the water I suppose.~

^No, I'm hungry too. Question, is, can we eat anything here?^

~Probably not. We need to get back to the farms. Did they get the sphere?~

^No idea, but don't even think about going back into that water. I am not waiting another half day for you to wake up again.^

~Let's go before I waste away completely.~

We go slow because Silas can't move fast and we want to stay silent. Silas is great at that and I am so light weight I only occasionally loose a pebble. At the entrance I catch Silas looking into the pool trying to find the sphere.

~Don't even think about it.~ I hand him, not wanting to make a sound.

~Can't see it. No one here?~ He looks around.

^I don't think so. Dark outside except for the moon. That's looks the same anyway. Might as well make our way back. It will be cool at least.^

We don't go back the way we came, but loop around to come in from the south. No more surprises. We are about half way there, with a false dawn showing, when we hear something.

I hand Silas, ~Now what?~

~Stay still. Very still.~ That's his answer to everything.

About time you two showed up. Nipper peers out from a bush with enormous teeth showing in a grin. He continues, Cats don't carry, so take this stuff so I don't lose any more dignity.

He rolls the sphere towards us. Silas leaps! I didn't know he could do that. It disappears into this nest of arms and mantle. Next comes food,

glorious food! I leap on that. Silas lets only one arm loose to snag a biscuit. I think that is what it is anyway.

~What the! I can't believe it! This is so nasty!~ He is turning several shades of mad at once. I turn to Nipper, as Silas is making no sense.

Nipper is ignoring us looking at some small animal part way up a tree. He springs! He comes back down with it in his jaws, blood dripping all over his fur. Messy eaters. Almost as bad as any of the dinos.

^Wait! Don't eat that! It will make you sick!^

The first five haven't. Tasty. What's Silas all upset about?

I turn around.

~That's what I have been trying to tell you. All of the plant life is from our world. They brought it with them at the beginning. It is not the plants and animals that are the problem. Or rather, it is the sticky weed, not everything else. The sticky weed is used to keep everyone else slow.~

^How come we don't recognize it? That tree over there.^ I point to the red leafed one. ^I certainly have never seen anything like that.^

~That's because it is not from our side of the planet according to this.~ He briefly shows the sphere.

Nipper looks up from his meal, licking his lips. Disgusting.

I heard that.

^Not polite to read other sentient's minds. How did something from the other side of the planet get here?^

~It says that the Giver brought them.~

^What is the Giver?^

The one I have been hunting. It is here someplace. No longer on our world, so must be here.

We both turn to face Nipper.

^Okay, spill it, as the Hu say. What or who is the Giver and why are you hunting it? No gender?^

He licks his behind with a back leg up in the air. I think that is one of the most disgusting things a Cat can do. I am not sure if I am jealous or ready to regurgitate. No wonder Cats don't kiss like the Hu. Shit breath.

Jealous definitely.

^Stop that or we leave.^

And go where? Aren't you curious?

~That is a Cat and Hu problem. Being safe and well fed works for me. Now that we know we can survive here all we have to do is get some distance away.~

Oh, just how far do you think the edible material extends? About two kilometers out it is all sticky weed and then much worse.

^Stop with the testosterone overdose. What is the Giver?^

Don't know. Never met one.

I ruffle my glide flaps and start down the trail. Don't like being played with.

Too bad, it is the way of the Cat and I am a Cat. Can't help it.

^And I can't help being Ba. I am following the way of the Ba.^

You too?

I hear Silas behind me.

He hands me, ~I need to get the sphere back to the Matriarch.~

I hand back, ~Better than being the mouse to the Cat. Got any ideas how to get back to the portal?~

~Someone in the castle must know. Need to hide around for awhile to see and hear. Hope you don't mind being in the rafters.~

^Not at all. Better than dying in a mag pool in the dark.^

~Silence! Hide now!~

I scoot up the nearest tree and fold my arms to look like branches. Being light I manage to get nearly to the top. Silas folds into the trunk and disappears. Amazing how he does that. Even the sphere, covered by his skin, looks like a root nodule. I am glad there are no other Ceph here, at least that we know of. Anyone not used to Ceph abilities will have a very hard time finding him unless they step on him.

"I know I heard something over here." A heavy Hu looks right at Silas but does not see him. I hold my breath though I know he could not possibly see or hear me.

"Come on. We are needed at the castle. Probably just a startled rat."

There are any left? I would have thought Nipper had gotten them all. We are getting thinner and thinner and he appears to be getting fatter. Without thinking I grab a beetle on the branch near me and munch it down. Not as good as cooked, but I am hungry enough it does not matter. It will take a lot more to quiet my stomach.

I hear a whistle and look down. ~Let's get out of here. They or someone else could come back in a moment. Too open here.~ I scurry down quickly. Trees and cliffs are what we are good at. Just don't ask me to swim further than I can reach.

^Well, now what? It appears we can eat anything that does not have sticky weed in it. What's on the menu first?^

~Staying alive. Move it.~ I can run twice as fast as he can and he is saying to move it? Too long around Hu.

^You want me to carry it?^ I open my empty pack and he drops it in. Heavy, but we will be faster this way.

We head further up hill. Less trees here. When we reach the ridge and look towards the east we see a total absence of life as we know it. The ground is burned black. Further on is where the native live begins. There is sticky weed everywhere, but also some very strange purple, red and drab green, almost brown plants. Leaves, spirals, mats of tangled twigs. Nothing moves. Totally silent.

~There. See that ravine? That is where we will go if they get too close.~

^You are thinking that they won't follow us?^

~They are too big to follow us. Look how tight everything is. I doubt very much one of their fat Ba would try either.~

^And the Dia are too sick to make it this far much less give chase. We will need water and food.^

~There is a lake near by on our side. We will have to fish at night. I am sure they will watch it, at least during the day.~ He has a much better sense of smell for water than I do.

^How do you know it will have fish?^

~What other protein sources have you seen? They are not raising animals unless you count rats. I suspect they came through unwanted.~

^They have some insects, but the Ba probably get those. Would not even be surprised to hear they have made it illegal to eat one. Don't forget the dogs though. Have not seen one yet though. Wonder where they keep them?^

~Unlikely anyone would eat bugs except a Ba.~ I show amusement.

^Good show Si. A rotting log! We have dinner!^

We quickly make splinters of the fallen tree trunk. Lots of beetles, grubs and termites.

~Still think cooked would help, but they were good. I will need to rest now.~ I am already leaning against the nearest live tree and have nearly gone asleep when something bites me.

^Ow! What's that?^ I swat at a bug that has bitten down hard on my foot. I pick it up to look at, being careful of the pincers. I get up and bring it over to Silas.

^Have you seen anything like this before? Native?^

~Let me taste it.~ He reaches out.

^Are you dried out? These things bite. Got me on the foot.^

~Hold it tight then.~ He reaches out with a finger and gently strokes it's back where it can't reach back to defend itself.

~High in something I don't recognize. Like the ant things at the portal. Have tasted a few others on this world as well. I don't think they are

native, but who knows. We have hardly gotten far into native territory.~ I set it down and try to smash it with a rock. The first attempt fails, but I finally get it on the second.

^The blood is blue!^ I have never seen a creature with blood this color.

Si looks at it more carefully but can make no more sense out of it than I can.

After a short nap we make our way to the lake.

^This is a lake? Looks more like a puddle to me.^

~If it has fish I don't care. Not salty. Test it for mag for me. I don't taste it, but after last time . . .~

^Understood.^ I taste it. ^No salt or mag is my guess. Tastes more like tea, wood tea. Lots of organics. Should not hurt you, but I am no pollution authority.^

~No we are just two fish mongers.~ He shows amusement.

^Two fish mongers at the thin end of a branch too high up a tree at night during a storm.^ About as bad as it can get.

~Maybe only a light storm.~

It can get a lot worse. I assume you have noticed the rangers protecting the lake?

^Did you hear something? Must be another one of those biting bugs.^

~Probably. Two Hu guards an eighth kilo to our right. Keep quiet.~

I hand him, ~Best wait until dark.~

~Not me. Hu don't swim that well. I am going in. Guard the sphere.~ He slips below the surface. Nipper comes up to sniff the water where he went in.

I decide to be more diplomatic and start to give him a back massage. He purrs so loud I think we will be heard. He is good at getting us into trouble. He must have read my thoughts though and purrs softer.

We move a little ways into the trees and wait with a good view of the shore. I can see the camp fire, of the guards, as it grows dark. They must have to stay here for days at a time. I am surprised they don't have a hut or something. Weather is good though. They could certainly see more outside than in. Orders? Who would come this far from the castle to steal fish though. Other than us of course. None of the slaves looked strong enough or willing enough.

Too bad we can't have a fire. I like fires. Fish cooked over an open fire is the best way.

You are thinking that Silas will bring anything back for us? We ate our fill of bugs and grubs. Neither of us is particularly hungry. He is just

investigating the lake to be sure we can use it later as a food source.

They have fish at the ranger camp. I saw them get them from the lake. They used fishing poles like our Hu do. No honor in the catch at all.

How did they set all this up? From the ridge it is much larger than you said. It is at least two kilometers to the ocean from here and there are Hu trees nearly to the edge. They then follow this ridge quite some ways south of here.

Yes. I see your point. The settlement is much bigger than I thought. I just went until I ran into a patch of sticky weed and assumed that was the edge.

We hear a small splash and see Silas come back ashore and put his shoe back on. Underwater it would be a hindrance, but definitely necessary above water. As I suspected, he is not carrying any fish.

He ignores Nipper and hands me. Nipper can read our minds anyway, so we really don't have to com him.

~Lots of fish. Trout species as I would have suspected. Lots of them in the streams on Hu Eden. They started with species mostly from our area.~

~From three hundred years ago. We have changed the ecology somewhat in that time to appease the other sentients needs. At least the redwoods and oak trees are here. Only the redwoods are much smaller.~

~Don't they need a certain number of each species to survive? Granted it is much bigger than we thought from Nipper's description, but still. I remember it had to be something like a thousand individuals to have a healthy genetic pool.~

~There are certainly not a thousand Ba unless they have another settlement much bigger that we have not seen. Hu, counting the slaves, maybe, just maybe. Dia certainly not.~

~And we have only seen a few Di. So, where is everyone?~

~Maybe they don't care. Maybe this settlement is not meant to last that long. Even if they just end up with Hu and Ba, they could last a few thousand years. Maybe they did not expect to be cut off and are doing the best they can.~

~So you are saying we need to ask why they are here, not who is here?~

Maybe you don't know what you are thinking.

~You are not helping to inform us are you? We have to do the best we can then.~

The Giver is not a sentient species we know about. We believe it to be a dangerous species.

~Who is 'we'?~

I am part of a large network that keeps a watch on communities.

~To be sure they are following the pollution and population laws.~

More, but that is a large part. We also look for trends too subtle to count and anything strange that can't be explained. The 'wall' you saw in the cave is part of a defensive network we monitor. Without it the Giver species would likely destroy Hu-Eden. We noticed occasional fluctuations but every time we investigated everything seemed fine. The reports never got past the local level for that reason. I personally think that was a mistake.

~But you are a grunt just like us. You would think that missing sentients would be noticed.~

Things happen to sentients all the time that are never investigated. A certain level of loss is accepted as normal. Over three hundred years a lot of sentients can disappear without being noticed. Most appear to have been recruited as well. That makes it less likely their disappearance would be commented on.

~The sphere says this was done with full understanding and cooperation of the Matriarch. She saw it as a potential new colony site.~

~I want to know if the sphere is the one the Matriarch is in fact missing. Or was the one we found broken in the cave the one?~

I don't have enough information. I was told to find the Giver. The sphere and anything else that was missing was inconsequential.

~Any important information is recorded many times. No information was lost.~

~Okay, I am confused. Aren't the spheres open to the public for anyone to read? No one has ever mentioned this one to me.~

Silas flushed white. ~Not all spheres are shared. At least not until the Matriarch's death and the successor can decide not to release it as well.~

~So much for that myth. What else are you two not telling me?~

It is totally dark now. The fire across the way is getting low. Lots of bugs making noises. Frogs too. They keep increasing in volume and then suddenly stop. Something must have startled them. I can't believe how loud they are.

~Some time before the moon comes up. We should move further south to avoid the rangers.~

They are at regular intervals. This is about the best we can do. Now would be a good time to fish for the morning meal.

~It won't take that long and they will come closer to the surface just as it starts to get light.~

~When the insects are swarming of course. Best sleep now then.~

I climb a nearby oak tree, the redwoods being closer to the ocean. Not the same, but I make do. Nipper takes an opposing branch. A low branch. He could easily drop on anyone coming by. Silas curls up in a crook in the roots and goes quiet.

When I wake at first light Silas and Nipper are both gone. We are well away from the farm and orchards. My best possible contribution is going to be more grubs. I climb down and go hunting for likely logs. It does not take me long and I start filling a bag with the best ones. Can't believe I am looking forward to fish. Rain water fish are different. Maybe that is it.

I have the materials to start a fire easily, but do I dare? I know Nipper does not care if his meal is cooked, but I have gotten used to cooked meat.

^Oh, look at those!^ I see a large pile of pine cones. Not as good as redwood cones slow boiled and it will take a lot of work to extract the nuts, but it would help to vary what we eat. I should have climbed a pine tree, but being dark when I chose, I took the easiest, not the best.

I have a small pile of pine nuts when the others return. Oh, and the grubs. Not too happy in the bag. At least I remembered to keep it in the shade. They rot fast in the sun.

~As usual, Nipper ate his contribution. More rats. Can't believe there are any left on this world.~ But Nipper is sniffing at Silas' fish bag.

It is still early, but we feast on pine nuts, grubs and fresh fish. We throw the heads and fins to Nipper who relishes them at first, but soon grows tired of them and lets them accumulate around him before getting annoyed by the occasional hits and wanders off.

I risk talking. There is enough background noise I should be okay.

^We need a plan. It would be too easy to settle in and forget our mission.^

~Until it snows. Horrible stuff. We need to get back to the iron grid room. There must be some way to activate a return portal.~

^Nipper could get us in if we get close enough. They appear to have stopped looking for us.^

~Probably think we have died by now. Not that hard to avoid sticky weed and the other variants. I wonder how they convinced the others that the local life was poison?~

^They did a good effort. Everyone is so thin. Wonder what would happen if we convinced them otherwise?^

I would not try. The Giver has the capability to change them over time. It really may be poisonous to them now. It has had three hundred

years to play with their genetics.

~Then why guard the lake? Who would attempt to eat the fish?~

^Someone who was really hungry? From the history classes the rich do crazy things. The Ba are apparently the rich here. What I don't understand is why did they accept me for as long as they did.^

They were told to by the Giver. It is sniffing us out. Probably not had any new comers for some time. It and they would be curious. Probably also why they have not done much to find us. They figure, if we survive, we will show ourselves again soon enough. I suspect we could walk into the castle without anyone caring.

~Not sure I am willing to try that.~

^It would be less suspicious. Popping into the iron room and scaring everyone again would not be my way to make friends.^

Nipper suddenly pins me to the ground and growls, *NEVER think that they can be friends. Once their curiosity is satisfied they will likely try and eat you as a delicacy. And they are not Hu, they do not stay curious for long.*

~Then we go in without their knowledge. Since the Ba do not work, they will not have good night vision.~

^I would not be so sure. They have lots of holes in the surface of the castle. It would only take one Ba to raise an alarm and order others to expect us. None of us is going to sneak in under their feet.^ We both look to Nipper.

You both want to go home. I can understand that. However, it is not my desire, nor that of the Matriarch.

^Then what do you want us to do?^

We need to see the Giver. I came to get more information on the Giver and we have yet to see it.

~That is showing crazy recklessness. Only a very desperate unseen would even attempt such a task.~

^Hey, we three found their tracks in the trees. We went into a deep cave, found the wall, figured out how to activate it without any help.^ I give Nipper a dirty look. ^We then survived till this day on a strange world we know nothing about. We have done great. It may be crazy, but it is not hopeless.^

~I have a question Nipper. Do you know how to get back?~

He looks at us and pauses, thinking.

No. I believe your thinking is sound. The answer is in the dungeon. That is what those rooms are called. But only the Giver knows how to make it work.

~I figured out the first puzzle. I can figure out this one.~

Did you ever wonder how so many sentients ended up here and put up with this abuse? If they could leave don't you think they would? The Giver controls the portal on this side. No one leaves without the Giver allowing it. I suspect the Giver has to activate the portal and does not trust anyone else to do so.

^Too much temptation for anyone else. Thus we know the Giver knows exactly who it is working with. The Giver knows each of the species well. It can manipulate each to its advantage. It is likely trying to do the same to us now. Do we do what it expects, knowing we know we are following the path only to get in, or do we do something totally unexpected?^

~This means you knew this was likely a suicide mission.~ He is clearly upset. I have never seen such a bright clear showing from Si. His Ceph is usually a bit sloppy.

You two were scheduled to be darted for trespassing. On Hu-Eden your deaths are already recorded. No one misses you. You are still alive here. Enough said.

^Oh wise Cat. What do you propose then?^

Meanwhile Silas has removed the sphere from my pack again and is reading it.

^Just how much information is on that thing anyway?^

~Not that easy to read. Not like we have classes in it. I think I see a pattern to it and should be able to actually find what we want now. At first I was only falling into information and trying to make sense of it. Now I have found an index of sorts that tells where.

This is what is recorded. The first Matriarch to make a record was two hundred and ninety three years ago by the Hu method. A few Hu infants playing in the forest found the cave and investigated it. When they found the wall, they reported it to the Matriarch's staff and she took over. A minor Ceph scientist found the hole in the wall and after years of effort a team figured out how to activate the portal.~ Si shows amusement. He was able to accomplish what took years for others to do.

~Ah, they simplified the procedure by making some changes to the mechanism. Anyway, they sent Guards in to survey the world they found. The portal would only stay open for about an arm, so they learned to time the portal openings so sens could come and go at specified times.

There they ran into the sticky weed and relatives. Some sentients coming back were found to be severely allergic to the plants. Procedures were put into place to decon returning groups. Sentients were tested for

allergies before sending them on a recon team from that point on.

The next Matriarch decided that research was fine and good, but not enough. She decided that it would be important to establish a permanent base on New Eden. It certainly does not feel like an Eden to me. Anyway, they built the castle from local rock, set up the forests after burning away most of the locals during the dry season. Apparently the stuff is very flammable when dry. All that we see is from that one fire. It was deemed too dangerous to try it again.

The burning worked, by planting the young trees in waste from the compost fields they were able to start things off very rapidly. The redwoods we see are the only first gen, everything else is much more recent apparently.

Ah, then there was some kind of dispute. The settlement ended up with two Matriarchs for a few years. Suddenly one disappeared and the portal was closed. The new one on this side did not want anyone coming back to threaten her apparently.~

^It sounds like the portal was only able to be activated from the Hu-Eden side. So, why reactivate the portal now? They were safe.^

~I am guessing they didn't reactivate the portal. The method was lost and forgotten. The cave was blocked and sealed shut it says here.~

Someone else on this side figured out how to get through. We tracked them back to the cave. One of the first things they stole was this sphere. It was one of only two spheres with these details.

^The other sphere was the one broken in the cave. They wanted us to find that one and know they now had the only copy.^

~We have not seen any Ceph here. It would appear that none have survived.~

At this elevation you would expect to see a large Ceph presence?

~No, I wouldn't actually. I would not expect to see any Ceph up here. Only crazy tree climbing Ceph would be up here. We need to get to the coast. That is why they set the fire to go in that direction. With Ba help they would have been able to figure it out quite precisely.~

^I agree. Ba were needed to pull this off. We have only seen a small portion of their population. The Ba would be the ones most comfortable up here in the forest. I bet the Ceph rule the coast. Might be were we find more of the Dia as well.^

We move at night.

Ba-Eden

"Hernkic, what is your summation of what happened?"

!Having been a student of Hu history, especially the entertainment sector, it reminds me of the Manchurian Candidate. Someone who was used but did not understand they were being used until triggered. At that point they lost all free will and were under total control of the imperative to act they way they did!

I look at my notes, "So the Seeker Lessa, a female Dia, did not know she was a vector."

!I don't believe so. Di are not that different than the Dia. We share similar expressions and mannerisms, especially now that we interact. She was totally surprised by what happened. When I saw her afterwards just before she died, she could tell us nothing and was horrified at what happened.!

+Thank you Instructor Hernkic. Okay class, you have your reports due tomorrow. Don't waste time. You may use any of the literature we have covered and anything you have heard here today. Just remember to quote the sources properly.+

My head still hurts from all the languages we have had to endure. The Hu was the worst. Totally illogical language structure. It will be some time before I try to speak it out loud. Hard enough to understand or read it.

+Seeker Fa, please remain behind for a moment.+ What am I in trouble for now? I can't seem to stay out of sight here.

She finishes gathering her things into a shoulder sling. The design is a good one. Better than what we used to use. Seeker Ge came up with it in engineering class and all of us Ku have adopted it. Ge was ecstatic when he saw Instructor Ba'ba'ra asking for one. We know she could make one herself instantly, though we are not allowed to tell anyone, but she did the honor of asking for one made by hand by our Ku gild. All the rest of the Ku made their own of course, but no one grudges an Instructor for asking for one already made.

I look out the window. I have never seen so much glass. Imagine the far seer I could make with a fraction of it. I did fine on the math aptitude and qualified for engineering school, but Instructor Ba said no. She made it clear that it was not negotiable.

Now I know that my initial infatuation, Affik, is in fact one of our Teachers, a Guardian and totally off limits. I am told to keep this a secret,

even from the other students, especially the other Ku. I don't like keeping secrets, but I have come to trust Instructor Ba and Affik. Even when I don't know why, I know they only have very good reasons for their actions.

I have to keep a lot of secrets. I tend to figure things out too fast. The instructors want other students to have a chance to use their minds as well. The first time in my life I am able to use my mind openly and I am told not to squawk. Very hard. I get excited by knowledge. I am drawn to it. I live for it. There is so much. The greatest feast I have ever seen.

+Seeker Fa, you will follow me.+ Sigh. Outside, I see the sun going down. I did not realize we were in the classroom so late. The others are probably already eating the last meal. Food is interesting here. We are not limited to Ku food choices. We are free to try any of the sentient forms of nutrition. Being on a Ba world means a lot of insect cuisine. I never knew they could be prepared in so many delicious ways. Hu food is too salty and too sweet. Not enough protein. The Dino, collectively, are the opposite. No taste, all raw meat and tasteless melons. And the Ceph. No way. Smells bad.

My stomach is rumbling as we go up a long winding path all up hill. It is hard work. I am tired and I have a report due tomorrow. Of course I have already written it twice, but it never hurts to go over it again. The worst part is we have to write it in anything but Ku. For practice reasons. I chose Ceph. Their food may not be good, but the language is all logic and a perfect fit. Besides, no one else in the class can read my notes. Wish I could obtain a practice sphere to put it on. Does not seem authentic on soft clay with so much oil in it that it will never harden in my life time.

I am wondering what she wants this time. I would really like to get back to my far seerer. It looks to be a clear night and I have neglected my sky studies.

+You used to like the night. Seems you used to spend most of your time out on a hill at night with your far seer. What has changed Fa? Have you lost your vision?+

+Ah, no Instructor, just that with all the studies, there is no time any more. It is still not clear to me what you want of me. A known direction would help me focus.+

+You will chose your own direction when you are ready. My purpose is to help you find your strengths and weaknesses. You are failing martial arts.+ I hate martial arts. How can I even pretend to do something that I would never do? There seems to be fifty ways in each sentient path to kill

another. I would rather eat poisonous butterflies.

+I am sorry. I will strive to do better.+

+I have taken you out of martial arts. You will take it up again when you are ready. It will be harder for you later, but we can't always do everything the easiest way. We each learn in different ways. I was never very good at martial arts either. But I learned. Now, what did you think of the attack on the Instructor Sussi?+

I sigh, +She is still alive. She is a Guardian, as is Hernkic, though not at the same level. I suspect that you also have Seeker Lessa somewhere.+

+You will tell no one this and it had better not be in your report.+ I wonder how I can get any grade at all given how much I am required to leave out.

She continues, +A lot of very good sentients died at their hands. That is real. This is not an intellectual exercise. We ask our students to see if they can lend any new insight, not so they can figure out our secrets. Secrets that must be kept to insure our entire culture's safety. Do you have any insights to this situation.+

+Yes Instructor. The First Ones are a very old culture that has a lot of experience. It is unlikely you will be able to outsmart them. They are also very careful. By using agents instead of acting directly they can be far away before the trap is sprung. It is likely that there are in fact very few of them. I also feel that individually they are not strong, definitely less than the highest Guardians. They depend more on stealth than power. They have a fear of tech because it takes time to learn any new culture's tech as it often takes us a lifetime to learn a skill well. The more advanced a tech the longer time it takes to learn and the culture is likely to be advancing at the same time they are attempting to learn and take care of all of their schemes. They can't afford to make mistakes.

Just as you could have diverted the comet that struck Ku by making a small change a long time ago, they make subtle changes that usually go unnoticed. It was actually a mistake in my opinion to draw attention to themselves. They must be time limited in some plan. It would be helpful to know more about the Guardian culture to try and understand what possible objectives they have.+

She shows amusement, +You figure out far too much on your own. Walk now so I can think, but think on this. The Center Library says no culture has been able to figure out their motives. Oh, they are not the First Ones at any rate. Something called the Piskon Hive if that lends insight.+

We continue for a time. My feet are getting sore and I am hungry. Maybe if I had paid more attention in martial arts I could learn to

suppress the pain better. Even if I don't learn to kill, there may be some benefit. Guess I won't know now.

+We are here.+ Not so far after all. I look around. Judging from the arc of the sky lights, we are at the top of a hill, out of sight of the settlement. Night fires and lights would have been lit by now and I see none. Though it is dark enough to not see my own claws, I have learned to see in other ways. By listening carefully to an Instructor and going in their direction it is usually possible to keep up. Don't know how they can see so well, but I guess that is part of the learning as well.

I walk right into a wall and nearly break my beak with a squawk.

+This way little one.+ I orient to the sound of her voice and proceed more cautiously. Helps to pay attention and not think so much. By placing one arm against the wall I sense we are proceeding around a round structure.

There is a brief flash of a small amount of light as a portal opens and closes. I see the Instructor's silhouette disappear into the portal. I find the opening and proceed myself.

Inside my eyes, already adapted to low light, I am able to find the Instructor after a moment of searching. She is close to what looks like several sentients up a stairway. At least I can see many arms moving. When I get closer I see it is not several people, but only one, a Ceph. There is a weak red light on his mantle. Took me awhile to always search for the extra arm in the right location to determine gender.

I try to follow along, but he is clearly upset and not always sharp in his rendering. It also does not help that she is between us. I decide this might be on purpose and I look around instead. As soon as I turn I see it and nearly poop on the spot. All of us Ku had to learn never to poop inside a structure and only in designated locations outside.

What is before me is the largest far seer I have ever even thought to imagine. It is a strange design though. Normally I would expect the viewing lens to be at the base. Instead there is a scaffold along the rim of the dome that allows one to see through a view lens near the top. I sit and think about this for a moment. Then it comes to me. I can visualize the entire structure.

+It uses a mirror instead of a lens! This is amazing!+ I quickly estimate the diameter of the lens. Hmm, there is a substantial amount of support structure, so it is not the entire width of the base. Maybe four strides or two meters as the universal measurement system would figure to. The distance from the mirror to the receiving lens must be ten meters. Ten meters, twenty strides! Ah, another meter. There is another mirror in

the center near the top to reflect the image to the viewing lens. So, eleven meters total.

I look up to the Instructors to see them both watching me. Both showing amusement. I don't care.

+I need to see! I need to see!+ There are tears in my eyes. Not easy for Ku to do, but I am so excited I can't help it. I look quickly around the room to see how I get to the viewing lens. There! I run to the sharply angled stair. Not easy for me to climb, but struggling I manage. Only a few more meters. I am out of breath when I reach the lens. I grasp the handle and move my eye over the lens.

+Nothing! I see nothing!+ I look around. What could it be? I can see the mirror below me. Shiny and silver. I think about that. Yes, silver is good. I slowly look up. The smaller reflector is also silver and looks right. So, what is it? I think. Light comes from the sky lights, reflects off the first mirror, to the secondary mirror and then to the viewing lens. Sky lights.

+Where are the sky lights?+ I look up to the top of the coop. I mean enclosure. Whatever. No lights. What? How can?

+What is the purpose of a far seer that is covered by wood? This is a far seer isn't it? Oh please let it be a far seer!+ I stand watching them. Finally the Ceph moves over to a column at the edge of the structure and turns a wheel. I hear movement and look up. A slit opens up in the top. As soon as I see it uncover the top of the far seer I look through the viewing lens. I see light, but it is not in focus. I look for a mechanism to focus. Usually I would just push the lens in and out to focus. I try that first but it does not move. He opened the top with the wheel. I look to anything close to the viewing lens and finally see a small hand sized solid circle. I try turning it. It moves. I angle my eye over the viewing lens and turn the circle. It gets worse. I turn the other way and suddenly it is very sharp. Oh so very sharp. I don't recognize the sky lights, but with this much power I would be surprised if I did.

I need to know more. I need to know how to move it, both up and down and around.

+Charts. There must be charts. Where are the charts?+

The Ceph is back to Instructor Ba. I climb down slowly. I am weak from the excitement. Don't want flying lessons now that I have come this far. I find my way over to the two of them and wait patiently for them to finish. He is viewing something on a flat surface. Ceph numbers. Lots and lots of them. A regular array of numbers arranged in columns and rows. The numbers progress to higher values from lower values. The

same going up and down, but only along the edges. The numbers in the center are much smaller and not always present. I blur my vision and see the pattern now. The sky lights above that I recognize are indicated by larger sized numbers.

+The smaller sized numbers must be sky lights that cannot be seen by my smaller far seer. The numbers across the top and side must indicate position. How do you account for time of day and day of year?+

~I cannot have this one as a student. She does not wait for instruction. I have no time for an impatient one such as this.~ I am shamed.

~This one's world is gone. She predicted it moons ahead of time with a half meter long refractor with limited magnification she made herself, including grinding the lenses. No one else on her world even had figured out how to build one, much less use one. She determined their world is round, even though no one else believed this. She may be inquisitive and impatient, but she could run circles around your understanding in less than an eight day. I understand why you would not want to be embarrassed by such as her.~ She shows all this very politely. Her Ceph is flawless, even when done with arms. If there is anything such as poetry in Ceph, it is her showing.

+If my far seer was a "refractor", meaning it works by bending light, then this must be a "reflector", because it works by reflecting light.+ Instructor Ba shows amusement. The words don't exist in Ku and I am forced to use the Hu words.

~A lucky guess.~

~You are a very stubborn old Ceph.~ She turns to me, +Fa, what have you been observing most recently with your far seer?+ She says this in Ceph at the same time so he can understand. Almost no other sentients have bothered to learn Ku. There are so few of us yet. Two clutches have been laid though. Who would have thought that garden workers would be able to reproduce much less want to.

+Instructor. I have been following a sky light near the fourth world from the sun. It appears to be coming along a path that will intersect this world in three years and two moons time. My far seer is not accurate enough to be sure though.+

Again showing in Ceph as well, +Maybe we could use this far seer to confirm your observations. I translated your observations into units he will understand.+ She hands the Ceph some numbers on a piece of ceramic. A tablet. We use them all the time in class. Easy to clean and reuse. She stares at him in that way I know means no choice in his path. He soon realizes this and climbs down the stairs to the mechanism below.

Using the back of his body he shows, ~There is nothing close by at these coordinates. I have very accurate charts. You must be mistaken. There is an asteroid, but it is at least a tenth of a degree from this location and no danger to us. I would have to check my charts to be sure of course. Even I cannot remember every one.~ Ah, but he must have been looking at this portion of the sky recently to have remembered that much. ~What is an asteroid~?

Instructor Ba motions me to go up to the viewer again. Tired, I still try to move as quickly as I can. I slip once on a step. I am fine. I try and be more careful. When I get there the far seer has moved to a new position and the Ceph is ahead of me and already looking. I wished I could have seen it operate. Noisy enough. I have never seen this much metal in one place before.

He is clearly upset.

~This is impossible! No asteroid can change direction in this manner. I will need to make more measurements over the next eight day to be sure. I need to concentrate. This is horrible. I can't believe it. There must be something wrong. I will figure it out and prove this hypothesis wrong.~

I look through the far seer and see the ~asteroid~ very clearly. No tail, so clearly not a comet like the one that hit us. Not quite round. Interesting. This is a very good far seer.

+Come with me Seeker Fa. We have work to do.+

+Instructor Ba, the far seer you made me is better than the one I made, but this one is incredible. So an ~asteroid~ is not the same as a comet. Made from different material.+

+Correct. This far seer is not as portable and takes longer to scan the entire sky. A good sky watcher uses both. Who said I made the far seer?+ I just look at her and she shows amusement.

+Okay, we are far enough away. It would appear I can keep no secrets from you and this is too important to play hide and seek with. Technically I do not need to make a flying craft, but I will do so for your benefit.+

The wind suddenly becomes very strong and a shape starts to take form in front of us. Granted I am only seeing this in silhouette.

A light appears. A glowing sphere with no apparent support or source. She can read minds as well!

+Stop that. Otherwise there will be nothing left for you to learn in your new school.+

The shape finishes. A smaller version of the craft we came to this world in. The portal opens and she immediately enters. I scramble in and

take a position on a perch. The portal closes and we are suddenly above the world. Then a moment later we are much further away.

+This craft will go much faster than the other one?+

+This craft is incapable of any movement. It has no power source. It is only here to provide you with a comfortable environment so as not to frighten you. We have work to do and that would not be possible with you unconscious. Now where is that pesky thing?+

+You are going to prevent this asteroid from hitting the world.+

+Yes, but not for reasons you think. If this large rock had gotten to this position naturally without interference from another sentient being, then it would be a council decision. Three years gives just enough time for thought. But you heard Instructor Xot. He confirmed my suspicions that this was not a natural event. The Guardians have a very powerful enemy. One that apparently will not stop at anything to destroy us, even if the innocent must die as well.

+He has not confirmed yet. He said it would take an eight day to be sure. Did they send the comet into Ku-Ra?+

+We don't think so. But now I am not sure. No, I am sure. We plotted it for twenty four years before it hit. No surprises like this one and the last one. And his confirmation is enough. Ceph tend to be too thorough at times and are afraid to act when they could do so easier sooner than later.

+ They knew before I was hatched. Interesting.+

+Last one? There was another?+

+An important world in our group was hit by a smaller comet. Not as much damage as on your world. They will likely survive with some help. It came from an unexpected direction. It is possible it was natural, so there has been some hesitation to interfere. Now with evidence from this world it will likely be declared intentional and more help will be offered.

+

+So a world that was part of your flock does not have any special privileges?+

+Some. Had we known of the comet, there was a chance that something might have been done, even if just an evacuation. The population on each world is purposely kept low so the world will not be in trouble for most disasters. Unpleasant, but not devastating.+

+What is the purpose of this logic?+

+Do you want me to train you completely before you even arrive? We need to concentrate on finding the asteroid.+

+You could make me another far seer?+

+I need mass to do that and there is nothing close.+

+Except the craft itself. You said it was unnecessary.+
+You are not ready. We will make a short side trip.+ We move again and in a few hops later we are on the surface of a strange world. The dust is reddish in color. I weigh less, much less, than normal.

+We are on the fourth world from the sun.+

+Correct.+ A large chunk of ground moves up into the air and disappears. Then we do. We appear above the world with the loose association of rocks. The chunk of ground changes before me and gradually takes the shape of a large far seer. Much larger even than the one the Ceph was using. A smaller one appears above it and near the viewer lenses. Our craft approaches the two far seeres and then merges with the two! Now the end of the viewer end of the large one and the entire smaller far seer are in our craft.

+No reason to be uncomfortable. We will use the smaller one to try and find possible candidates and then the larger one to confirm before going there.+

+It would be easier to find from the world we were on than from here. I am not good enough to move all of the worlds in my mind.+

+Fair enough. This will be a little slower as there is much more mass to move.+ We start to move and gradually speed up. We hop, but don't go that far. It takes many such hops before we finally arrive back at the beautiful blue world. We are on the dark side. That makes sense. On the bright side we would not be able to see anything.

She emits a strange sound like escaping low pressure air.

+I am afraid we have been seen.+

+By whom? Surely we are the only ones up here?+

+Down below. Xot is still tracking the asteroid and we are in the line of sight. He has seen us and gotten upset.+

+Can he actually see us?+ I look below and wave my arms and feathers.

+Not that good. But the large far seer is obvious. We appear as a non descript bulge on one side. Helps that our feathers are nearly the same brightness as the seer and the craft is transparent.+

+Bring him up here. He can help! He knows exactly where the asteroid is.+ I am excited. I suspect that I could find it from here, but it would be better if he participated as well. +I think we owe Xot. After all, without his help we would not have known the asteroid was out of place. I really don't want to be have been on two doomed worlds.+

+This is not regular. Xot will be missed. I could explain your being missing as everyone knows I am giving you extra work. I brought you

here to see if we could confirm your findings.+

+After Ku Eden you did not believe my results?+

+Guano, he has added extra lenses. Might was well wave. He can make out there are two Ku like creatures up here.+

I show amusement and wave my arms, beckoning him to join us.

+He won't know what that means. Yes I believed you, but I needed the others to know.+

+No reason to worry about that now.+

She lets air out of her lungs, +I know. You are right. Move over to the far perch. There is not much room in there. I was not expecting three of us.+

As soon as I move he appears. He is paralyzed with fear. There is ink leaking out of his mantle, but in the weightless state it does not go far. He does not even try to match his surroundings.

+Instructor Xot. There is nothing to fear.+ That only upsets him more. He probably thinks we are going to eat him.

Correct. I am going to open my thoughts to him to reassure him we mean him no harm.

So, it is not just seeing another's mind, but you can give thoughts as well.

Shhh.

Huh? In a moment Xot seems to calm down. Some color patterns appear. He slowly starts to come alive again.

~You were correct. I don't understand how it could be where it is. She was wrong in her calculations though. Not surprising considering the equipment she had to work with. She assumed it would not hit until the next trip around the sun. It will actually hit in twenty three days.~

Ba answers, ~Because someone put it there. We need your help to locate the asteroid and move it again. Quickly.~

~Has it moved again already? How do you propose moving it? We are still above Ba Eden I assume. I am guessing several hundred kilometers. The asteroid is much further away. Given the time it would take us to get there, do we have enough time? How much push does this craft have? I estimated the asteroid's mass at three thousand tons. It would not destroy this world, but could do much damage at the speed it is coming toward us.~

+Does he always think out loud?+

+Most males do. They have a need to feel superior even in overwhelming evidence to the contrary.+

~First we find the asteroid. Then we worry about what to do. This far

seer below us will assist us. Please help us line it up properly to see our prey.~

He startles at the showing of prey. He looks into the far seer. He flashes much excitement.

~How do I move the far seer? Amazing detail. Being above the atmosphere is definitely better as I suspected. You will of course leave this far seer here for us after we are done.~ He presumes much. How exactly does he expect to get here and back? Instructor Ba is not likely to give up all of her other duties just to transport Ceph sky watchers.

~Tell which way you wish to move and I will operate the controls.~

~It would be easier if I controlled the movement.~ He holds out an arm.

Ba shows amusement and hands him a box with four depressive devices on it. It is independent with no wire or visible means of communicating with the far seer. Nor are there any visible means for the far seer to move.

+The box is empty. You will read his mind to determine which way to move.+

+Be quiet.+ He already knows more than he should. What does it matter now? I am clearly not needed any more. I sulk on my perch watching the world underneath. Fascinating how the white material slowly moves. So slow.

+Those are clouds!+

+BE QUIET!+

I see rivers, mountains, oceans and lakes. Look at that cloud pattern! Like a spiral with two arms. I don't know where we are. What down there is our roost?

+We have the asteroid in sight. Prepare for rendezvous.+

+Don't I get to see?+ We move rapidly after disengaging from the far seerers. We sling around the fourth world. The speck of light that is our prey grows larger. Not that much light. Almost dark actually. Holy sky demons. That is one large rock!

We move closer and closer. I cannot judge the distance. I have nothing to relate to. It just keeps getting bigger! Then we stop, a claws distance from the surface. There are many many circular depressions. Circles within circles. I am caught up in trying to figure out the pattern.

I am nudged by Ba, +There is no pattern Fa. They are caused by very small specks of rock hitting it over billions of years. Sometimes bigger rocks. No pattern.+

She continues this time in both Ceph and Ba, +Let us begin.+

~Excuse me Instructor Ba. I understand Ceph. Please save energy by continuing in Ceph alone. I will do likewise.~ I realize that I am not as graceful as she is, but hopefully I am understood.

~When did you say she started learning Ceph showing?~

~About two moons ago Instructor Xot.~

~Amazing.~ He flashes appreciation to me. I do my best imitation of a Nauti bow. He responds in kind.

~If you two are done, we need to decide what to do.~

~We? It is clear you have all the abilities.~

~All the same, I will not act unless both of you agree. Being a Guardian does not exclude one from accountability.~

~We could not force you nor prevent you from any action.~

~You do not believe so, but soon you two will be Guardians yourselves. It is best you start learning the Way of the Guardian.~ Xot draws a circle on his mantle with an arm. I have seen this action before.

Ba notices me watching this and comments, ~It is an ancient belief that drawing the symbol of the solid life form, the 'thn, will evoke their approval. In reality we do not seek their approval nor do they seek ours. A group of Guardians learned their secret and has told all of us. They no longer have any power over us.~

~Is that not dangerous? Temptation to exploit your own strength. No one should be all powerful.~ Xot looks visible upset by what I have just shown.

~It might be best if you returned me. I will say nothing to anyone. If you like I will remove myself to a Hu monastery and live a life in seclusion.~

~If you truly feel this way I will of course honor your request. Both Fa and I would prefer you joined us however. You have much insight we lack. That lack could prove dangerous to those still below, where you will be. We are not all powerful as Fa implied. Far from it.~

~Yes Instructor Xot. I may be quick in understanding, but I lack experience. I make mistakes before understanding truth. This is a time we can not afford a single mistake.~

~I would think that Instructor Ba, or rather Guardian Ba, if that is your true designation, would have the necessary experience.~

~No one knows everything. I am not well skilled in large killer rocks. But more importantly, as I said, I am not allowed any action without consensus of at least two others. Fa alone is not enough. I would be forced to wait for others to arrive. In the mean time, the asteroid will get closer to impact and fewer choices will be available when a decision does

finally arrive. Choices that will have consequences, if you understand my meaning.~

~And you will not break this rule, even to save millions of lives?~

~If I was not here, what would happen? The asteroid would hit and millions would die. There are no other Guardians present at the moment. We cannot intentionally create greater harm, but we are under no obligation to prevent harm. In fact sometimes inaction is actually the best action. Take the condition of Ku Eden. We allowed the comet to hit and effectively destroy the resident sentient life form and many others. If we had not, we know from experience, that they would have likely grown to be a terror race inflicting harm on many sentient beings.~

~Given that I am a member of that race, you can see my dilemma. Should I vote for saving the Ba sentients and others, or should I judge this asteroid to be natural and let the ways of life proceed without interference. What has been done to my race would incline me to not show special inclinations towards other races, especially one where Ba Guardians condemned my own.~

~I am neither Ba nor Ku. I will admit I have shown harmful thoughts towards the Ku, though I was not, obviously part of the decision. I was not even aware of it. I do not like the killing of others, though my own culture approves of much in this way as a necessary way of removing undesirable thoughts. All who survive to naming are the result of careful culling of the undesirable. It tends to make us a cautious sentient. Differences are suspect.~

~The Hu used to have a saying that the nail that stands out gets pounded down. Meaning, before you ask Fa, that differences are not to be tolerated. In the end, it did not make any difference to the Hu culture. If not for the Guardians, they would be extinct.~

~So, there is a precedence for saving a suspect species.~

~More of a side effect. The first true Guardians on any Eden were Hu. They were not aware of the other Eden sentient species at first. They only had the Hu to work with. When they met other Guardians of non Eden origin, these Guardians were protecting their species as well. The model that they were presented with was that Guardians protected the species that spawned them.~

~Are there not Ba Guardians who should be part of this discussion? It would seem only fair as this is their Eden we are discussing.~

~Again, it would take time. Another problem is present. There were Ba Guardians. The same sentient species that I believe moved this asteroid to destroy their home world killed all of their Guardians.~

~Then they have no representative among the Guardians, and for the sake of their species others must assume the responsibility. That is an large undertaking. Not for the weak or challenged.~

~I don't understand the reference to challenged.~

~He means less than normal. Missing some level of at least average abilities.~

~But we all are lacking in some way. No one is good at everything.~

~Not needed to be good, only average. I believe the discussion of the asteroid is more important.~

~Ah, a Ceph tendency to stay on task until completed. A necessary component to help insure success.~

~Good point Fa. We need you Xot. The Ba need you. Though I spent a lot of time in space, it has been a very long time since I needed to work much with physical principals. A question to be contemplated is how we proceed. Do I explode the asteroid, do I stop it, do I redirect it and where? What do I do?~

~Great Matriarch, whatever you do, do not explode it. That would only send a shower of rock down over the entire world instead of one location. It would make the situation worse not better.~

~Unless enough force was used to effectively vector most of the material past the impact path.~

~Ah, but an explosion of that magnitude might affect other asteroids in the vicinity. It might eventually send others to the Ba world or other worlds. Our action could have consequences far beyond the immediate need.~

~It seems to me that the best action would be to put the asteroid back on the path it was on, to the best of our ability of course. In that way the universe takes over responsibility again.

~Agreed! Though it seems a very cautious approach. We would definitely need your help to do that Xot. You are the only one who knows the original path.~

~You will find that the Guardians tend to take the cautious approach. Having these abilities makes for great responsibilities as well. The alternative is to be most certainly a means of destruction.~

~What prevents a Guardian from choosing the path of destruction? How do we not take that path?~

~Every Guardian must go through a test at some point in their training. It is different for each. They decide for themselves which path they would take. Those who chose destruction for the sake of power voluntarily accept return to the norm life path. We call it the dark night of

the soul. Your worst sleep fear is a day off compared to what happens when you reach this point.~

~They voluntarily relinquish their abilities?~

~The fear that choosing the wrong path induces is so intense that one wants the fear to go away at any cost. Some even kill themselves rather than take a chance they would hurt someone by accident. We are not easy to kill, even by one's self.~

~Do you erase their minds? How do you unlearn what you have known? Would not the temptation remain?~

~Being a Guardian is not about just knowledge. Certain abilities are induced. These abilities can be suppressed as well.~

~Then it would seem the best course would be to find these beings that are throwing rocks at us and suppress their abilities. Otherwise we will be meeting in committees till the end of time deciding which of their actions are real and which are illusions or possibilities.~

~There are other Guardians who are working to that end.~

Enterprise

Life aboard the Enterprise has fallen into routine. In twelve systems we have found the evil ones. It does not matter what they are called or what we call them. Any culture that would purposely destroy the helpful and the innocent is not worthy of respect. The Organization of Sentients defines sentient as being self aware, aware of one's beginning and one's ultimate ending.

We Qes define sentience more narrowly. I only feel comfortable here aboard the Enterprise, among those of the other sentients who can anticipate to some extent. Of course, our young are nearly as awake as those present, who are far behind our most skilled. As part of our training I am required to spend a septarch among others, not of our kind. This is in order better appreciate our way. We lack the tech of the Hu and Ceph. We lack the numerics of the Bu. We lack the strength of the Di and Dio. We fear heights unlike the Ba. The Dia are perhaps most like us in method, though not form. Both of us work well with others when we are allowed to.

I inhale another breath of halla. I am becoming too dependent. I need to be stronger. I fear too much, though I am among the most powerful the universe has ever seen. They claim they know the secret of the 'thn. Imagine, the 'thn? Maybe the evil ones are attacking out of fear and not greed. Strength shown attracts envy of the less fortunate and lazy. Cooperation is better. Cooperation undoes envy and strength. Strength shared is better. So obvious a bud could feel compassion.

"Ehira report to the bridge."

I exhale the halla and answer the com, #On my way.# I have known for an eighth they would call, but I am finding it is less fearful to others if I don't appear to anticipate every action they make. I would not need to do this minor deception on home world.

I see a flash from their corner. My star nauti pair are hungry. I remove a few scraps of left over glass fish strips. Not their favorite, but they eagerly accept it flashing at a much faster rate. A gift from Sussi upon completion of my studies in TK school. No one knew that they are particularly affectionate. I stroke them gently.

Commander Mei is the easiest to read. She is single minded and passionate. She would not be allowed to supervise even a minor garden on Qes. Such misunderstanding can only lead to sorrow. Twelve worlds we have disrupted and caused pain all to find only two individuals on

each. I no longer go to the surface. Up here I am accepted as part of the whole, but below I am seen or sensed and sentients distance themselves rapidly.

We are the only species that uses a gas volume below our skin to assist in communication. This causes our forms to take on different shapes. The rigid forms are distressed by this ability as they are also distressed by our ability to anticipate. We only intend politeness and helpfulness. We are much misunderstood.

I adjust my hydrogen chamber to float up one level. We do not move as fast as others but we learn to be there when needed. Which is more useful?

#Ehira reporting for duty.#

!!Assume your position Ensign Ehira. See if . .!!

#Raising OS HQ for updates.# Captain Klieg snorts. He does not like my kind. I need to be slower. Appearing stupid is better than being feared.

!!Well?!!

I pause playing with the controls. I already have the message, but I noticed this tends to calm the Captain.

#Guardian Rooi has turned in a report of her trip to the Center of Center's library. Guardian Jesus is remaining behind for further study. The Bugs have an official designation. They are referred to in the Library as the Piskon Hive. They are a silicon carbon based hierarchical caste based colonial life form. Unlike other colonials though, they are highly dispersed only coming together for Froth.# That much we knew.

!!Anything we don't know?!! He is becoming impatient. Even I am becoming weary of the slowness of knowledge accumulation. More study from my best friend is needed. Not really a true friend. Pink do not bond like other sentients. Still I learn much. I will visit at next break.

#Guardian Rooi was surprised at the lack of information. Because we have upset the Piskon Hive we are declared Anathema. Other galactic sentients are avoiding us. There is a belief that anyone who associates with any of us will become a target as well.#

!!That certainly explains the last system we were in. We do them a favor of removing some parasites from their hide and they try to burn us out.!!

^Captain we are entering the K254G system. Two planets look possibly habitable.^

!!Launch probes, full psiotic sensors.!!

#Requesting another lot of probes from manufacturing.#

!!Thank you Ensign.!!

^Probes launched. ETA in two eights for the first and three point four eights for the second.^

Given what we know from the journals and first gens like Mei herself, how come we never look in the unusual places, like the magmotics or plasmotics? Not all life forms are alike. Could the One Minds have anything to do with this? I am just not convinced that there are almost always just two on nearly every planet that could support our own life forms. Are these really the bugs? Are we missing most of them because we never looked in the other places?

Mostly I remain at my station and monitor channels for evidence of sentient tech and listen in on the interdepartmental chatter to keep up my intuition of needs and emotions aboard. I report everything to the Commander. No idents for the on board. I don't understand the need for privacy. Cultural I guess.

The Hu are the most secretive, including the Commander. The few settlements I have visited I got into trouble when I attempted to witness mating behaviors. Hu do not like others watching. They are the only ones who wear covers for no apparent reason. Tool belts and carries I can understand. Even for warmth or protection make sense. But just to avoid being seen by others? What is that about?

I retreat from my thoughts. She will be here soon to take over from the Captain. She is always present when probe results come in. I noticed the Captain signaling her. Others are preparing for her entrance also. Some intuition is nice to observe. Mostly the lack makes me very lonely. No one reads my needs. I am entirely on my own.

Commander on Deck! Her sec. You can hear him coming. His claws clack on the 'thn shield surface. He comes in before her with his tail high. He wears a collar of his rank. Never thought I would see a Cat wear a collar unless during a fight where they wanted an amp to give them an edge. Cats do not like to lose and take very few chances. One of the easiest to read. Take Grisser. He had an especially good meal. High on the mouse ratio. Artificial. Nothing is real here.

I ignore her entrance. Others may come to attention. There is no way to signify that for a Qes. We don't believe in hierarchical structures. I still have to fake it when around those that do. They get so upset when I don't patronize them. Mei understands. She makes up for it by giving me orders in a command voice. It helps reinforce her authority and I don't care. I help anyone regardless of rank or temperament.

The hardest aspect of all the others is gender. We have no gender. We repro asexually. Genetic variability at the time of budding. Most buds die

before we even know about them. Some here like to tease me by changing their gender. One more annoyance I have to put up with.

#Probe data coming in from the first one. There is life. No EM or night lights. Psiotics says level three complexity. It will be some time before we need to worry about them.#

"Thanks for the conclusion Ensign. How about you and two others check it out anyway. No surprises. Who is up on the roster?"

I check the database, #Smith and Jones.# These two are good.

"They should keep you out of trouble. Dismissed. Grisser take the com."

I float out quietly while Grisser arrogantly takes my position at the com. A Cat at a com is crazy. Can't TP your way out of this one. Makes an excellent pilot though. Good sense of dimensional space for a benthic life form.

I make my way to the arboretum. It is the only place that they would agree to for quarters. I would have done the same except the tree things here are very disturbing to me. I will abide near the 'thn walls instead. They can't snag a hydrogen sack. I need to talk to the engineers. Too many sharp corners in the ship.

I emit a sharp high whistle then a twirl. I am answered almost immediately. I wait at the edge. Too many trees.

"Hey Stink! Glad to see you!" I am given a gentle hug by each of them.

#We are ordered to the nearby planet to look for Bugs.#

"Ah the hunt. We are ready."

"Which shuttle are we to use?"

#No shuttle.#

"Ah, well there was hope. She promised we would get to learn to pilot one."

#And she remembers the last two shuttles you crashed.#

"Yeah, there is that. It was not our fault. How were we to know the shuttle would not fit through that opening in the stone arch."

"We were so intent on the prey. Anyone could have made the same mistake. No one was harmed."

#Except a kilometer of landscape. We are here.#

I do not phase well, so they help me through the skin and shield. I can phase through normal matter, but 'thn nanomatrix is beyond me. I practice on a piece in my room but cannot get in any further than a centimeter.

My own shield automatically comes up as we enter vacuum.

Which way?

Follow me. I memorized the probe data. We try to be helpful. I jump a respectable distance and the chase is on. We TK and DS at ever increasing rates. A classic Hu game played at the Guardian level. Who is 'it' goes back and forth several times before we reach the planet. I do not like the competitive games. This one is fun though.

We assume orbit and start our scans. A sentient probing is always better than anything mech.

How far below ground can a first contact probe sense?

Not far if I remember right. We have never found a sentient culture below surface and we have limited mass from which to make more probes until we reach landfall. Corners were cut as some Hu say. Smith and Jones do not like being associated with the dominate white Hu culture so I never attribute anything to all Hu. There are certain clones not liked on Qes as well. Not something we are proud of either.

This planet is riddled with caves. I sense life below the surface. They are close to their sun. There is much ultraviolet light. The rock absorbs the light and emits blue light well into the cave entrances. He is right. Good insight.

I wish to go below. A fascinating world.

They both pop out of sight and I sense them on the surface briefly. They then go below. I had best follow. They were supposed to keep me out of trouble, but it appears as if I will be the rescuer this time. I live to serve.

The surface is nearly barren. Lichens are about the only life form I sense or see. I sample one to get a better idea. Very similar to ours, but the two species are not separate. That means this is a more normal world plantimal world. Interesting how there are more sentient cultures in our league from non plantimal worlds. I wonder what that is, or maybe just something specific to the Eden worlds. I miss my clonemates very much.

The edge of the nearest cave is very interesting. The green color starts very close to the entrance. The walls are nearly white where there is no growth. No longer lichens, but full bush like creatures with differentiated parts. I scan to see which one the two went down and then turn around to be oriented properly. Being in no hurry I decide to use my normal abilities to float into the entrance and exam the life forms as I slowly make my way further inside.

The ones with bright red stalks turn towards me. Ah, something is aware of my presence at least. That is good. I go closer to one. It continues to examine me carefully. A long tentacle reaches out and touches me, but quickly withdraws. I am sure I don't taste good. Of

course I did the precaution of emitting a noxious compound we found on the Nexsfa system. I am able to adapt my chemistry to mimic most compounds that other life forms make. Oh, that is interesting. All of the other red stalks have turned away from me as well. They communicate somehow. I scan and find roots that are interconnected. Commensals, opportunists, symbiots and parasites. It is all here. A very complex ecology. This world has potential.

The two Hu have not returned yet. We probably have several days depending on what they have found on the second world. Mei says that I worry too much. Everyone on board now is TK6 or above. No one is defenseless unless we run into an actual Bug. Not expected here and both Smith and Jones are nines. I am a seven at the moment. Well above the natural three of my kind thanks to Sussi and others.

We were 'found' by mistake. Most of the league is near froth to the original set, with the exception of Pink and now us. Froths are defined first by how far back they branched from the Hu-Eden ancestor. Pink is still the furthest at over three billion years. How Rooi found them is still conjecture in classes and centers of learning. We are closer at two point zero one billion and are not plantimals like the Pink, but very near the break point. There are no vertebrates on Qes. That body plan was never found or died out before they developed hard enough bones to fossilize.

The next closest is much nearer at three hundred and five million. I suspect there are others between us, but since the Bugs started attacking Guardians all exploration has stopped. I would rather have been on a new Eden world exploration team, but this was the next best thing. At least I get to experience new life forms. When you get larger on a clone world anything different has to be experienced.

There are more pink colors further in. A natural stratification on water worlds. Which is interesting because the cave is not full of water and it's resultant filtering of the red wavelengths. Right. Now I remember, the red pigments are much more sensitive to ultra violet. Greens at the entrance, more brownish further in and now the reds. Next? Should be the chemical autotrophs.

Instead it becomes lighter again. Strange. I enter a chamber and direct sensors upwards. The top of the cave is well lit. I scan. Pure quartz. But with traces of uranium, lead and other isotopes. Nothing can grow on the surface thus keeping the window open. It is, however, thick enough to block most of the ultraviolet. I scan around us. Several more caves nearby also have these windows with varying degrees. I reach out further and find belts of this configuration.

How did they come to be? So many caves, so much quartz and life in most. How do they get from one cave to another? The ones at the entrance could use wind seeds, though none were present at the moment. Could be seasonal. But what about those further in? The caves do not appear to be connected.

Best to leave this to another survey team, if there ever is one. I sense down. Footprints. They decided not to use TK. A wise move on a sentient expected world. Scares them if they are not TK themselves, or know of ones who are. Best to start low until knowledge is obtained. Lots of damage where they stepped and I know them well enough to know they were careful. Interesting. These creatures are not adapted to sustain pressure of any kind.

Two shapes flash past me at high speed nearly blowing me against the sharp stone wall. If I was not shielded that could have hurt or worse, popped a float sack. Another game? I pop to the surface to see what they are doing.

#What happened?# The sun will begin to hurt me too. My sensitive skin is already starting to show damage. I make a Ceph shader. Better, but there is still enough reflection from the surface to eventually be a problem.

"There are very evil dangerous creatures further below!"

#I did not scan anything beyond a well developed plantimal eco system. Remarkable actually. Worthy of more study certainly. Nothing particularly dangerous. Though I would not recommend consuming anything. Lots of akaloids.#

"You were not as deep as we were. There is an entire level four culture at two kilometers below the surface."

#Why did they stop chasing you?# We try not to show our abilities to undeveloped cultures who are not already aware of the Guardian type. Of course non Eden cultures will not have actual Guardians, but something similar. Hmm, flying out of the cave is not exactly kosher. I love that word and use it for ideas not originally intended. We do not have religion on Qes. The idea that a food can be good because it follows special spiritual guidelines fascinates me. Food should be judged by objective criteria or empirical evidence not beliefs for which the reasons have been forgotten. Rules that must be followed or one risks eternal damnation is beyond crazy. Crazy is another word I like. We do not have crazy either. Anyone not fit mentally dies.

While I am thinking this the two are peering down the entrance of the cave with intense interest.

#Do we call the ship to have more resources allocated?# And risk the wrath of Mei. This idea of dominance still disgusts me. Why do they acknowledge her as the 'leader'? Why do they not make decisions by consensus or leave to be with more sane sentients? Which of course makes me wonder why I am here. My clonemates feels it is very important that we understand this group.

"We think you should investigate before a decision is made. Only then should we call for help." This is why I like them so much. Their thinking is most like the Qes.

#We are different in how we approach our investigations. I propose we seek out a potentially less dangerous cave first. Such as this one.# I TP the location of a partially collapsed cave. The damage appears to have been recent. The plantimals are not all dead yet.

It will likely take several eights using non TK abilities. I am sure we do not have that much time. I make a decision and pop all of us closer. There are no live sensors out in this sun. The little remaining distance is easily transversed. My surface is saved from further damage as well.

Inside this cave the entrance looks similar. Green, brown and then red. Then we come upon the damaged area. The ceiling has collapsed. The damage is very extensive. More extensive than just they physical damage caused by the stone smashing them. Of course the exposure to ultraviolet is starting to affect them as well. But there is more. The dying continues well into the unaffected areas. The chemicals in the air are extensive. All creatures have a unique smell upon death and decay.

Smith and Jones are beside me watching carefully. I am not that good at judging facial expressions. We do not have faces and express ourselves with odors. Our shape changes constantly for too many reasons to mean anything. I get the impression that there is something wrong though. Their oral cavities are open yet they are clearly not going to consume anything here. Ah, an odor. I recognize that odor, though I have never sensed it among Guardians. Fear. Not intense yet, but definitely there.

What could bring fear to a Guardian? Why do I not feel it?

I continue to investigate but see nothing living or dead that should be a cause for concern. Maybe in a few hundred million years this world will produce species of note, but at the moment they are more of a curiosity.

"Not as strong here, but still bad. Evil Spirits. I can smell them."

Smell. I do a detailed analysis of the dying emissions. I get closer to some plantimals that have recently died from exposure to the sun as it moves across the sky. Competition for space means those at the edge get pushed into an area that eventually receives sunlight. I absorb the odors.

And am overwhelmed for a moment with visions of horrible creatures burrowing into the lift sacks and deep into my body.

#Interesting. Sort of like a dose of lysergic acid, though not chemically the same. More of a mixture of several substances. I can taste fungus derivatives and well as suffa tree extracts. I am guessing each creature emits its own signal of distress. Now the question is why was it strong in the unaffected cave.# Then I remember.

#Footprints. You two did not float above the life forms, but walked on them. Killing them, they released their death fumes, which were quickly absorbed through your skin.#

I pop all of us out and then to a newly opened cave that is not heavily settled yet.

Then I wait for the effects to wear off. Fortunately the last exposure was less than the first.

"It would appear we need to make this world off limits to norms."

"And post warnings to even Guardians. There are many questions remaining. Why emit these mind affecting substances?"

"And how do they get from one cave to another? There is very little wind. I did not see any evidence of seeds."

#Might be a seasonal phenomenon we do not witness here yet.#

"No, I sense no tilt to the axis of this world."

"We are too far away to sense an elliptical orbit."

#Unless we combine.# Though I know I would be adding little.

"Still not enough. The Enterprise could determine this information though." He removes a com from his tool belt and signals the Enterprise. We each carry one in case we get separated and in harms path. He is quite good at tactile communication for a Hu.

#This cave is empty is it not?#

Jones pauses to scan the entirety carefully, "Yes."

#Then we could not be suffering the effects of any chemical substance. Please confirm that these are gone from our forms.#

Smith is smelling worried now, "Confirmed. What do you sense?" He even looks around.

"What? Mei says we are too dependent on our abilities. Best to use all of our senses."

#I think we should leave now!# We all pop out.

#Higher!# We are in orbit all directing our abilities to where we were.

What did you sense?

It is what I did not sense that brings the call for action. It was subtle. There is an intelligence down there. This is a very dangerous world.

Explain.

We all scanned the cave and sensed no life. Nothing that could emit cognitive alterants. Yet, I sensed a change in our thinking that was not under our control.

A substance we did not sense.

Is it continuing? Is our thinking still being altered?

I cannot sense our gaseous emissions up here. There may also be substances I cannot sense. I recommend caution.

What is it?

We need consensus. Follow this logic for possible errors. Space is highly limited. It is a harsh world living between the ultraviolet and the dark. When the sunlight recedes the lines of livable space move. Plantimals are slow moving creatures by our perception of time, but they do move.

You get all of this from school? A walk in the woods would tell us as much.

Please proceed and ignore my rude brother.

I show amusement in a way that can be understood by non Qes.

Some species depend on chemical substances to discourage abuse. We experienced this in the first and second caves. The second was actually the stronger effect because the recent damage was more extensive than your few footprints in the first cave. Forgive my lack of understanding. It was there that the substances were in high enough concentration for me to identify.

But there are none in the empty cave.

Correct. I believe this to be true. Too few life forms had settled there yet for the concentrations to have built up and there was no damage other than what they had done to each other. I believe the danger is not from these creatures.

I dare not read your thoughts, but curiosity, for which my kind is known, is pulling at mine.

Understood. There are other ways we know of for altering the thinking of others.

The white man's friend. Talking with two tongues.

Wait, this is starting to remind me of the Bugs. Do you think there are Bugs down there? Certainly enough silicon to make them happy as sand grubs.

What did you see in the caves?

They look at each other and shrug. I am learning to read their visual clues. This means either they don't remember well, are embarrassed to

admit or do not see meaning in my question.

Evil Spirits. Our Hu clan believes in more than the merely physical. Being a Guardian has reinforced those beliefs. Surely there is much that all the Guardians in the universe still do not know.

We are also curious. What did you see?

I am not curious. Our clan does not use this method. I am trying to solve a problem. To fulfill our mission.

But you saw something.

On our Eden there are predators, as there are on all worlds where there is life. We saw predators familiar to us where they should not be any. Where there could not be any. Therefore I knew they were illusions.

Ah, big advantage over Evil Spirits. They can be anywhere at anytime. Usually they try and trick you into misfortune. They rarely act directly. These were tempting us to go much deeper into the caves.

Do you think it wise to face our fears and investigate or should we heed the warning and depart? They are testing me. A good test. I pause to think. They wait. I like them. They allow proper waiting periods.

It is a pleasing world from above. There are dry areas, such as the caves and there are deep wet areas. I can sense life deep in the depths below the ultraviolet reaching areas. The plantimals in the wet areas are only the brown variety and exist in a narrow layer. Below it is too dark in the type of light needed for the other pigments. Only the yellow brown pigment works in the depths. On most worlds life came from the water and eventually colonized the land. It was this way on Qes as well. We came from what later would be called placazoans on the other worlds.

Once the creatures came onto the land they could differentiate into the other forms. If there is life in the caves, then it feeds on the others. Yes, predators would be deep in the caves and come out at night to feed when the others were defenseless. Though not entirely. They use their chemical defenses as best they can.

What would scare a predator?

They both smile at me. Ugliest thing I have ever seen and they keep doing it. At least the Di species don't smile. Ugh!

The predators use psiotics to hide themselves until they are close enough to feed. Being plantimals they would not be fast. They would not use chemicals as they depend on stealth and knowledge of the caves to survive.

What feeds on them?

Others of their own kind. The chemicals delude them into thinking they are being attacked by each other. If they kill too many of the

plantimals in any one location they lose conscious thought and react rather than think.

We are ready. He emits a TP *whoop*. Jones repeats it. We use TK this time to come in at high speed.

I follow then down to the first and largest intact cave. We enter at high speed, being careful not to touch any of the other creatures. It will be night soon here. The predators will be coming.

I watch as Smith and then Jones change their psiotic signature. They become creatures with huge molars capable of consuming massive amounts of plantimals in one bite. Flying buffaloes! I remember them from the stories they told. White buffaloes. Now glowing brighter and brighter. Snarls and snorts reflect off the cave walls too deep to support those who need light.

I adjust my psiotic signature to be a qesssnake. Something that is very effective in caves. One of the reasons as adults we develop float bladders. Our young are not so protected. It takes time to grow a bladder and learn how to use it effectively. The most dangerous time even for adults is when it is windy. We have to come closer to the ground to avoid being smashed against rocks.

I scan and search for their hidden signature. They are very good. They had to be to survive this long. But we have too many advantages.

Entering a large underground cavern we find nothing. I make a glow ball stronger than the glowing buffalos. There they are. Actually quite small. They resemble small very slow moving white Ba. Must take them nearly the entire night to get to the pigmented ones and back.

"They can fly. That is partly how they avoid detection until the last moment." I had not noticed that. Very clear membrane wings.

Jones laughs, "They are so small." He holds out a hand and lets one slowly crawl onto it trembling. It tries to bite him, but they are too small to get a good grip on the TK hardened surface.

"These are the great and fearful predators." I ignore them and investigate the rest of the cave. They are all on the ceiling. May be from earlier forms that climbed up to the surface and the light. Might be to avoid the waste products thick on the surface of the cave floor.

#Strange. There are holes in the waste piles.# I scan then.

The others stop laughing and teasing the native plantimals and look towards me.

I TK a creature to the surface that does not belong here. Looks like an insect.

"Bugs!" Not the large ones of course. Just a small colony of the

smallest ones.

"It would appear they are everywhere."

#I think it would be good to get back to the ship, but maybe through a careful path.#

"Agreed." They both acknowledge.

They are better at navigating dimensional space. I don't mind in this case. I am sure the small ones could not follow us, but I have to wonder if they report their knowledge to others. Are there full sized Bugs nearby? Could they have already sensed the Enterprise?

We arrive at the Enterprise at least an eighth after the team that went to the second planet.

!It was closer yet colder on the surface. The clouds fooled us. Nothing down there but ice and wind.! That explains why they returned so soon.

"Go ahead Ehira. Give our report."

#We have not discussed it sufficiently. More analysis is necessary.#

Commander Mei intercedes, "If we wait for you to be satisfied with the report we will all be old. Just give us first impressions." Not a patient sentient. Would be considered very rude behavior by Qes standards. I have been here long enough to know this is normal behavior for Hu who take on leadership positions. I don't understand how they can make wise decisions using this method.

"We are waiting." No you are not waiting. You are pushing. I am annoyed. Soon I will return to my chamber. I signal irritation on my skin.

She smiles. I think she likes to get other sentients upset.

#An interesting plantimal planet with a thinner than Eden atmosphere that lets much ultraviolet radiation to the surface. Gravity approximately 0.7 that of Eden.

The plantimals live primarily in caves to avoid the sun and are striated starting with green pigment and then going to brown and then finally red. Deep in the caves live predators who have lost their light gathering pigment.

The prey use chemical deterrents of a variety of neurological types. The predators use stealth and psiotic shielding to avoid detection. They appear to be evenly matched at the moment and have developed a stable ecology.#

"No sign of intelligence?"

#The predators are small. Weighing only a few tens of grams each. It will be millions of years if ever before they develop enough to be called intelligent.#

"Very good. We can then move on without further investigation.

Grisser if you will plot a course to next identified system."

#I hesitate to interrupt, but there is one more detail of note.# I wait for her wrath.

Annoyed she sneers at me, "What is it? Interesting geology this time?"

#There is interesting geology, but the more onerous is that there are small insect like creatures that have no analogs that we could detect.# She comes fully erect and concerned.

"Did your Bug lights react?"

Smith answers, "No Commander. The small ones are probes and not intelligent themselves. We have seen them before."

"We will be returning to Ehira's world immediately to make a more careful evaluation. Where there are probes the big ones are near by."

#There were only a few.#

"Don't you think that an entire ecology that uses mind altering gases and psiotic shielding isn't a little bit suspicious? You should be thinking, is this a natural ecology or an induced one? Induced by the Bugs."

She nods to the three of us dismissing us.

Rolling Stones

"What the #\$%^ is the ax for if not to use?"

"Don't you talk like that to me. We have had the Ax for generations. Generations! It is irreplaceable. We can never, NEVER replace the Ax. You have permanently crippled the community."

"But no one ever used it! Look at how much wood I was able to cut? An entire winter's worth."

"And the last winter's worth. What will we do next winter and the one after that?"

"You don't get it!"

"No you don't. It is the decision of the council that you leave the Rolling Stones community. You are to wear this necklace as a symbol of your crime. You are never to take it off, even for bathing." He places it around my neck. A piece of the ax suspended at the end, sharp side in. He then turns his back to me. No one will acknowledge my existence from now on. It will be as if I don't exist.

The 'Council', a group of old sentients who long ago lost touch with the world. They follow the same old traditions even when conditions change. Maybe it was good that it finally came to this. I will seek out a better community. It will be hard though. Especially with this strange weather. I cut the wood because so many were complaining of the cold. The middle of summer and it feels like winter. I have not seen the sun in two moons. The loss of the ax will be felt when the true winter comes.

I go back to my shelter and retrieve a few possessions of importance to me, mostly clothing. I will need it to survive. I don't dare go near the food stores. Being attacked is worse than being ignored.

I only have a few hours left of what little light there is and my muscles are already sore from cutting so much wood. Well, nothing to do but make distance.

My first criteria is to get out of sight and the fastest way is over the ridge. The downside are the rolling stones that the community was named for. Some old stream bed left a lot of smooth rounded stones. Nasty to get over. We have a bridge. Or rather, they have a bridge. I can see from here they have someone posted. They are not going to make this easy. Do a group a favor and this is how I am treated.

I sigh and take the long road. It will mean a few extra kilometers. Water will be a problem too. Even the rain has got this dust in it that you have to wait to settle before using. Everything is covered in it. It is going

to get very ugly before this is over. My odds of surviving have gotten a lot worse. I certainly would like to know how an indestructible ax can shatter into so many pieces.

Poop! The necklace has already cut a hole into my shirt and into me. There is blood all over the front of it. So sharp I did not even feel it.

I find a piece of quartz and try and chip the sharp edge of the piece. I can't take it off but I am not going to bleed to death or attract raps just for their sense of injustice.

Next I find a stream and attempt to wash my leather shirt. I need to get the smell of blood off of it. It will be even colder now. I also tie the necklace into a knot to put the sharp edge out. The quartz did almost nothing and I might actually need it later. Could be useful for skinning food.

I do my best to get through the stones. Twice I nearly sprain an ankle slipping. I finally decide to go on all fours. Not dignified, but I have no where to lay up with a bad ankle or worse.

Near dark I get past them onto the slope of the ridge. Here the stones are not as round and far less dangerous even though it is still hard going. I can see somewhat of a glow from the rising moon. Enough to navigate a treeless slope at least. On the other side of the ridge I can hide from the wind that comes up in the night or has the last few moons. If I have to I can sleep during the day to avoid locals who would make my life even more difficult.

Into the gravel section it is slide back half way for every step. Fortunately I am too high up for the raps. They like the warmer areas especially now. Feels like it is going to rain again any moment. I think I just felt some sprinkling.

It starts raining just as I reach the hard stone. Nice and slippery hard strong. I fear I am not going to make it when I reach the ridge and nearly go over the other side to my death. I can't see the bottom shaded from the moon glow. Too dark to see any landmarks, I really have no idea where I am.

The wind is next, added to the fact that I am soaking wet and I could easily die of exposure. I need to get down the side as far as I can, but not over a cliff.

I follow the ridge carefully on all fours. I get a short distance in an eighth of crawling when the wind hits. I have no choice now. Stay here I am dead. I slowly make my way over the side. Soon I am into brush with large thorns and am scratched to shreds, but they do offer some relief from the wind. The now light rain will keep the smell of blood down too.

My lucky day.

Huddled down in a crevice I fall asleep shivering.

I am startled to wake by a voice.

"Want something to eat rap bait? They do like fat ones better than skin and bones like you."

"Huh?" I look up to see an old man with a dirty white robe and hood, white beard and walking staff staring down at me.

"Oh, it is alive. Thought I saw flies starting to gather."

"I am shunned." I turn my head so as not to embarrass him any further.

"Not from me you aren't. Shake a leg if you're hungry." He makes good time away from me before I am shaken out of my trance and get up. How can someone that old move that fast?

I get up as fast as I can. Stiff as a stick. Ow, that hurts. I shuffle at first and gradually gain some mobility. He is far ahead of me. How the bot fly can he move that fast? Hate those things. Have enough scars from ones that got me.

The trail looks good here. Makes me wonder how I missed it. Right, dark and raining. Small trees at this level and much larger ones below. Definitely on the other side of the ridge.

I gradually catch up to find him sitting outside a crude hut, a small fire and a pot of something that smells wonderful boiling away. I immediately huddle near the fire to get warm.

"Bout time you got here. Not much, just nuts, roots and dried meat. Don't ask what kind." He serves some to me in a wooden bowl and spoon. To me it is heaven on Eden. I did not realize that I was that hungry, but I should be, not having eaten for a day and a half.

"Not much green vegies to eat as you can imagine. Fruit even harder unless you had the foresight to save some dried fruit from last year."

He looks expectantly at me. I shake my head.

"Ah, no matter." He eats in silence and takes my bowl to refill when I am done. I blow on it a bit. Already burned my mouth on the first. I look around for something to drink. He figures out my need and offers a glass bottle. I take a drought and almost spit it out. It is just water.

"Aren't you worried it has sickness in it?"

"Boiled. No lack of wood."

"But all of it is wet. How did you get a fire started?" He winks at me. We have had to dry wood in shacks for weeks. There is clearly not enough room in his pitiful shack to dry a toothpick.

"It helps to have the right tools. I hear you know something of a

particular type of tool, the ax?"

I inhale sharply, "If you know that why am I here? I am shunned."

"To make a choice of course. Life is full of choices. Time for you to make another."

I laugh, "I have had my fill of life changing choices. No thank you. The stew was great, but I should go before I get you into any trouble." I get up, set the bowl down and turn away from him.

Just as I pass a moderate sized tree, a hundred meters away from the hut, something skims past me and embeds itself in the trunk of a tree. I look at the object half buried in the tree. An ax head. Gee, why not. Put ash in my mouth. Strange one though. Did not know they made them out of glass. Why didn't it break on impact?

He calls to me, "You need an intact ax head to redeem yourself. Here is one. Take it."

I try and pry it loose. Thrown from a hundred meters it is really stuck. I have to work hard to remove it. Of course I nearly cut a finger off when I accidentally let it cross my hand. Great. I pull a cloth from my pocket and wrap it around my finger. That is going to hurt for some time. Hope I don't get infected.

Next to me he softly says, "Sharp huh?" He takes the ax head and carefully sets it down and then unwraps my bandage. I am not sure why I am allowing it. I look into his eyes to try and figure him out. When he finishes I look to see no damage whatever.

"What? How can this be? I nearly removed that finger." Plenty of blood on the cloth to prove it. I turn it over and over. Not even a scar. He hands me the ax blade wrapped in stomper leather. Hardest hide we know of. Have to work it into shape when it is fresh. Once dried no knife will cut it, easily anyway.

"The blade does not touch it. If it did it would slice it like a leaf. The leather is there to protect you from touching the blade again. Present this to your council and it will more than make up for your mistake."

I sigh, "It was not a mistake. If we did not have that wood we would freeze and starve to death. Now at least they have the wood. I may be the sacrifice, but it was worth it to save the others, whether or not they appreciate it."

"The trail back to Rolling Stones is about thirty meters over there. Good trail, well maintained. Should not take you long. Present the ax to them. It is a far better one than the one that shattered. I assume payment in kind still suffices in your community."

"It does, especially if it is in their favor. But why are you doing this?"

“I have my reasons. None of them bad. I'm no dom [dirty old man] if that's what you are thinking.”

“I never think that of anyone. Someone would have to be crazy as a Di on lizard bane to find me attractive. I'm no breeder. Accepted that about myself long ago.”

“I will be here until sunset. Come find me if you are in search of a new life. Oh tell them that all of the Ceph settlements are gone and this is the last ax head they will see in this life time.”

“Shit that is bad news. Never met a real live Ceph, but I have no bad feelings about them. The cerams they make are the best. As to your offer, I admit I always wondered what was over the next ridge. But, I have a life. I have friends and family. Well, no family. The scourge got em three summers ago.” Not much in the way of friends either judging from the fact that none stood up for me in the council meeting. If they had I would have only been shunned for a time, not cast out.

I wave goodbye and take off at a trot up the ridge and then over the side. With the good trail I make good time. Sky is still overcast, but probably no rain again until tonight. By then I should be back in my dry bed and all of this behind me.

Long before half day I see the bridge over the stones, with a guard waiting. Does everyone try and come back?

I stop a respectable distance away, rummage in my pack and remove the ax head in its case. I hold it up and shout, “I brought payment in kind. Let me pass.”

The Di stares at me like I don't exist. I would expect that of Harfin. She hates guard duty. Not going to make it easy on me. Well it is hard to tell from the case what I have. I carefully undo the cover and pull it out to hold up again.

“An ax head. Better than the one that shattered.”

“Prove it.” Finally a response. I look around, but only the bridge itself is made of wood. I hold up my leather shirt and slice that cleanly.

“Not good enough.” She throws me a large stone. Partly to show she is serious and just as soon throw one at me. “Cut that and I will let you pass.” I know of no ax that will cut stone, but I did say this one was better. Guess I am about to find out.

“You don't happen to have an ax handle do you?” No response. Did not think so. I hold the stone up in front of me. It is heavy, but I am one of the stronger Hu so I am careful not to show any expression. I raise the blade carefully and attempt to slice of an edge of the stone. Stupid I know, but I have to show that at least the blade will not be damaged by

the act.

I expect it to hit the stone and slide off to one side. What happened I definitely did not expect. It buries itself into the stone. I set it down, pull it out and try again. This time I try a more grazing cut at one side and it cuts the stone clear through. No knife marks even. What the rap, I continue working the stone until I have a nice rock cube. Maybe I would be better off going with the old man. With this ax I could make my way in any number of trades and crafts.

I raise the stone cube and the blade to find a totally astonished Di staring back at me. Stunned myself I stare back. She then catches herself, turns and runs at top speed back to the settlement. I guess I am to follow. The Ceph have definitely been holding out on us if this is their work.

When I arrive at the center of the settlement. There is no one there. However, what I do see has me seeing red. The entire pile of wood that I worked so hard to spit, that was supposed to save the community, that I sacrificed my life for, is now a large pile of smoldering ashes.

Tears form in my eyes and I whisper, "Why?" Why make all of this pointless.

The Council Leader, Parsiops, comes out in full formal dress.

I bow and offer up the ax and cube. Forgot I was still carrying the cube, but it does offer proof. Harfin is behind him whispering as well as Di can to a Dia shorter than she is. Not hard to guess what she is saying.

I go through the ritual anyway, "I come with payment. An ax head superior to the one that shattered."

Trying to look important, but looking more and more pitiful to me, he says, "Your payment is refused. Leave at once."

"This ax head is clearly superior to the old one. Harfin saw me shape this stone with it. No other ax I have ever heard of can do that. My payment meets the criteria of acceptance."

"You are evil. No ax can shape stone. Everyone knows that. Payment is rejected as we cannot accept the gifts or labor of an evil one." Or labor. I look at the ashes. That explains the wood pile. This was decided long before I came back. Possibly even before I cut the wood. Why? I knew I was different, but most accepted my help without complaint. How could I have missed this?

"You will not see me again unless you attempt to harm me in anyway. This ax cuts flesh far easier than stone. Any attempts to do me harm will be met with resistance."

"Just go. No harm will come of you unless you are seen after sunset." One on one with this blade I would likely win, but against dozens hidden

in bushes after dark with arrows I would not last a moment. I bow and back away, not so much as to give honor, but to be sure I am not about to be ambushed. I no longer trust any of them.

Away from the settlement making my way back up the grade I think. What power does he have over everyone? I grew up in a neighboring settlement and only came here after the plague that killed most of the others, including my parents. We were too small a group to survive. We split up and each went in a different direction. A settlement might take one in, but never eight at once. They would be afraid of diluting their power structure. I was strong and could work hard. A plus to anywhere I went. I hope the others fared better than I did.

Far enough away to be sure I would not be taken unawares, I carefully place the blade back into its holder and then into my pack. Guess I am starting a new life, again.

In my mind I try and remember exactly where the hut is in relation to the trail. To the left, but how far. I remember looking back once and seeing that it was very hard to make out. Explains why others never reported seeing it. As I near the top though I find the old man waiting, staff in hand.

I greet him and say, “You were right. They did not accept me. I have brought your ax blade back. Remarkable tool. One could do much with it. They were foolish to refuse it. Said it was evil, yet I do not sense any evil in you.”

“Thank you. I try not to express that side of being. Not always successful, but then no one is.” He shrugs and smiles.

“I have not introduced myself. My name is Sam.”

He answers, “And mine is Anikin.”

“Strange name.”

“A very old one. But being no others I am never mistaken for another.”

I laugh, “Oh I doubt that would happen with any name you took. So, tell me where did the ax come from? I have never seen Ceph work like this. It even shapes stone easily.”

“That was a mistake. I should have thought there was no wood about when you reached the bridge. Except the bridge itself, but then you could not have destroyed the bridge to prove its worth. I am sorry it did not work out for you.”

“Are you?” I smile, “I think you were hoping that I would choose this path.”

“Are you sorry you did?”

"No, the more I saw of their behavior these last two days the more I wonder about the settlement itself. If the ax was forbidden to use even when it was so desperately needed, what else have they hidden away? What good is a tool that cannot be used and for which there is no substitute?"

He looks sad and offers, "I do not think they will survive long. They have backed themselves into a corner with no escape I am afraid. I was hoping that you would be able to show them the way out, but alas, it was not so. Still I tried."

"You have been watching us? You tried? Ah, the ax. That was strange. What was so special about their ax. Looked the same as dozens of Ceph axes I have seen."

"From what I have been able to find out, it was associated with a famous leader in the past. They made the mistake of associated an inanimate object with the idealization of a good sentient. The object was not the leader. But once done, they felt you had killed their leader, when in fact they had died hundreds of years ago."

"You have seen this happen before? You look well traveled."

"I am and I have. Though not for some time. Might be the strange weather has stressed them beyond what they are able to recover from. But, enough of this. We need to get back to help those who are trying to survive."

An eighth later I am breathing hard, "Wait! I can't keep up with you. How do you move so fast for so long?"

"Sorry, I am used to traveling alone and you are used to a village life. You have more upper body strength and less leg strength. You'll get used to it." He takes off again and I am running again.

Two eighths later, or I think it was that long. I am almost to the point of not caring. He stops suddenly.

He motions me to get down, "Raps."

"Wish I had an ax handle." He looks to his right, carefully moves some bushes aside and pulls out an ax handle. Grey from weather, but in good shape. Nice hard wood.

"Don't set it right now though," he comments. The noise would draw attention. I know about raps. I am just happy to be able to rest.

"They have found us. Get ready." Well, setting the ax won't make any difference now. I stand, pound the head home and take my fighting stance, ax raised. I smile. They don't stand a chance with this ax head.

He sighs, stands up next to me, raises his staff over his head and circles it around. The raps stop in their tracks, eyes wide, then turn and

run away as fast as they can.

"They have met you before."

"Not me specifically, but my kind yes."

"So, what is it about your staff that they fear? I would have been more afraid of the ax personally."

"That is because you have not met my kind before." He smiles, but does not say more. Curious.

"Tell me more about the sentients I will be meeting."

He pauses, thinks about it, then starts walking again, but a little slower. Sorry I did not ask earlier. I am going to be really sore tomorrow.

"The reason for the bad weather is because a group of beings, that don't like the group I belong to, caused a large comet to strike the southern seas. This melted all the ice at the southern pole and tilted the world's axis. There will not be any more seasons. Weather will be dependent on how far north or south you are instead of what time of year. It will take millions of years for everything to settle out and adapt."

"You mean there will be no more sun? Cloudy days forever now?"

"No, that will only last a year or two if all goes right. Unfortunately realigning the axis would cause even more damage, so at least for now, seasons are over."

"Wait, how do you know all this? Even I know we are in the northern side of Eden. How could you know what happened way down south?"

"Oh, I was there. But that is a long story. Best left to later. Just take my word for it right now. So, where was I?"

"Bad guys did it. No more seasons. Sun will return."

He smiles, "Right. The Guardian Council has meet, finally, and decided. . ."

"Wait, what council?" Guardians? The mythos?

"The Guardian Council. I know you are resentful about councils in general at the moment and I will admit that the Guardian Council is not much better, but this time at least, they have finally come through. We have approval to intercede. Normally we don't of course, at least not overtly."

"Guardian Council? You KNOW sentients that sit on this supposed council?"

"More than that. I am a member. Of course I am only one vote and being one of this world's current protectors I was removed from the vote once a quorum was met. Possible conflict of interest." He shrugs.

I stop and sit down on the ground. My arms are shaking.

"What's wrong?" He inquires, obviously concerned.

"You are telling me that Guardians are real. Not just myth and stories. You are one. And we are going to meet more of them."

"Ah, that's the problem. I am so wrapped up with the work we have to do that I forget. There is one more point you need to absorb. You are to become one of us." He starts walking again.

Nearly out of sight I get up and run to catch up.

"What? How can this be? I don't even believe in them/you. How can I become one?"

"Guardians are not born or hatched Sam. They are made. You want kids?"

"Look at me. Do you think any sentient is going to desire me? I gave up on that thought a long, long time ago. No, my purpose is to serve to the best of my ability. Just gets frustrating when what is obvious to me is not to others." Like Rolling Stones.

"Get used to it. Same all over for all time. We do the best we can. We aren't perfect either. Sentients have a right to make mistakes and chose badly. We are here to offer choices when at times there appear to be none. Sometimes to each other. Not all bad though. There are some perks. Long life, never boring, well, unless you count stakeouts. Those can go on for what seems likes forever. Get to travel a lot."

"Travel. That is something I would love to do. So, when do I meet the others?" I really want some proof I am not being tricked.

"Part of the training. Only thing worse than a stakeout. At least it will be quick. Lucky for you, quicker than normal actually. Time is of the essence." Strange expression. I know plant extracts are essences, but time?

"Stop. Please just stop." He ignores me, but finally comes to a stop at the top of the rise a few arn later. I make it to the top and am confounded by what I see.

"Nice huh." Hands on hips he looks over the valley below. A huge grid work of structures are going up. There must be thousands of sens working like ants in an over turned hill.

"Where did you find all the lumber?" I can't help but think of the eco damage from all this.

"Not wood. Not strong enough for what we are doing. This plain was scoured from lava flow a few decades ago when a volcano blew to bits over that way. The ash from the comet hit is actually adding nutrients it was missing."

"I have a question." He turns to look at me. Most don't give me this kind of total attention. "Ah, okay, why me? There must be thousands of

others more worthy."

He laughs to the point where he is nearly helpless. I help him stand up again.

"No one is worthy of being a Guardian. No one. Not even Rooi and Silver." He starts snickering and shaking his head again. "If you only knew about those two."

"How come all the stories talk about the Guardians being saints. Some even worship them."

He gets serious, "Yeah. You can't believe how humble it makes you feel when someone evokes your name in your presence and you can't say anything. You can't tell them about all the mistakes you made. How many sentients died because of some action you took or did not take."

"Why me?"

He sighs, "You fit the profile of what we are looking for. The biggest problem the Guardians have at the moment is the fact we can't decide what to do. We are so worried about making a mistake that we can't move at all. Worse, when we find out we should have done something and it is too late we spend an enormous amount of time cleaning up. Like here." He waves towards the activity. "Had we stopped the comet when we could have a hundred thousand would not have died, this planet would be going along as before and we would not have to set up a Guardian training center to raise enough sentients to take care of everyone until the climate settles. Well, we will speed it up a bit. No one wants to be here forever."

"What profile?" It is taking forever to get any useful information out of him.

"Simple. You are a compassionate trouble maker. You will shake things up a bit. I am hoping a lot. We are too complacent. Might as well be the Bugs themselves. We have become too predictable. An easy target."

"You've seen them?"

"Not recently. Been nearly four hundred years. No, closer to three eighty. Time is not my strong point."

"Enough. I don't believe a word you have said in the last five eighths. It is getting dark and I think we should get down there if we are going to be able to find food and shelter before the next rain hits."

"No rain here. Time. You are worried about time." He grins.

"I think I have traded one madness for another."

"We recognize we need help. An essential difference."

Suddenly we are in the middle of the structures. I freeze. Several look

up from what they are doing. Soon all are staring at us.

"I would like to introduce you to our newest recruit. This is Sam. She is stubborn, impulsive and as strong as a fem Di who has eaten nothing but raps."

I hear hello Sam in five different tongues. Six, one was late. A Ba running up and waves nearly Hu like. Then they all come up and hug me! I can't believe it. They hugged me! Even the Di. There are so many tears in my eyes I can barely see.

"Hey, let me in too." Anikan makes his way in looking much younger and gives me a hug too.

"That was a Guardian thing you did wasn't it?"

"Yep. You may have heard of me. I am the Guardian Healer. Sometimes called Doc. Welcome. Mandhi is around somewhere too. The Ceph only took minor damage on this world. No settlements south of the equator and enough time to get to higher ground. Lost everything though."

"You two are going to run this entire thing?"

"Oh no. Couldn't. We are not gods. First thing we did was raise our crew to fives. They have been doing most of this. Never knew they had so many skills among them."

#!Has she manifested yet?!# Doc smiles, but says nothing.

!Attention folks, we have another victim for the Pebble Pit!!

"What is the pebble pit?"

"A play ground. The person who has not manifested sits in the center and everyone else throws small pebbles at them until they do."

"And I have not done this thing? What is it?"

"Ah, I said earlier you are joining us. This is part of the training. You are big, you can handle it easy."

"So, am I allowed to throw pebble back then, right?"

"Sure, handfuls if you want."

^But your have to sit on your hands when you do it.^ Everyone shows amusement.

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"That is what it means to manifest. You figure it out."

"And everyone here has done this?"

Several rub parts of their bodies. I suppose so.

!You do get to wear a helmet to protect you head. We are not supposed to try for you head, but not everyone is good at this.!

#!You don't get to use your ax either.!# It tugs at me and I hold on tighter. It raises me into the air, but I still don't let go.

^That's one way to get to the pit. Go ahead Port, take her all the way.^
#!She's heavy.1#

!!You want to join her in the pit, with a limiter? Suck it up!!

More amusement. This group likes to play games. I have both hands around the ax now, but I don't feel any weight. It is like I am flying. Kind of fun actually. So, this must be one of the skills I will learn here. Wonder what else?

I am set down in a shallow pit no more than Hu deep. Lots of pebbles all right. About bean sized. Still have my ax though.

Doc appears next to me. That is disconcerting.

"You can sit on your ax along with your hands, or you can let me care for it. Not really useful in this exercise. Oh here is your helmet." It appears in his hand and he give it to me. I hand him the ax. He made it. If I can't trust him who can I trust.

"Hey I can't see a thing with this on."

"Won't help to see. Trust me." I hear him move and assume he is gone.

The first one is a gentle toss. A test. I am not sure what is supposed to happen, but I don't feel anything yet. More hit. Then a lot more. No big deal, I am wearing pretty thick clothing. Nearly everything I own. Easiest way to carry it.

It is kind of relaxing to be hearing the gentle pat of the small stones hitting all around me. A few sting, but nothing to get excited about. I float away, thinking about all that has happened. I feel my self looking down at everyone around me. Quite a collection of sentients. Nearly everyone I have ever heard of. Even a few Ceph. Never met a Ceph up close. Never seen one from a distance either.

I look closer at the pebbles and scoop some up to watch them fall. So many nearly identical, all very smooth. The hits become more intense. I wonder about the rest of this new community. I float in my mind higher and higher and move away from the pit. They have done so much. Everything is here. There is a forge for metal and ceramics. Metal, that would be something. I used to watch when I was smaller. Practiced on smaller pieces. Some say that is why I am so strong now. Lots of pounding on scraps. Then life's needs caught up. A lot of tasks need strength and I soon found myself moving stone, raising buildings, pulling loads like a pack animal or discipline subject. Not that I did not deserve that a few times.

Storage for food. Good roads. Water tanks. What for? I go closer and I can see inside. The water appears clear and clean. This is fun.

"So, you come here often?"

Funny, I can hear Doc. I can play along. "I don't feel the pebbles any longer. Did I pass? Was the test just to see that I could take it? Not much really. I have been through much worse."

"Take your helmet off Sam." He says this gently.

Huh, my hands. I don't feel the pebbles any more. Oh well. I reach up and remove the helmet to set it down. It disappears. I look around. I am not in the pit. I am near a water catchment. Looks just like the one in my thoughts. I reach over and touch it. Feels real enough. I look over to Doc. He is there.

"Whoa, you are floating in the air."

"So are you."

"So you did change me. Interesting."

"There will be talk about you. Why didn't you fight back? You have a reputation for boldness and a certainty about of regression."

"This was a game right? They were not instructed to hurt me or kill me were they? Then why take it out on them? This was a test of me, not them."

"Brains as well as brawn. Looks like I made the right choice. Welcome aboard Sam. We certainly need you."

"So why did you? Why did you choose me? This is a huge responsibility you have given me. A lot could go wrong."

"Interesting. Every question, observation and action you take confirms my decision. Let me try another tack. Ninety percent of people do not have a strong opinion about most things. They just want to get by. Eat, work, sleep, that sort of thing. Of the remaining ten percent, most have something to gain from a decision whether or not it is good for the community. Let's say another five percent to be nice. Of the remaining five percent, with strong opinions and good intentions, most of those really don't want to put in any effort. Their bark is loud, but they won't do the work. That leaves one or two people out of a hundred that meet my criteria. Then add to that your willingness to sacrifice your own safety and future to do what is right when most are opposed, your knowing when violence is called for and when to play along and then finally, just now, you feel this calling as a responsibility. Believe me, I could not ask for any one better than that."

"I'm cooked aren't I?"

"Oh yeah. Rap snack for sure. But, even I will admit, it will be exciting."

"Great. A curse to go along with it." He laughs. I will never forget that laugh.

"Are you not worried that I am 'perfect'? It seems you need change.
How can be that if I am perfect by your definition?"

"Okay, I take it back. You are not perfect. You think too much."

Brown

Finally! I can't believe you monkeys have left me alone so long.

"Alone? There are three hundred Cats here. How can you be alone?"

They are not Cats, they are cats. Huge difference. All they care about is where the food is and the best spot in the sun. Totally selfish.

I have to smile. Of course Garfield is exactly the same, but can't see it. I wonder sometimes how others see me. Maybe I know that already. Certainly been to enough pot latches in disguise to hear them talk of Spider Woman.

"I'm sorry poor little one. Rooi is no where to be found. I know you like her. Silver is in slow time on Hu Eden. Why, I have no idea. And Doc is on Di Eden with Mandhi trying to clean up the comet mess. If you want to help out there I could arrange it."

Are there still raps?

"Very hungry ones." His tail goes up in the air and he leaves the room. I scan him to notice that he is immediately pounced on by several of the inmates. They have sure made a mess out of the arboretum.

I make my way to the office. The one room even Garfield will not venture into. Been pushed out too many times is my guess. This place is a mess as well. Papers, books, specimens in jars. I feel like I have gone back to the 19th century. The age of discovery. The golden age as far as Edwin is concerned.

His journal is open on the desk. Without touching it I read the latest entry. Done with a dip pen. Actually we use dip pens as well. Something special about making up ink just before use. Most of our stories are oral and we pride ourselves on remembering especially long ones. But, there are times when minor details that would not make an exciting story need to be remembered all the same. Lineages for instance. Diversity and mixing the gene pool produces stronger people.

Funny. I am the protector for a nearly Hu only group and yet, I find it refreshing to visit other cultures and sentients. Even the few Hu I take with me from time to time appreciate it in a positive way. So, why is Mei and her group so xenophobic?

Back to the journal.

I feel sorry for Garfield, but this work is important. Something is wrong. The brown worlds are showing increasing growth far in excess of any semblance of evolutionary time. See species logs for a full

accounting. Pay particular attention to the chlorophyta. Just returned from Brown 3679. Should be a plantimal world, has been for nearly a thousand years, but I am seeing increasing amounts of biphyta species. These were not hidden species that are making an appearance because of changing conditions. I was very thorough in my search. We were taught that our worlds came about because of a mutated spore from a One Mind. Now it looks like the original Hu scientists might have been right. Animals are mutated plants who lost their chloroplasts.

Brown 3679 is not the only world either. All of the other browns are showing less pronounced, but definitely visible changes. Greens too. Animals are becoming more social, gathering into groups for defense and foraging. Not my area of specialty. Isn't Pushy Paws our anthropologist? Maybe she should take a look. I will make a note to ask when I see her next.

Going to check out some of the Pink variants. The background psiotic frequencies are changing. Wish I had a meter to measure them. Depending on the abilities is not quantitative enough. Where there is change on one side there should be a corresponding change somewhere else. I am too close to the vertebrate worlds. I won't be able to see the differences without adding a bias. Better to go to somewhere I have never been. By comparing the frequencies I feel on the sentient variants from what I feel from the ones with lower frequencies I should be able to tell if this is multiverse wide and not just a local phenomenon.

I don't even try to read the rest, nor am I going to check the logs. Raw data bores me to tears and would mean nothing to me. I am not a zoologist either. Hu I know about, even a few other sentients, but I never made a study of their social behaviors. Any observations I would make on his subjects would be just opinions. Shit, the date on this journal is a year old. I scan, but it is all blank below this page.

This is not my problem though. I am trying to figure out the subjects next door. I go up to the glass. Peaceful at nap time. A few giving others a bath. I need help. I don't understand the Cat mind well enough to know what is going on. I still think this has to do with Roo's folding dimensions. I don't understand it at all of course, just Spider Woman intuition. Roo is no where to be found and Mandhi is occupied for a while, probably years. That leaves only one besides Silver, Sussi.

Edwin is saying there is something wrong. It appears to have started with the incident on Paradise. That is where we met the others. We think the disappearances, I am not willing to call them deaths yet, are because

of them as well. So, this might in fact be one puzzle instead of two.

I read nothing from the Cats that I would not read from a captive puma. A sacred animal in Una lore, just a whole lot of kitty here.

Back to Hu Eden and the space station. This takes very little time. Even though I am not as good at riding the dimensions as others, this is a trip made many times and familiarity allows speed.

No one home. Not surprising considering how spread out we all are. We are supposed to travel in pairs since the incidences, but I travel alone. Death will come. I accept that. Until then I will do the best that I can.

I check the monitor. No more attacks at least. Glad to see that Di-Eden got the go ahead to help. Only the two of them? That is a huge task. I think about the Cats and decide I can't put this off any longer.

I check the registry. Sussi is back on Ba-Eden, but in an isolated outpost. Interesting, her purported attacker is with her. I have to see this story. Weather is pretty bleak. Sort of like the Great Plains in winter. Only it is summer there. Guess the Ba want to catch up intellectually. Curiosity is contagious.

I DS to the subsurface and make suitable clothing to match my showing up. Transportation. Need to work out something. No sled dogs on Ba. Steam? Right, a snow plow. Okay, how do I fuel it. Might be able to carry enough to look like I did a one way trip. Supplies would be limited. I would also have to bring my own rations. Skis? Low tech. Might work. The outpost is near enough to shore. Anchor there, small boat to shore, skis to the outpost. Going to be a big pack all the same. Concentrates. Not staying long.

Ready, I make the transition to Ba. Then a few hops to the shore. Fortunately I am out of sight of the outpost.

By the time I reach the outpost I am suitably exhausted. I pride myself on doing only what is necessary with the abilities, but I am beginning to wonder if I have cheated too many times. I am sore, cold, chapped. I can't feel my toes. Just barely above being frostbite. I don't want to be a burden, just believable.

No one outside the structures. That must have been an undertaking to bring everything in. Less than a kilometer from the shore. What is here that is so interesting?

Isolation is the reason I am here. What brings you?

I seek your help. I have a weak theory that might lead to rescuing the lost ones.

They are dead.

I believe they live, but in a changed state. I seek the help of one who

understands the dimensions.

Rooi or Mandhi would be better choices, even Silver.

Am I going to stay out here and freeze or may I enter?

Hospitality says you may enter. Seek the portal with the moon sign.

I am not going to waste any more time. I scan all the structures and find the one with a crescent moon carved on the door. Five structures down. I make my way crunching ice and snow under my feet. A slight breeze. Amazing how little air moving makes everything seem so much colder. I bundle up tighter. Stopping to talk has cooled me down.

I knock on the door in the manner of the Ba. Long moments later a high pitched Ba note is sounded.

I reply in kind though it hurts my throat, ^A way to live in a harsh world.^

^Enter.^

Inside the small shack are stacks of boxes, some used as chairs and one as a table. A small stove sits in the center nearly red hot. If I did not know any better I would guess that I had gone back in time to the time of the tears when so many were massacred. A white substance passes by me. I look up. Three Ba are above in the rafters where it is warmer. A large barrel is off to one side. I go up to it.

"A barrel?" At that moment, the door open letting in cold air briefly. A Dia comes in carrying more wood for the stove. She ignores me and goes up to the stove and places one log in and sets the others down near by. She then goes up to the barrel and tests the water temperature. I am guessing it is fine. She goes up to the box table and begins to prepare a meal of raw fish she pulls out of a bag.

A tentacle comes out of the barrel and signals. I smile. Almost immediately the Dia bows profusely at my feet. The Ba come down from the rafters and do the same. First one and then another tentacles comes out of the barrel. Confused, looking back and forth between me and the barrel, the three Ba and Dia have to make a decision. I am not here to play games so I signal to attend to her. The immediately set about drying her off as she emerges.

I wait patiently for them to finish. The last step is some kind of smelly lotion.

Prevents chapping. The air is too dry here for Ceph.

I would imagine. Too dry for anyone.

The three Ba leave when finished. The Dia stays at her side.

#!Seeker Lessa.!# She bows.

~It would appear that contact is no longer a problem.~

~I don't believe it ever was. Though I am not sure yet what the actual trigger was. It only affects TKs who were at Paradise.~

I hold out my hand to allow Lessa to touch me. She looks to Sussi and she acknowledges. Shaking she reaches out and gently touches the back of my hand then quickly withdraws it. Since she nearly died the last time I can only imagine the fear she feels. Nothing happens. I know some who would fake getting sick just to see a reaction. I am not one of them.

~There are some who believe each victim is matched to each trigger sentient.~

~I am not sure of that either. Not a very efficient method. If you could find the target why wait for an innocent norm to do what you could do yourself much more quickly and surely?~

~We blend well. A norm trigger could touch everyone they met until one worked.~

~You did not see the look on her eyes. She knew before touching what I was.~

"A norm who could pick out a TK9? Not possible."

~I know. Hence my reason for investigation.~

#!Seeker Lessa. I need to borrow Sussi for a short mission. Will you join us? I wish you would.!# She might see something we miss. She was used by the others, might be some remnant left in her thinking.

She looks to Sussi, but Sussi does not move. It is her decision.

#!Would we leave the cold?!#

I laugh, #!It is nice and warm where we are going.!#

She acknowledges enthusiastically. I do not tell her about the Cats, even though they should not be a problem. If I am right, a lot of the Cats were formerly Dia themselves, including Bernice.

I turn to Sussi, "Do you need to inform anyone?" How did she get here? I can think of no way to keep a Ceph warm during transport to this place without using psiotics. Even on Ceph Eden no one gets close to the poles. The frost line is the limit.

~They all know who I am. They cannot leave without me and therefore it is not possible to inform others. I have just replenished supplies. They have enough for an oct of years if necessary. In the mean time I have left them a list of measurements and experiments they need to do to continue their education.~

"This does not sound like the musician I remember."

She turns and looks at me, ~One must adapt. There is music in the wind.~ I bow in the Nauti way. She pauses and returns the honor. I wish I was back on the plains as well. Not the same wind song, but beautiful

none the less. Long Feather should be near term. I did so much want to see her baby girl being born. Much effort was put into her conception and gestation. She will bring much to her people. I am still amazed at how much progress they have made left to their own growth. Would this have happened in North America if the Europeans had not made their way to their world first? It would have been they who invaded Europe with advanced psiotics.

We do not choose our own paths. Life unfolds in front of us. Our task is to walk it.

I reverse my direction to get back to the brown world.

Finally you return! I am so happy to see you! Garfield purrs and rubs against me so hard she nearly knocks me over.

And you have brought me chew toys! She grins and looks at Sussi and Lessa. Lessa decides she would rather be behind Sussi. Sussi reaches out faster that I have seen a Ceph do and boxes Garfield on the side of the head.

"I would not mess with her Garfield. Level nines aren't patient with teasing kitties." His eyes go wide and he backs away until he hits the wall, jumps and pops out.

Not far enough kitty, even I can scan you from here.

"Sorry for the interruption. Garfield has been taking care of them for several years now. I am afraid he is going a bit mag."

~Understood. I assume those in the next room are the subjects you mentioned.~

"Yes. Coat color matches the skin color of those missing. That green one over there next to the outer wall reminds me of Bernice. Even has a blue tuft on her head. Ever seen a cat with blue? She is always next to the beige pink male. They are never separated. Many are that way."

~I read nothing from them except what I would expect from a house cat. Wasn't that their original phenotype.~

"Yes, interesting isn't it?"

~Lessa, we will set up in this room.~

#!At least it is warmer.#!

~You need to work more on your abilities. You should have been able to handle it. Here you will be able to practice keeping cool.~

#!Here I am among the enhanced. I do not need to hide my abilities.#!

~Ah so you know all three hundred of our subjects and can vouch for them?~

She looks stunned. No of course not dear. Everyone always imagines that being a Guardian will be easy. Piece of cake as the big noses used to

say. Anything but.

I need to give her time to work. I tell Lessa because Sussi is gone from hearing or seeing me.

"Don't forget to care for them. They are like infants. Food, water and remove their waste. Get Garfield to help. He has been doing it alone for years. Tell him I will get very nasty if he does not do most of the work."

#!Thank you.!#

"You're welcome Lessa. Good luck. A real puzzle."

I pop out and then up. I never trust world to world transfers unless I know exactly where I am. I then go north to be over the pole. From there I go home. Earth. Easy pop back to the plains.

I walk the last few miles. Still not used to kilometers. Does not matter. Miles mean nothing here either. Here it is half way to Coyote Rock, or two days past Trout Flats.

A little girl sees me first, "Grandma!"

"Sohospala! How good to see you. Has Messa dropped yet?"

"No Grandma. Midwife says maybe two more days."

"I am thankful I am back in time."

"How was your trip Grandma?" Meaning did I bring anything.

"Oh it was very long and dangerous, but also beautiful. I saw a strange beast with eight arms and others with wings between their arms who liked to hang from high places. Another one looked like a giant lizard, but could speak and understand. I was in a very cold place. So cold that air nearly froze."

She is in rapt concentration on my every word. She will remember well what I have said and relate it to others. They have a written language, but it is not phonetic but rather symbolic. Symbols help the reader remember the story, but do not tell the story.

"But I am glad to be home. Back to where the trees sing and the water talks. Where blue bird tells me secrets of what the crows are doing and the piece of cornbread the young raccoon stole from Wet Feather's hearth."

She inhales quickly, "You heard of that! Oh such a treat. Now my brother will not be punished. Thank you! I love you Grandma." She hugs me quickly and runs ahead of me to tell of raccoon. I am glad she is happy with her present.

I make the next rise, taking the long way in to give Sohospala time to tell of my coming. I have only been gone a quarter moon this time and no one will believe that I have been to the cold and back on this nice late spring day. All the same I provide an excuse for a break in routine. I will

earn my keep later watching the children as everyone prepares for our migration to the summer pastures.

On an opposing hill I see White Buffalo. He is chewing the young grass contentedly. No one touches White Buffalo, though his brothers and sisters are not so immune. The snow is gone and the small brooks and streams are full. Later the plains will brown and the creeks will dry up. By then the people will be in the cool of the mountains as will many of the creatures.

"Grandmother. Good you are back." I do not react.

"Getting better Long Tail. I almost did not hear you this time."

He smiles, "Soon you will not hear me. I saw you come in this time Grandma. You will need to walk further next time." That I did not notice and I bow to him. He smiles again and runs off towards another hill and disappears behind it. He will make a good scout for a time. Most do not survive. There is much honor, but most are eventually caught. Still many try for the honor of being call Eagle Scout. I do not tell them that term was stolen from them for a time. The big noses had the best of intentions there at least.

Here all bloods of the people are mixed. There is no longer black, white, brown, yellow or red. There are still differences. No one looks like another, but no one cares. It is what your heart sings that tells your worth, not your physical appearance. And we don't name people at birth before we know them. Children are given temporary names until the long night when they assume their final name. The name can be a failing they need to work on or an obsession they need to either embrace or let go of. Lots of reasons for names. I just go by Grandma. Never had any kids before the change. Now I have thousands.

Singing Twig comes up to me as I enter the camp. He got that name because of the way he can throw a shaped twig and make it sing in the air. Great distraction for game.

"Grandma." He pauses to try and say something right.

He starts again, "Grandma, the Sway Back tribe has been killing game without need."

"You know this for certain? You saw them?"

He sighs and nods, "I saw them. Out near Green Creek Hills. I also brought back part of their kill."

"What do the Elders say? An old Grandmother like me has no say in this."

"The Elders have been told and have decided punishment. I need to show you the kill. There is something strange about one of them. I cannot

explain how this buffalo died. There are no marks on it other than what occurred when it fell. No one else can explain either."

"Go on a think walk."

"The corpse will be rotten by then. People are afraid of it and the meat will be wasted if a reason is not found soon."

"Ah, Grandma to the rescue. It would be a shame to waste that much meat, hide and bones. How many other kills were there?"

"Five. They are already scavenged and distributed to every tribe but their own. They did the work as penance. The two responsible are serving honor. We run." Right. First a march in the cold and now a run over hot grass in midday. Wait until summer when it gets really hot. Mountain, think nice cool mountains.

He runs much slower than he normally does for my benefit. I am grateful. I would not want to use abilities and draw even more attention to myself. Still it is several hours before we arrive.

"You are trying to kill me and collect my magic bag. I will scatter it before I give it up." He laughs, but is winded as well and coughs to cover it. Good, I am not losing it completely, yet. Sooner or later I will have to fail to return to cover my not aging as I should be. A properly placed corpse will take care of the rest. I wonder how Silver remembers his body after so long. He still looks like I would expect him to, from my own memories of him from the time before all of this.

The two serving honor are sitting next to a pole on a hill nearby. Only a light strand of rope is draped over them. They are honor bound to stay as if bound by tight rope until relieved tomorrow morning. Even if a plain cat comes and eats them. Not likely, but they don't know that and it has happened before. After that they will not eat any meat for at least a moon to help remember what it would be like with no buffalo because they had all been killed. The entire Sway Back tribe will not eat meat for a week and none in front of others for a moon. All share when one or two stray.

"Okay, let's begin. Tell me what you already know." We sit next to the dead buffalo.

"Fallen Leaf and I examined the fur and skin carefully. There are no marks." I look at him. Fallen Leaf is only twelve years. Hardly a good choice.

He continues, "Examining the teeth says he was three years old. A young male. Age sickness could not be the cause."

"Even the young may die. The little ones do not respect age." Microbes as they call them.

"Look at the mouth and the waste. Smells and looks normal. What

ever happened was sudden."

"You say you saw the two kill the others."

"Arrows as one would expect. I did not see this one fall. We only noticed it after we examined the others."

One on the hill says, "I saw it happen." They are not supposed to talk.

"You interrogate them?" He does not answer or acknowledge their existence.

"I am not so bound." I walk up to the two.

"What did you see?"

"We had to kill the others. They were contaminated by being near this one. A Grasshopper Shaman did this." A powerful shaman. Locusts bring much death to the plains, even if they taste good roasted.

"You told the Elders?"

"Of course, but no one else saw the Shaman. It disappeared when we turned to talk to each other."

I return to Singing Twig.

"I hear there was a Grasshopper Shaman."

"There were no tracks near this buffalo. Even a Shaman has to walk."

"Even a shaman has to use some means to kill too. Look inside."

"I thought of that. I cannot see any reason inside either. All the organs look normal. Even the stomachs are full." One of my adepts. A natural. I did not raise him to level two, though if he works out, I may raise him further.

I scan myself. Brain damage, prions. Shit.

"We should cut it open."

I wake up. "NO!" I DS it to orbit and then to Hell along with a substantial part of the ground around us.

"Grandma?" I have just blown my cover. Grasshopper Shaman that kills with prions from a distance and leaves no tracks.

"I need to leave. You will not see me again. If you find any more like this one, stay away. Move the tribe immediately. Go now." I DS to the other side of the world, then take a very circuitous dimensional path back to Brown.

I am visibly shaken when I arrive. It is easy to forget we are not immortal.

"Sussi, I think the Bugs are on Earth."

~Hu-Eden?~

"Ah, right. A sentient shaped like a large grasshopper was seen killing a local herbivore. Upon investigation I determined the cause of death to be prions. The sentient left no traces of itself."

~These are your feral natives?~

"I would not describe them as feral."

~They are nomadic are they not?~

"Please that is not important. They are on a prime world. I need to tell the others."

~I see no reason to raise an alarm. The feral ones often describe fantasy versions of events and herbivores are susceptible to prion diseases. You have no direct evidence. All I see is the fear that they might be there.~

I am stunned.

"Prion diseases do not work so quickly. There would be wasting before death if it was a natural form of the disease. No evidence of anything but immediate death."

~Assuming this is not a new virulent form and that your diagnosis is correct. Did you continue your examination after finding the prions?~

"No, that was reason enough to remove the corpse and get out of there. You don't wait around for the second arrow to hit after a near miss."

~Best to hide and observe, not run and start a chase. You may have brought them here. Better to go to an isolated location and wait.~

"Can't get more isolated than here."

~Do you not believe your own theory? If you are correct this is the largest concentration of Guardians.~

"The Bugs sent them here if my theory is correct. No way everyone chose this world as their safe place. Did you?"

~You may be correct. However I have not been able to discern the enfolding if you are.~

"How is Lessa doing? You took a chance with her."

~I have seen no evidence since the event to confirm. She has had ample opportunity and nothing has happened. She is a good student and shows patience. Unusual for Dia.~

"And Hu." She affirms.

"Do you want me to stay and help"

~It will be better if you sought other duties. I want Lessa to learn responsibility for species she does not care for and you are likely to buffer that by your presence. I also will appear to leave from time to time.~

"In other words, you can study them from anywhere on this world." She affirms.

~Hmm. I did not try one thing I should have.~

"They are enfolded then?"

~Perhaps.~

"STOP. They are not enfolded. What are you two doing here? This is my project."

Sussi bows deeply, ~We meant no offense.~

"It was my fault. It was my theory that the Cats in the next room are the Guardians killed by the Bugs. I mean missing. Whatever the Bugs did, this is the result."

~Maybe the training we all had was partly responsible. From my own experience when one nearly got me it was reflex to be ready to jump, both body and soul. It is possible all they did was tweak the location.~

"That might be part of it. But, why all Cats."

There is a better choice? Garfield of course.

~He might have something actually. Assuming you cannot use your abilities and you do not know where you will land, given a random selection process. Cats can even swim if necessary.~

Says who? Garfield looks shocked. Too long on desert worlds.

"I would think Ceph would be a better choice. Most worlds are seventy plus percent water."

Huh?

~This world isn't. DSing to a green world does not make sense. It would be expected. Arriving some place like this means nothing to feast on you while you recover.~

They arrived here emaciated. No food or water except at the compound. Not a good choice in my opinion.

Edwin has gone back to work at his lab bench. I had forgotten him he is so quiet.

I go up to him, "Edwin, what do you mean they are not enfolded?"

He looks up at me surprised to see me here. Eyes and mind still on his work. He then goes back to his work.

Sussi lays a nice wet tentacle across his hand. He does not even notice.

"Maybe we should just wait. Patience and all."

~If they are not enfolded then I am not needed and can get back to my own work.~ She and Lessa both pop out just like that. I will wait for the explanation.

I decide to check on the kitties myself. They are up and about now. Looking for trouble as Cats do. I pass sniff butts, hissy fits, bath time, and chase tail. Certainly are starting to act like normal cats. Some seemed to be clueless the last time I was here. That suggests at least one is teaching them and I don't think it is Garfield. Wait, they are acting like house cats

not Cats, as in the large kind. Granted, their history was as house cats first, but still? Genes scan mostly puma with the necessary cranial enhancements. Silver's work. Way beyond me.

This is not getting me anywhere. I need to talk to someone who will listen. There is only one I know of that I can find quickly. Can't wait for this feeling to cool down. If she is still alive that is.

Back to Earth. She lives up in the hills above the birth place of the second gens, myself included. Well, I wasn't raised TK wise there, just had to make the pilgrimage. Oldest living Ceph. Over two hundred and eighty. She does not even have a name. Everyone just calls her the Old One.

I walk the last couple of miles to help get my mind ready. Normally the oldest one is the Matriarch. Anyone older than a Matriarch is killed off upon a change of leadership. The Old One somehow stayed hidden until she became too weak to be any threat. Now she is mostly forgotten except by a few who bring her food and minimal other items. I have brought her a 'thn pot with pure magnesium chloride crystals. Not enough to get her high, just enough to bring some pleasure and ease her pain for a short time.

I am met a few hundred feet from her cave. Water runs in the cave for her needs and it stays cool enough to keep her comfortable.

I announce myself, ~I seek wisdom from the Old One.~

The older one of the two, a male who has not mated yet answers me after waiting a bit to test my patience.

~The Old One is tired today. Come back tomorrow.~

~I have come a long way. It will be good to rest myself. I will wait here.~ I sit down on the nearest stone and make myself comfortable. The younger one, also male, leaves towards her cave. I have not met these two before. Must be new to the position.

Sure enough he comes back and hands the other. They immediately assume the full Nauti bow. I pretend not to notice. Two can play the patience game. On the other hand I am sure she is tired, most of the time.

I finally yawn. Very rude to show one's mouth. I get down from my rock and do a short bow and walk past them. They do not relax until I do.

At the cave I do a full Nauti bow, carefully and honorably. The cave smells of old Ceph. Sort of a fishy salty smell with a hint of must. After an appropriate length of time I slowly enter the cave. She is resting in a pool of water. The bowl looks natural, but I suspect it was slowly carved into the soft limestone by years of use. Okay, I already know that. Still impressive to see.

I wait to be addressed.

She is weak. It will not be long now. No one knows how old a Ceph can live, but eventually every body wears down past the point of repair.

~You honor me Hu older than I.~ I smile. She likes the idea that someone is older than she is. Though of course no one would believe it if she showed to them.

~I need your help.~

~I am watching.~ She relaxes. I set my jar down next to her. She will open it later. I always bring the same thing. She will use the salts and trade the jar for what she needs. A 'thn jar will bring much. Virtually indestructible and much sought after, though of course no one can figure out what it is made of. I microinscript my journal into them. Another TK could read it and know I was here. Each jar gets a longer inscription.

What will they make of my returning here for answers to this question?

From here on I hand instead of the visual means. Her eyesight is not as good as it was and handing is easier for her.

~I have a problem that I cannot solve.~

She is still and patient. Of course I cannot not come out and say I am a Guardian, though I am sure she suspects. I should have quit this relationship a long time ago, but I just can't for some reason.

~Some time ago myself and many friends were drawn to a meeting of leaders. We were very excited to be among sentients from many lands. We were brought together to accomplish a great task.

As we started this task it soon became apparent that something was wrong. We were soon asked to leave the project and were brought to a nice meadow, but all of our talents and abilities had been taken from us. Alone in a strange land with predators and parasites eager for our lives we grew forlorn.

Two of our group had not heard the call and came to find us. They were able to save us and the other sentients from certain death, for that was the end point of the project. It was designed to remove all competition by removing all of the leaders.

We returned to our communities and returned to our work. We prospered and life was good. But it was not to last. Recently, our members started to get sick upon being touched by strangers. They died or were changed. We are not sure which. I think I have found them, but cannot figure out how to awaken them to their former selves.

I am hoping you can see what I am missing and assist in my understanding.~

Handing all of this, short version that it was, still took awhile. Took

longer still waiting for an answer. No more light comes from the entrance. Crickets and the night creatures emerge and go about their lives. A snake comes into the cave looking for what spells of food. A tentacle reaches out and grabs it to submerge below the surface of the pool. After her meal she responds.

~Start again. Assume nothing.~

~Okay, the beginning. We were drawn to a place called Paradise. That is where the Bugs tried to kill us.~

~Stop. Start again. Assume nothing.~

~I don't understand.~

~Try assuming the opposite. It is the only way you will find the missing information.~

I am stunned. Problem solving 1A as Silver would call it.

~Go now. Your community is in danger.~

I bow slowly and carefully. What does she suspect?

Outside I do not walk down the hill to her guards. I pop straight back to the plains. It is dark, several hours ahead of the coast.

I hear moaning and wailing. There are camp fires out in the open in many locations. No, not camp fires, funeral piers. I quickly scan. Ten, twenty, thirty are sick. Many are already dead.

I run to the closest tent and call out.

"Grandma wants to know what happened."

A head pokes out. Then she comes out completely.

"Grandma, come help. Please, quickly."

She goes back in and I follow.

Three are ill on the ground. I do a quick scan. Prions! I scan the other tents. All prions. I scan what is left of the dead. Prions.

"It happened a few hours after eating the buffalo. Everyone had some. It was such a welcome treat and we did not want it to go to waste."

"Meat never goes to waste. The little ones needed to be fed too."

There are tears in my eyes. I sit down and start my healing chant. Not needed for me to do my work, but necessary for them to believe. A few are too far gone. I would only have brought back living vegetables. Over half of the community is gone.

Is this like the comet on Di? Are they punishing those around me to try and get me? Hundreds of thousands died on Di. A few tens here.

"Shit, I forgot about the Sway Back tribe!" I run from the settlement to be out of sight. As soon as I am sure none are watching I pop closer. The kill was closer to their settlement and the meat got back sooner. They were not supposed to eat any as part of the honor agreement.

A few did. They are gone. I leave unnoticed. They paid a heavy price. Others will not follow them.

How far does this plague extend? I send out a subliminal psiotic command. The shamans in each tribe are tuned to me and will hear. I warn them not to eat any meat until first snow. Anyone who does will risk death. An evil spirit is traveling the land, but can only attack those who eat meat. Everyone will be hungry, but we will survive. I taught them some time ago about alternatives. They will survive.

It is time I left them for a time. I was careless. I should have seen this coming, but was too preoccupied by the Bugs. This has put my community at risk.

Ceph Lake

^Ceph Lake? More like Ceph puddle if you ask me.^

~You want any more fish or not?~

He can call it Ceph Ocean if he wants. We have spent too much time here. Our mission calls.

^Oh great sphinx, tell us how we do that? We are stuck on an unknown world with no way to get back. We are surrounded by enemies in a small plot of land that is poison outside of it. Looks real promising to me.^

~Better here than pushing nets in the bay. No one ordering us around. Nice weather. Good food and companions.~

^Careful or kitty will take another nap.^ He bumps up against me to be rewarded with a growl. Don't push it too far flying mouse.

The way back is in the basement of the stone house. That can wait. We need to find out why these sens are here and who is top cat.

I get up and do a good stretch.

~You mean now?~

I ignore Silas and start down the trail. Pok is quickly behind me. Silas is still all wet from the lake and never was good on land. I leave plenty of clues for him to follow, but I do not wait. This has to end.

It is not far to the stone house, but we do have to avoid the local feral sens whomever is in charge is using and these two could not hide from a drunk dog. No, they are not that bad, but they have gotten lazy. I turn around quickly and run over Pok. He immediately scrambles up the nearest tree. I continue on and find Silas camoed into some bushes.

You stink like the sea. Easy to find. Climb on. I am not patient today.

He pauses, obviously not sure of my intentions. He finally comes out slowly changing to match my fur. Yeah, like a Cat would ever be so undignified to have a hump that large on their back. The stuff I have to put up with. The Matriarch is going to owe me a very good mating for this. I might even be able to mate Black Night. She should be coming into season soon.

Pok come down and climb on too. NOW!

^You stink Silas.^ I hear a slap as he gets Pok across the face. It's going to be a long trip. I think they ate too many fish. I am going to be very sore. I think of Black Night and speed up.

It's dark before we arrive. Perfect.

Where would a leader be? I would be as high up as possible. Top Cat

means being on top. I look up. The upper rooms look little used. A strange night creature sounds from somewhere up there. No lights. However, if it is a dog it will be in the softest spot. Probably at ground level. They are so lazy. Lots of light. Hu guards. Must be dog lovers. The largest open space I can sense is the open room we nearly burned down. No lights there and on the second level. I pop us into the room.

Still smells of the fire. Been a couple of moons now. Surprised they have not repaired the damage. Hu would have. Ba would have. Cats would not have. Too much work. Dogs would think it was an improvement.

Silas hands me, ~What's going on? What are we doing here?~

I am looking for the leader.

~A Ceph leader would be in a separate residence. Never with the lower ones. Too dangerous.~

Pok hands me, ~The Ba will all be together for security. Doubtless up the cliff we passed on the way in. I saw climbers at the ready. Definitely occupied.~

Neither Ceph nor Ba are the species in charge here. No Ceph and the Ba are being used as paper tigers. A common Hu deception.

~You think it is Hu?~

I sniff the floor and the seams near the walls carefully. I am lead to one section of wall.

There is a hidden room behind this wall. The trail does not smell like any species I know, though it does smell familiar.

^Huh?^ I reach around and nearly bite Pok. He jumps and disappears up the wall to clink to the ceiling. I watch him to be sure he does not plot revenge. He goes along the beam towards the area I found. Normally I would just pop into the space and take my chances. I can sense a void, but do not have the ability to 'see' clearly. Even I am not a silly kitty.

He reaches the edge of the wall above me and disappears! I try and see up where he is but am confused by the jumble of cross beams and decorations. What does he see? Silas reaches the wall and climbs up leaving a slime trail a Hu could follow. Those suckers really give him away. Being the only Ceph in this litter box doesn't help. He is up and over.

Here goes! I pop in to a shriek from Pok and sucker in the face from Silas, then we are all falling! I reach out and grab what I can with my legs and claw us to a stop after falling a couple of meters. Why didn't I see that drop?

It is painful waiting for my eyes to dark adapt further. At least the hall

we were in was not lit. I feel Silas leave first and can hear him descending.

Pok emits a few chirps, ^The walls are absorbing sound. Probably the earth and rotting vegetation I smell. I can't get a clear image back. Smells of insects.^

Climb off me and signal when you are not under me any longer. I may fall attempting to get down this rat hole.

I hear him scrambling down.

Hurry, my muscles are tired. So is my mind.

A moment later I can't hear anything below me. I wait. They may have just stopped. I scan, but can sense nothing but the twisting hole going down. They may be playing with me.

The first thing was to turn around. Not that easy. The size of the hole is a little large for easy maneuvering. Rats! I slip and fall a meter onto my tail and nearly break it. Then I slide down at least another few Cat lengths and slam into a wood door with a loud thump.

^The amazingly graceful Cat.^

I growl. *Gliding mice are not graceful either.* I pause. None of us are. We are the losers, as the Hu say. I pretend to know what I am doing, but in reality I don't expect to get back. No Black Night mating for me. Probably already done. I growl thinking about it. That muscle bound monster will have gotten her. I imagine two kits with too much fur around their eyes. Ugly. Could have done better with me.

I scan around me. There are many doors. I scan behind one. Strange.

What are they?

~Tastes like bugs, a whole lot of them.~

I sniff the air. It smells faintly like centipede. Centipedes are not bugs or insects rather. Too many legs.

Too big. These things are at least a Cat in length. Not moving either.

^Pupae. The doors suggest purpose or intelligence.^

Food?

~Not everything is food Nipper.~ It isn't?

^Could be. We know the Ba are running things. Might be a local delicacy. Let's keep going. At least it is level now, though I hate crawling underground. I need to get out of here or you will not want to be around me.^ Explains why they live in trees and cliffs.

We come out in a field between rows of crops the Hu have been attending. I remember this area from earlier. Still dark at least. I have no idea how long we were in there.

Silas is in front tasting the path. He takes off at the equivalent of a

Ceph run. I could take a nap and catch up without losing sight of him. He makes it through the trees. Did Pok just hug a tree? He really must have been hissed about being below ground. I decide to take a flanking path. I don't trust the locals.

Near false dawn they reach a clearing. I come in from the other side. Before us is a large mound of bare earth.

Be careful. Don't touch anything. Those were not Hu-Eden plants we have been walking through.

I see Silas show in the rising light as he sits on top of the mound, ~Too late. They make you itch a lot.~

Pok is careful not to chirp. The fur may have protected him for a time. I am going to have to be careful to take a water bath before cleaning myself. I hate water baths. I hope this is worth it. I can already imagine my paws itching. I want to scratch behind my ears.

I make my way to the mound and sniff the base. Lots of the centipede smell here. I go around the edge. The path up one side is the strongest. I follow the path and reach Silas and Pok now both at the top. They are peering down a hole.

~Not a good design for when it rains.~

Tell that to the ants. Maybe whatever is down there wants the water.

Pok waves his arms to get my attention and then hands, ~I will wait here this time.~

The hole is too small for me too. Looks like you Silas.

~At least scan for a larger area below. I would rather you took all of us than leave anyone alone up here or down there.~

I scan.

Something is moving down there. Looks like only one. It is coming up! Scatter! I make a quick turn and dig in, making a large cloud of dust. Silas is not going to make it in time. I double back bear hug him and pop us to the edge of the clearing.

Move it slug!

I turn around just in time to see it emerge from the top of the mound. I hunker down.

What the? I certainly have never seen anything like this. Shiny surface mottled reds, greens and browns. Jointed body. Eight legs. Not insect, not centipede either.

~Crabs that is ugly.~ Silas hands me.

I think the ones behind the doors are it's young.

Pok comes over to us, ~Or siblings. That thing looks fresh. Newly emerged from a pupal case. Time in the sun or age wear would dull the

surface.~

~Could have just washed. Light is still too low to get a clear view.~

It is going back the way we came. Follow at a distance. It is not moving quickly.

We make the castle at daybreak. There are Hu workers up and about. With an open field ahead of us there is no way to stay hidden if we continue.

Stop at the forest edge. We watch from there.

The creature reaches the edge of the forest and stops. It grows larger then smaller with the sound of air. It then reaches down and uncovers a storage locker of some sort. It removes cloth and proceeds to put on a set of clothing like the Hu do. When finished two sets of legs are folded inside the clothing. It uses it's largest back legs as walking legs and the two fore most for arms and hands like the Hu and Ba do. Sort of. Not a perfect imitation, but maybe enough not to upset everyone as much as seeing it naked.

It then proceeds towards the castle. The workers ignore it. It goes in the back entrance as if it lives there.

Fellow spies, I think we now know who the real leader or leaders of this community are.

^Didn't think the Ba were the leaders either. We are too fragile. What muscle bound Hu would be that stupid? Someone had to be enforcing the relationships.^

~Why make the rest sick though? We have been here for moons now and we are fine.~

We are not Hu or Dia. Maybe some disease or allergy type thing is going on.

"Ifs you allows mees. Iis cans explains." I turn quickly to see another one of those things a few meters from us. This one has no clothing. All of it's legs are visible. No weapons visible. Those legs don't look like they could harm anyone. The whole creature looks so light I think a weak Dia could take it on. How could they be the leaders?

It comes towards me. I back up and hiss at it as a warning.

"Inseressing. Whas species arse yous?"

I am a Cat of course.

It waits.

^I don't think it heard you Nipper.^

^Ah, esselent. Iis understands Bas. Yous cans sell mes whas species hees is.^ Knows gender anyway. Still not clear to me what gender it is, though judging from the projection near the tail I would have to say male.

^Has hees repressus?^

^Oh many times.^

^Essellense. Iis essamins nows.^

It comes towards me. I growl, but put up with it for the moment.

Upon reaching me it examines me with it's antennae and fore legs.

^Yess, shouss worss fines.^

It grabs me and I feel an intense pain in my stomach. I scream and react instantly, bringing my hind legs up and attack. I easy shred the lower abdomen of the creature. There is goo everywhere.

^Whys?^ It then dies.

I look to the others to see shock on their face and mantel.

I look behind me to see two more of the bugs coming towards us.

I crouch down and prepare myself, though they are not much of a challenge.

I then pass out from the pain!

A wet arm across my face wakes me up.

What happened? I try to get to my feet to fight, but am very wobbly. I look around and don't see any of the bugs.

^The other two explained to us. They learn about new species by injecting a live egg into the center of the organism. When it hatches it will slowly eat the organism from the inside out, assimilating information about the creature at the same time. Once it reaches adulthood it will be proficient in the creatures language and other abilities.^

There is a creature inside of me that will eat me?

^That is essentially correct.^ He looks worried. I am terrified.

I run in circles trying to see my stomach and where it injected me.

~STOP NIPPER!~

Huh?

~You can pop. When you do, you don't take everything with you.

Scan your insides and pop without the egg.~

I must have looked very stupid with my tongue partly out and frozen in place. I scan my insides carefully. Did not realize I was so much like other furred creatures.

I can't find it!

^Follow the injection path. It will be at the end of it.^

I do finally find it. Nearly at the extent of my abilities. I don't wait. I pop and yowl at the same time. Part of my intestine is around the egg. I paw at it to tease it apart. About two centimeters in length and about a centimeter wide. It moves!

I jump back and stare. It wobbles back and forth and then suddenly

splits open. A white tongue like thing emerges. Pulsating it makes its way out of the egg case. A maggot. Seen enough of those, though this one is tens of times larger. It immediately starts to feed on the small amount of me surrounding the egg case. It eats the egg case as well.

~Guess that is how it knows about itself.~

I think I need to see a healer. I am in extreme pain.

^Sure, get us home and I will personally take you to one.^

Why didn't they attack you two?

^They already know about Ba. Maybe once is enough?^

Does not explain Ceph.

~Seeing a dead sister might be an incentive to avoid us.~

^At least until it absorbs the information from us.^

I look back at the grub and step on it as hard as I can. A Hu method, but I am not going to bite it and risk it climbing down my throat. Once is enough.

You are both wrong. Those two were males. We need only fear the females. And now that I have the mark another is less likely to try for me. That means Silas is up next. Don't let one get to him.

^The Hu servants are awake and working in the fields around us. No more surprise.^

~If the leaders know of us, doesn't matter who else.~

^True. What now Nipper?^

~In spite of their method of gathering information I believe they are essentially curious, not intentionally malicious.~

^And they can't hear Nipper mind speak. That could be a real advantage. Nipper, can you read our minds as well as speak to them?^

Of course.

~Ah, then all communication goes through you. No more visible or audible communication.~ *You can still see my thoughts catnip addict?*

Mag head.

Hey, don't forget to rethink what the other has thought so the remaining one knows what's going on.

I swing my tail and ignore them. Going to be a long day for this kitty.

I lead them back towards the castle. For whatever reason that seems to be where the answers are. The servants ignore us. We are on the same path as the bugs. Probably learned long ago not to notice. Not that different from enforcers in a Ceph settlement, you learn to ignore them. Some learn through pain, some from watching, but you learn.

"Nipper! It is me Yasmin." I turn to see a young Hu tending plants. So undignified. Grass is for clearing your stomach of bad food and hairballs.

No one should have to tend it. She comes up to me and gives me a hug around the neck and starts kneading my shoulders.

"Oh, you're all here. We all thought you had died. It has been months."

What's a month?

About a moon in the number of days. Old Hu, very old Hu.

"Oh my God. You have been stabbed by one of them. I didn't think they did that to anyone but the Dia. It's why they are sick all the time. I'm sorry it happened to you. You seemed like a nice creature."

^He is fine. We ah, removed the egg. Just sore.^

"I didn't know that was possible. Hope you are right. Horrible death. You got both of them right?"

Both of them? Both of them! I crouch down and mew. The other one will have hatched by now. It could be anywhere chewing on my insides.

"How long ago did this happen?"

^No more than a few eighths.^

"How long is that?"

^It was early morning. Short time after sunrise.^

"Come with me now. Normally the victim is alone and asleep. Without help there is no hope."

With my head low, I am sure I will die a horrible death now, I follow. Back to the Hu huts of bad smells and sick sentients. We pass the Dia settlement which has fallen into disrepair. I sense no one present. The last one has died. Died a horrible, horrible death.

"Come in quick. Yasmin, get back to the field before they notice. Hurry." She leaves me. I look up into Hytha's eyes with as much sadness I can muster. Hopeless.

^He has been injected with bug eggs. We got one out, but Yasmin said there should be two.^

"How long was the Queen attached?"

^Only a moment before he killed her.^ Her eyes go wide.

"Unlikely there is time for the second egg to be implanted. You sure you got the one?"

^It was very much alive on the ground when he killed it.^

"You need to leave. You have put the entire group in danger. They will kill anyone and everyone will be looking for you."

^Strange, the other two bugs did not seem upset.^

"They do not have emotions like we do. They don't care about us other than to learn from us and for amusement. Please go! Please!"

So, I am not going to die from within. Maybe. How long was it on

me? I am such a scardy cat.

I go up to Hytha and purr and rub against her. She looks more frightened than thankful for my compliment.

Enough nice kitty. We attack!

^With what weapons and what enforcers?^

~When outnumbered use stealth and surprise.~

^Everyone in the land knows we are here.^

The leaders are the bugs. Kill all bugs and maybe the rest will join us.

Paradise II

"Ehira, launch . . ."

#Probes launched Commander. DSing to coordinates given. Telemetry looks optimal. We should have data coming in soon.#

"Captain, go to full alert. Likely they will know we are here soon if not already." I am counting on their fear or aversion of tech.

Now we wait. A lack of probe data tells us as nearly as much as if they do report back. We are in orbit around a brown froth mate. No life but simple cyanos in an organic soup. We spent days being sure that was all there was including numerous away teams led by eights and nines. Those few who are left. We should have been here over a year ago. Too many have defected. Too many. Lack of high TKs means lack of propulsion. I had ordered the size of the ship reduced as much as I dare.

"Don't they see the danger we are in? If they succeed how many will die? Millions of TKs and possibly billions or trillions from the worlds they serviced. Weren't the comets proof enough?"

!Commander?!

"Just thinking out loud. Carry on."

!Yes Commander.!

#Data received. Processing and analyzing.#

Weapons, shielding, and computational systems. We have lost too much of each. This placed far too high a reliance on the nines who are left. Rachael, James, Q and Hei Long. True allies. But what are a handful of nines against an entire world of Bugs?

#Commander, you will want to see this yourself.# If a Qes could look worried, she does. Flashes of colors I have not seen before cross her form.

I get up from my chair, lock it down and come over to the science station. We used to have separate com and science stations, but a smaller ship with less sens means consolidation. I miss Cook. I can't even remember his name, but I remember his creations. Called back to some emergency on his home world. Sure.

I scan the screen shifting portals with my mind.

"Good we are in time. Prepare an away team. I will lead this one. Captain, take the com."

!Aye, aye Commander.! He assumes my chair and types in his own code.

"Inform my team Ehira I will meet them in outfitting."

#Done.# Took me awhile to get used to her ability to predict my needs. Now I am dependent on it. She had probably already informed them and was only being polite. Let's get this over with. I do not give myself the luxury of thinking about what I will do afterwards. I must concentrate on surviving and succeeding. Nothing else matters.

I walk to outfitting. I refuse to become dependent on my abilities. Likely they will be prepared for psiotics. Oh, I practice them and keep myself sharp, but I try to do routine tasks as a norm. That includes weapons practice. The report said there was no detectable life or tech on Mirror II. A perfect place for practice.

"Mei, here is your gear." Hei Long hands me my suit. 'thn fiber impregnated light weight armor with helmet. The air is not breathable. Psiotics would take care of it, but if we can set up resonators to keep them out, so can they. Psiotic powered air supplies with variable frequency redundant microprocessors and a two hour passive system as a backup. Multiple alarm systems to tell me their current state.

I am handed weapons next. Explosives, knives, darts with non selective highly nasty chemical heads known to kill any sentient instantly. We have learned from their example. No more friendly handshakes. An of course, the ballistic weapons, 'thn hollow points with explosive toxic payloads, capable of hypersonic speeds. Makes the weapon itself dangerous if crushed. Could take out a heavy loader.

We will take separate shuttles to the surface using psiotics for the descent, but with enough chemical rocket capacity to get us back without it. Separate shuttles so we are not dependent on nor close enough to each other that they could take us all out at once. Even one of us survives and it will be enough to destroy their world and save the universe.

"Today is a good day to die!" Rachael salutes me Klingon style. I nod affirmation. I have no idea why she clings to her fairy tale idea of an imaginary war culture. Just glad she is here and on our side.

"Let's do it." I enter my module. I double check all systems. The fuel looks a little low. I scan the tank and scowl. Who set this one up? Latter. I grab mass from the air system and top off the tank. What else have they missed.

Hey, boss, were they sloppy with your pod too? Mine's lateral jet is clogged. Dust that looks like it has been there fifty years.

Mine looks like it was used by someone's rat's nest. Food crumbs everywhere. Dirty clothing.

Deal with it. We leave in five.

Descent is quite until we hit air. Low ox makes the planet's rock and

soil very red. No liquid water. It will be hot and cold below. High winds buffet the pod. I can sense the others in a tight array. Could have popped to the surface, but I like to come in slow so I can observe as much as possible. And to make as much noise as possible. If they are going to hit us I want to see it coming. Five pods screaming in make plenty of noise and lights.

The tech has scanned the entire planet to the core. So have the four of us. The Bugs have been doing this longer than time though. We learn new tricks each year, they must have too. They are down there somewhere, we just need to find them.

I land with a good solid thump. Rock, not dust. I look up through the bow port. Looks like pink soup. A lot of dust up there. The high iron content interferes with radio. Pulsed psiotics get through just fine.

"Captain, we are down. No problems to report."

"Aye, aye Commander. Nothing to report up here either. Good hunting. We got your six." At least while we are within visual range. They will hit us when the Enterprise is on the other side. Approximately thirty minutes from now, six eighths of an eighth.

"Scratch the normal exit. Meet me on the surface." I am getting impatient. Have to be careful. Sentients make mistakes when impatient. Need a Ceph in my command to remind me.

We stand a hundred meters apart. Nothing yet. Gravity is 95% Earth normal. Temperature is about 160 C, but wind is high enough to bring the temp down to a mere 120 C. Without psiotics we would be blown across the landscape. The landscape is barren. No hills, no mountains, nothing. I stoop down and feel the rock. Very smooth. Slight waviness to the landscape is all the definition that is visible.

I point north and we walk. I don't expect to see anything, but it helps me to think.

We walk for part of an eighth when I stop.

Let's make camp. Be creative and crazy. I want them guessing what we are up to. In my mind I can see them smiling.

I am not disappointed. The wind hampers their work considerably. These have to be free standing and not dependent on psiotics to stay standing. Still, using a lot of weight and 'thn shielding, which is inherently heavy, helps.

It is sunset before they finish, or I thought they were finished. They keep going. To pass the time I decide to do a minute scan of Mirror II. In spite of outward appearances, there is some geology here. It is not all amorphous and homogeneous. Forty degree tilt means it won't be dark for

long at this latitude.

I am going on a field trip. Back in an eighth.

All I hear are psiotic grunts. Tempted to eavesdrop on them, but I don't. Not wise with nines who have had more field experience than I have. Instead I pop to the outside of the caves. As a nine being closer does not help in terms of my resolution, but there is something psychological, deep brain need, about being physically closer.

There is no entrance. Anything that might have been there has long ago been filled in by compacted dust. The caves don't appear to be ones that were made. Too irregular. For Hu. What about Bugs? I think ants and this cave system does not look so unbelievable. Not the same as on Hell and Paradise. Hell! If the set up is the same there should also be a reflection world. There should be another Hell, though it might not be a black world. Equations say it could be a brown just as easily. The important thing is that there should only be one. A definite sign we have found the set and have not missed something.

When you are done, let me know. We need to go to Hell.

Right Boss. Finishing up now. Come when you are ready. Best to check out that cave under you. Looks interesting from here. Right. I shake my head and roll my eyes. I miss Ly'thn, even if she is an artificial appendage of a mega structure. If something is so complex you can't tell it from a true life form, is it still not a life form?

Oh well. I pop into the cave. The surface is as irregular as I scanned. No surprise. I turn on my lantern. But I can't recognize anything that means anything. Is that a storage room or a random pocket. Does that pile of stones all the same shape and size mean anything?

The branching structure goes on for kilometers, but is certainly not the world wide network of Paradise. There are caves and pockets in other locations on this world, but there is no pattern to them. Most are in this hemisphere. I understand the Rooi spheres pretty well. Dimensional math was a prereq for all astronauts and my training since has only improved on that. There is no way to place those spheres in the caves here. At least not by our understanding. 'thn shielding is easy for us to spot too. We have the only shield material on this world.

I pop back to the pods.

What the heck is that? Very intricate, bilaterally symmetrical and huge.

Rachael comes up to me and touched her helmet to mine, "Welcome to my fantasy."

She pops us into the interior.

A ship, but not one I am familiar with. The air is breathable. I remove my helmet.

"If you want the chair, you have to fight me to the death for it." She growls at me.

"As long as we go to Hell, I don't care."

Q comments, "Not exactly Klingon, but close enough Commander. Welcome aboard."

Hei Long adds, "We smuggled plans in our suits. We each carried part of it. We practiced for months, I mean eights of eight days. Is that right? No matter."

James comes up to me dressed in the most fearsome costume I have seen. Would not hold up to a hand held plasma meta laser, but looks impressive.

"It is not just show. We are fully weaponized. The designs are Rachael and my own creations over millions of years. We would get together every millennium or so and compare notes."

"So why didn't we use them on the Enterprise?"

"We did to a large extent, just adapted to your requirements. Here we are not so constrained. No automatic firing tech. On this ship each weapon has to be fired by operating a control at the time of discharge. We control the when and if, not some solidic brain. It might be slower, but a lot more fun. You have control."

"We found living so long and seeing so much that too much was lost to tech. We all spent countless lifetimes worth as savages, making our own weapons from natural materials found around us. We found that no one should be allowed to kill another life form unless they have experienced it with their own appendages. Note I don't say hands. We have all also been nearly every sentient life form we have met."

"I remember as much from the blending we experienced as magmotic."

"Not the same." They all shake their heads.

"Well, I hope we meet them then, though Hell should be empty unless some other froth of this world has found it already."

"Good point. If we find something, how will we know it is a true reflection without comparing it to Paradise II?"

"We won't, until we get to Paradise II silly, but safer to find something here to compare than to start on Paradise II." They are getting silly.

"Where do you want me Captain Rachael?"

She scowls, "You really need to learn Klingon. James will show you to your station."

He salutes her and turns to me, "Commander, get your scurvy maggot filled excuse for a meat package over here."

"What?" My eyes wide.

Q laughs, "Too much too fast James. Think like a pirate Mei. Even a few Arrrs would fit here if it makes it any easier."

I shake my head and go where directed.

"This is tracking, this is the selector for the weapon type and here is the firing button. The computer screen here will answer questions you might have about the capabilities of each including range, destructive yield and effectiveness against different target types. We added a Standard language interface for you."

"Thanks, I think." I scan the surface around us and the pods have returned to the Enterprise. No point in wasting them. I send a mental command to get someone in there to clean them up though. I don't tolerate sloppy work. The problem is that with everyone on board now at least a six they don't take orders well. Doesn't anyone see the importance of what we are doing? Do all TKs think this is a game? Two of three worlds hit by comets and meteors. This is war dammit! I growl in anger.

"That's the spirit Mei. Might have to give you a Klingon name soon."

We rise to orbit and pull alongside the Enterprise. The two are about the same size. I sense several sens have come aboard.

"Commander you may want to go back to the Enterprise to assume command there."

I remember a little about the fantasy world of the Klingons, "You insult me to my face! You dishonor me and accuse me of being a coward?" I assume a battle stance, convert my clothing to something more like theirs and add appropriate armament.

"Captain Sklag, this is Captain Rachael of the Bird of Prey Galagc. Are you read to rumble?"

!If you mean are we ready to masticate bugs. We are.! Di have strange idioms.

"Have you gotten data back from the probes?"

!Affirmative. There are over ten million sentients over five continents. There is also a very small colony of Hu and Ba. This is very strange as the dominant life track should be poisonous to them. The rez on the probes is limited by their flutter freq and we did not get a look peek at the colony. Likely more than we are seeing. Tech world wide is medieval, but psiotics if at a high level everywhere but the colony. There is likely enough to be formidable.!

I ask, "What was the freq used?"

!One one hundred thousandth, random number pattern and position.! Paranoid in the extreme. Excellent. Good sen Sklag. Glad we raised him from a six to an eight.

“What do you suggest Commander?” They all turn to me. Up on the screen in front of us Captain Sklag watches as well. Unnerving. Why did they put that disgusting thing in. Wait, I remember something from the stories. Very impractical.

“Even two ships against ten million would likely fail unless we went straight for the kill. However, we know this is not their only base. We sterilize the planet and it could still be used to start the froth again. Also, what is with the Hu and Ba? Are they studying us? What do they know? Is this how they learned to make the prion kills?”

!A lot of questions. Do we go for answers or the kill? Two ships against what is likely trillions throughout the universe is foolish. Honor would be lost going against odds like that. We need more information first.! He is not sure what to make the Rachael's gang either or me dressed like this I suppose.

I say under my breath, “Then we remove them from the game.” Slow them down some even if we can't stop them yet.

“Afterwards we implant the Rooi array. It will take them awhile to get around that. Don't even need to remove the bugs. They will revert to their pre-psiotic form and be harmless to us.”

!We have discussed this before countless times.!

“You will kill the Hu and Ba that we know of and who knows how many we don't. They were likely innocent victims. Can we do that?”

I sigh, “No we can't. As much as I would like to be done with this and get back to be a normal TK.” I hear a snicker, though I don't know from whom. I glare, but no one breaks.

“That means sneaking. Not Klingon at all. Klingons never sneak.”

Q, “Maybe it's time to stop playing games.” The rest smile at me. What? They think I am playing a game? Q remains serious though.

“Sklag, remain in orbit here. Slow the freq on the probes and use an encrypted data channel to stay in contact with us. Be ready to get away or to rescue us.” I turn to the others, “I don't want to loose everyone. We can't all go on this mission.”

Q grabs James, “We volunteer to recon the colony.”

Rachael smiles, “That leaves Hei Long and I to recon the Bugs themselves. I have been looking at the probe data. There is a large city like structure . . .”

“I don't like the idea of my top four nines all down there at once. We

will need you for the final assault. Q and James can scout both. We know where they are. Neither of us is going anywhere soon. The main point now is to remain undetected. Therefore the rest of us are to watch the probe data carefully, in real time, to watch for any change in their behavior, especially a rise in psiotic activity.”

!Understood. I recommend both ships be kept, but in different froths. We too have the saying, not to put all of ones eggs in one nest.!

“Captain Sklag, remain in orbit here. Adjust half the probes to send to the reflection froth. Captain Rachael and the rest of us will go there to see if we can find any evidence of Paradise II in the reflection. Much safer than doing a recon of one of their cities directly.”

Q and James salute in some strange way and pop out. More Klingon stuff no doubt. I shake my head. “How can they remember so much after so long?”

Hei Long provides the answer, “Ah, I retrieved the vids from the archive and we all reviewed them. We don't have transporter units of course, we just use the normal DS method for that purpose. But, other than that, we have done pretty well at duping everything. Even our disruptors. Based on an a high powered tuned microwave. Very effective against a variety of lifeforms without hurting most equipment.” He grins.

“Setting course for reflection point.” The view screen cuts off Sklag and changes to the view in front of us. A large DS portal opens up and we fly through it.

“Watch the weapons array. This is not a tour of Rija.” I roll my eyes and watch the sensory data coming in. Two small moons just like Mirror II. Time of day is different.

“Launching probes. Telemetry coming in from the Paradise II probes. Q and James are not there yet. Probably on Enterprise gathering as much info as they can before they go.”

“Or already eliminated.”

“I doubt it. We will give them some time before we react. Let's concentrate on our own task. I sense no tech. Like Hell, this is also a black world. Psiotics are zero. Data coming in from the other side. They have found an area of interest at, ah, shit, I can't read these numbers.”

Hei Long comes over and looks, “A bug in the software, ah, no pun intended. These are Klingon numbers. Set course for latitude 40.125, longitude 12.998.” He runs over to the com and enter the coordinates and the ship veers to the right. “ETA five arns.” I guess we are not in that much of a hurry. This many nines could pop the entire thing in a second. Remaining in character. Never let your enemy know all that you have. I

was an astronaut, not a general. Different way of thinking.

I miss being on a farship with Ly'thn. We had a lot of time to think. Of course now with the Rooi methods I could be there in a moment. Not the same. Walking though the woods is better than flying over it when you have the time. Not that the joy of flying is not an end in itself.

We pop. I instinctively scan below. I shouldn't have and two of them look over at me.

“Yeah, I know. Sorry. But explain what we have here. This is a black world, but looks a lot more like a brown. There is pre-life present. An ideal world to be hit with a One Mind seed. It would take off and cover this world in a blink.”

“Pushy Paws' report on Edwin's work said something about that. She is not a scientist though. She could have misread it.”

“The evidence is below us folks. Look! Over there.” A map appears in my mind with a flashing dot. I line it up with what I scan myself. “It has already happened. We are witnessing the beginning of life on a new world. Too bad we don't have time to bring Edwin here.”

“Too dangerous. Enough on the plantimal life. Search for structures.”

“Caves in the same place Mei found them on Mirror II.”

“Confirmed.”

“Still not world wide.”

I sigh, “Confirmed.”

“Maybe we have the wrong world. There is no guarantee that they would use the same exact formula this time as last. In fact they may have to do it differently. This world is not the same and the time is not the same. I am sure we messed the timing up big time.”

“There are billions of possibilities.”

“Actually not.” A Rooi sphere appears. Mirror II at one end and Paradise II at the other end. I make my own sphere next to his. Not a Rooi sphere, but a thirteenth inversion of one. Mirror is at the center and Paradise at the north pole.

“This rep says we may be totally off. Even Paradise might not be where we think it is. Both reps are equally valid. How do we know?”

“We need a third point to lock it in.” A dotted ring appears in the first rep about a third of the way up from Mirror II. “We expect the reflection point to be on this line somewhere.” A red dot appears. “This is where we are now. Where we expected it to be anyway.”

“So you are saying that it might be anywhere along your ring. That is still over a thousand worlds if we are the proper world to begin with.”

“Yeah. Could take some time. Time we probably don't have. They are

undoubtedly looking for us. A thousand worlds means a thousand times greater chance they find us first.”

“Do we need to? We know where Paradise II is. What more do we need?”

“Ah, do we? We have a green world, but if we look at Mei's sphere we can see there are a lot of possibilities. Are you so sure we have the right one.” A dotted ring appears on it. “If we assume this really is the reflection point and we have the real Mirror II, then these are the possibilities for Paradise II. I would hate to kill millions of sentients over an oops.” They all look at me.

“We need more information. Now I am not even sure we have the right world at all. This might be the most logical place to start the froth process, but it does not mean they chose this location. They clearly don't think the same way we do.”

“The Blu did the calculations. Have you ever know the Blu to be wrong?”

“No, that's what confuses me. Let's get back to Mirror II and the Enterprise. I want to hear first hand what Q and James are finding.”

“Agreed.”

Fast Track

~It is time to make your decision Professor Xot. Though it is not normal to recruit to our ranks in this manner, I am willing to bend convention to see how this will turn out.~

~If we had not been allowed to save Ba-Eden I would not be here to consider. I am deeply grateful for the positive outcome. Had I somehow survived and learned you could have saved them but did not I would hate you till the end of time.~

~Understood.~

~What I don't understand...~ I turn to Fa, ~Is why you are not mad at her and the others.~ I don't know her species well enough to judge emotions. We are so transparent by comparison. She moves her head back and forth and ducks it briefly.

Then using her wing hands she tells me, ~I understand the reason why our home world was allowed to change. The Guardians had nothing to do with the destruction, though, yes, they could have prevented it. I have personally experienced the pain of my species methods and have seen how destructive they can be towards other species. From what I understand of the Hu species' history, if a comet or meteor had threatened them, their world would have suffered a similar fate before the Guardians appeared. Besides, my species is not dead. A remnant is alive and reproducing. Several clutches have already been produced and should hatch soon. The difference is that this remnant was carefully chosen for positive traits that will be an asset to the sentient universe.

The Guardians are not the only beings who could have prevented the disaster. The 'thn solid life forms could have done so easily, but they never interfere.~

~I am not sure I could be so calm about my own species. I am on this world because my ancestors were forced to leave Ceph prime or be eaten. We can be similarly cruel and destructive. From what I have seen, most sentients have a destructive side. I am not sure I want to be a god as the Hu describe the concept.~

~A level nine Guardian is not the only role that is filled by this path. Very few get that far and not by choice. Nines are all chosen very carefully. And if you want the job, you will never be offered it. We are also healers, scholars, explorers and thousands of other roles. I would not worry about ever being in the situation of playing god on the planetary scale. As to the individual level, do we not all do that every day when we

decide who to grant a favor to and who to turn down? Which hatchling to eat for breakfast and which to let go? Ceph more than any other sentient should understand this.~

~You say that I can go back any time I want.~

~You can go back to being normal, but never back to your previous position. We all disappeared a few days ago and no one will ever know what happened. Well, outside the Guardian community anyway. Hernkic and Sussi have been told and Hernkic has taken over my classes until a new instructor is found. I will return eventually, but in a different form and temperament. Just too hard to explain what happened and too great a chance someone will say or show something that might be a clue to others.~

I go white, ~Different form? You mean like I can assume different shapes, textures and colors as all Ceph can do?~ I mimic a rock nearby to illustrate. I am well practiced. Have to, to survive hatchling to the unseen period.

She changes in front of my eyes. She becomes more upright, her neck much shorter and thicker, her body longer and thinner. She becomes Hu!

~Interesting I have never seen a Hu without the cloth covering.~ I can read Hu emotions. She looks annoyed and clothes appear. In reality I want to hide so bad I can taste it in the air around me.

“As you can see I am not limited to the Ku shape. This is as close to my original shape as I can remember after so long. I have been every known species at one point or another and many you have never seen.”

She changes shape again to something truly hideous. All ceramic knife sharp spikes and edges. She emits some weird sounds and smells that might be language, but nothing I can understand. She finally assumes her Ku shape again.

Fa asks, +Does that hurt to do?+

+Very much. That is why it is only for the most advanced students. Thank you for noticing.+

I go white again.

~I don't understand. I could understand what you showed, ah, I mean said.~

+Very good Xot. The language impression took. Ceph is not easy for the Ku shape. Please continue to show us in the Ceph means and we will express in Ku. Both you and Fa will learn faster. How do your ganglia feel? Any pain?+

~No pain, just confusion and fear.~

+A real advantage to the Ceph physiology. Having only one brain

mass is definitely more painful.+

~I have one request. May I be assigned to astronomy?~

+Everyone learns astronomy. When you can visit other planets and dimensions at will, it is a good idea to be able to find your way around. You will both be free to decide your own fates. That is not a good thing as much as it sounds like freedom.+

+I don't understand.+

+You will. We go. For the moment anyway you are both my students. You will have many other instructors before you are through. However, the most important instructor you will ever have is yourself. Always question your own motivation and desires. Much to be learned there.+

She turns to me, +You are no longer Professor Xot, you are student Xot. Fa is your equal. She is likely to learn and advance faster than you. Do not be alarmed or disappointed. Go at your own rate.+

~Ceph tend to take longer to learn concepts and methods. I have seen many of my students learn what took me several times longer to achieve.~

Fa comments, +My own brief experience suggests you may take longer but will learn better. I mean your ability will be stronger.+

+Each will learn in their own way. One way is not better than another.

+

Everything changes. We have gone from an open field at night to a very cloudy and dark day. I cannot determine the time of day it is so dark. It is cold, which feels good. Most places away from the sea shore are too hot and dry for me. Ku-Barb sees we are with her and starts to move. I try hard to keep up, but I am old one even by Ceph standards. I soon fall behind.

The trail is clear enough and it is a nice day. Not Ba-Eden. The plants are different. We are not even at the same location on this world as the farseer was on Ba-Eden, though where we landed after moving the asteroid is beyond my experience also. There was not enough time to study the star pattern. Too many distractions. Hope the clouds clear. I could tell much more if I could see the stars here. If we are still on an Eden world. Wish I studied botany some.

It has been at least an eighth before I see any movement. The plants do not look healthy. I thought it was just the low light. Might be because I rarely go out in the day time. Something is coming towards me down the path. I decide it would be better to hide and wait and see what it is that shares my new world. If the plants are different, likely the animals are too. I merge with the surroundings.

In a few arn a large Hu female, I think, comes running down the path. She passes my location and continues down the path. I wait until I am sure she is not returning. Not looking at the surroundings for me then. Vigilance is needed here.

I relax and start to move only to be confronted with something nasty looking right at me. I freeze again. It breaths hot breath on me. Large teeth. Probably never seen a Ceph, but I don't want to end up a chewed up and then thrown up snack. Too much salt and copper in our blood for most land animals.

“Hey you! Get lost!” I can see just enough behind me to see that the female has returned. I am not moving and I hope she is referring to the creature about to eat me. I see a large leg with shoe attached suddenly swing around and hit the creature in the head, very hard. It snorts, turns and runs away from us.

~Thank you.~

“I'm sorry. Don't know Ceph that well. Not many around here. If you can understand me, raise one of your arms over you.” I do so. “Great. I am going to lift you up and carry you back to the City.” City? Out here?

She is very gentle as she picks me up and we start to move. I did not realize that a Hu could run so smoothly. None of the up and down I have noticed before. This is the fastest I have ever traveled on land. Nothing compared to being suddenly above the planet of course.

It is another eighth before I start to see where we are going, even at my new height. It really is a city. There must be hundreds of structures. Several Hu levels high too. This would never be allowed in a Ceph city or settlement. The City stretches over a flood plain judging from it's shape and though wet enough, no evidence of an actual flood. I look up. The clouds should yield plenty of rain. I look around. How far are we from the ocean? Are there any more Ceph? Do these Guardians run the settlement or hide and rule by influence and stealth? So many questions. Is my transport a Guardian? Probably not if we ran here.

Very little time passes getting to the edge of the settlement. My rescuer slows down to a slow walk with more up and down movement. A lot of Di, a few Dia, Ba, Hu. No Dio or Diu. The Di are wearing partial cloth covers and tool belts. We must be on Di-Eden. Di hate Dio. I am amused. Most of my peers do not even believe in the old tales of separate origin worlds. I guess the other explanation is that I am having a very good time in a luxury mag tank with clove and wintergreen oils. Oh, and scented candles. One Hu idea that I do love. Have not had a night off since I was newly named though.

I am set down on a stone walkway. Fa and Barb are waiting with a bowl of food!

~I love you both!~ I did not realize I was so hungry. I cover the bowl and begin. ~Excellent. Where did you get takei fish? The herb mix I do not recognize, but very tasty.~

+Slow down Xot. No shortage of food here. Not takei fish, but raptor. The one thing we seem to have no shortage of. Nice to know at least one sen likes it. Everyone else is sick of it.+

~What is a raptor?~

+The creature who nearly ate you on the path.+ Ah, a great honor to eat an enemy. I chew more slowly and respectfully.

~Seems to me that if a Guardian can change shape without regard to the mass differences you ought to be able to make food. Maybe you can do something about the flies too. I have never seen so many so hungry.~

Fa chirps rapidly, +I had not thought of making food. I am ashamed at my stupidity. I need to go inside and hide my shame.+ Does not stop her from snapping a fly out of existence. Hu would waste a good protein source amazingly.

+Stay here Fa. There is no shame in not figuring out every puzzle.+

“Okay.” She just used Hu? How many languages did she say she knows? I have been under a farseer too long.

Fa tells me, +This is the world where a comet hit but did not kill most life, at least not yet. This settlement is an attempt to rescue as much as possible of the sentient culture.+

~Explains why there are so many Di.~

+For the time being the three of us will work along side the others as you learn to use your abilities. Most of those you see are also gifted or newly gifted. The nice Hu female who brought you here is a recently added student. Her teacher is Doc, also known as Healer.+

~The Healer of legend? That can't be. It must be over a thousand years since that time. Barb, I remember that name as well. If you are the same, that means you are. . . ~ I turn white and match the flat stone around me.

“I never tire of seeing them do that.” The one who carried me lowers her face to my level. “Hello. You can come out. There are even more old timers here. Mandhi you should meet for sure. Those weren't legends you learned as a young one, they were real. All of it was real. She probably is the Barb of the stories. The one who was a space whale for most of her existence. Get used to it. My name is Sam by the way. Welcome to paradise.” She gets up smiling, waves to the others and takes off to do

some task no doubt. Knows more Ceph than she admitted before.

+Do you hide every time your feathers get ruffled? Er, arms, fins?+

+You did not do much better the first day either Fa. Be respectful. He will be your learning partner for some time.+

~How long?~ Barb raises her beak into the air and whistles. A long time then.

+I have been wondering who I would pick to be her partner. I thought at first it should be another Ku, but none impressed me. Most TKs have partners, at least during training. Right now it is not safe to be alone for our kind. There is a species that we upset with our actions who is trying to kill all of us. They are unlikely to try and attack here though. Too many of us in one place. They like to attack when we are alone.+

+Still want to join us Xot?+

I think about it.

~Yes. It is one thing to see the stars through a farseer.~ I turn around and look at this world I have never been on. ~I will serve you forever to be allowed to do this, to visit, to see, to taste other worlds.~

+Oh, you will serve, but not me. You serve The Question. We all serve The Question.+

~What is the question?~

Barb looks at me carefully. I feel like I am about to be eaten. I must be visible. No hiding. If all of them serve the question, then it must be very profound. Very important.

+Why?+ Huh? She makes some wild noise. Even Fa looks confused if I am seeing her right.

Pink

Thorps are tasty. Syn and other world food is not as good. Nutritious, but essential elements missing, no soul, little learning possible. I feel less being away. The advantage is that it concentrates what I have learned.

Eat now, think later. Purposely arrived some distance from group so as to rebuild nutrition. Many will feed. Much to transmit.

Sure now that transmission was from the enhanced one to the native one, not as fast seekers presumed. The slow seeker finds the truth.

Eating now. Truth will be consumed by many soon.

Mesa

Everything returns to the Mesa sooner or later. Why here? It was the point that Br'thn remembered how to reach the Regional Center, but now we know we are not limited to this location. Granted, it is still easier to come and go from this position. I should have the Blu look at that some time. I feel I can almost see why. The treads of froth and dimensional connections feel right here. Everywhere else is like walking on sharp rocks on dry land. You can get there, but it is abrasive to one's mind.

I land near the Kiva we use to meet in. No one present. No one has been here to clean it in some time either. The Kochinas are looking dusty and forgotten. It only takes a moment to do a surface cleaning. I should spend the time to do this by hand as the Hu show. I feel time is short.

I hear movement outside and instinctively blend with the wall.

“Very good honored one. If I was not one of the chosen I am sure I would not find you.”

~Jones? What are you doing here? Weren't you with Mei? Where is Smith?~

“So many questions squishy one. It was my turn to deliver the progress report. I will leave it here for others to read.” He places a chip on the altar and then immerses it into the altar itself. Prevents norms from taking before we have all read it.

“On to the space station and then back to the Enterprise.”

~Wait, tell me what happened? I don't want to have to chase you to the station just to read it.~

“Forgot your reader again?”

~I was at the Library. They are sort of suspicious of tech there. Easier to just not carry it with me.~

He looks thoughtful, “Few words means less truth.”

~The facts I can read later. What do you feel?~

“Ah, a wise choice. I am concerned. We are chasing Coyote. Very tricky and not as obvious as others think. What we see is not what is seen.” I am trying to remember the orientation Pushy Paws gave me on Una mythology.

~I am feeling the same after being in the Library.~

“We read your report. Thanks for not waiting. Maybe it will open eyes.”

~Any more deaths?~

“None that I know of. At least no more sens have left Enterprise. We

are too few now.” He looks at me like he wants me to join him on the return.

~How is Ehira?~

“She will make a good scout with more training. Wasted in communication.”

~If there is time.~

“The universe will continue. All we can do is as the Great Spirit asks.” He smiles.

~Does the universe really end when I deliver the Black 'thn? It seems like a fantasy now.~ He shrugs.

“Why are you here?”

~I need to find Silver.~

“Ah, you have thought up some marvelous way to get even for his last trick?”

~Why does everyone think that? I failed the last time. He actually liked it.~

“It provided amusement to many. Is that not enough?” Smiling again.

~Help me find Silver while you are here. Or are you wanting to get back.~

“I should leave. I will give you a clue. Look to Silver's history.” He smiles again and pops out. Crabs.

He pops back in, “He is here.” He laughs and pops out again.

Here? Where? I scanned as soon as I landed. Only thing I sense is norms.

History. How far back? The last thousand years he has been obtuse, painful, always there when you least expect him and absent when you do. He could be anywhere. Jones showed here. He could sense him somehow.

History. Further back then. Twenty five million years is a long time. Owa would know more, but I have no idea where she is. Could she still have kits? Why do the Cats still have the need to reproduce? Once is enough.

It was Owa that started this back and forth trying to trick Silver. The last meeting before coming back was particularly violent. Maybe having lived so long they welcome death? Silver is the master of time manipulation though. No one better. Fast time or Slow time. Actually, when in either state, a TK is much harder to sense. If I adjust to a slower time frame when scanning . . . ah, there is one lone male Hu down in the green crevice over the edge of the Mesa. No room for anyone else. Very precarious. Right, the plants. Not many plants around here. He is with OM! He spent millions of years with OM on the first Hu Eden.

I move over the edge and descend to hover just above him. Silver alright. Still has a sheen to his skin. I need to match his time frame to TP. I can't hover in slow time. Only one way then. I lower myself to his height and then wrap myself around his as close as possible. I slowly release my TK to be sure I am balanced.

Now slow time. I hope he is not running too slow. I don't want to spend years here.

As I slow down the sun moves more quickly. Soon it is just a flicker, a fraction of an arm for each cycle.

Welcome friend! OM of course. She still makes me wary. Someone so powerful, but unseen and very hard to harm. Good, we are not in too deep.

Nothing like a nice Ceph coat to keep me warm.

I am not a coat lazy one. Everyone else is working hard to solve the problems we have seen and you sit here talking to the plants.

There is much wisdom in the plants. You need to spend more time with them yourself. Might help your personality. I sense amusement. Even here, even now, he can't stop playing.

What are you really doing here?

Negotiating with OM of course. OM reminds me of some of the stories of Satan, always tries to trick you out of what you think you are getting. Too similar to some Ceph I have encountered.

How can OM help us?

With what?

The Piskon Hive, the missing ones, the destruction of Di-Eden.

I felt that one. I have to remember OM is listening and seeing my mind as well.

They have a name then. I wonder if they chose the name or is it what others call them.

Why does that matter. They are trying to kill all of us.

Been too long since you had to worry about being eaten Roo? More amusement.

I need your help.

I gathered. Must be important to interfere with our conversation.

I have plenty of time. Amusement from OM? That's weird.

I met with Jesus at The Library.

Not the Regional Center then.

I tried there first but got no help. They hid the entrance to the Library by using a dimensional portal. Was not difficult once I understood.

But Jesus just walked right in of course.

How did you know?

A habit of his. And yours I noticed.

They had the answer though. It seems that the species is particularly nasty. Known as the Piskon Hive, as I have shown. They operate in pairs spread throughout the universe. There is a worrying side. Once a species has attracted their attention they are declared anathema. No other species will associate with them until . . .

They succeed in overcoming the Hive or die themselves.

So I assume.

I have never been to the Library. How long were you there? What else did you learn? Ci'lan spoke fondly of her time there, ah, in the future.

Nothing else. This is too important to soak in.

That is sit on.

Huh?

Never mind. So, I take it you were not there long?

No, less than an eighth after the information sphere was delivered. That took time unfortunately. The mech servants were helpful, but not quick.

Mech huh? And the first sphere they delivered had what you wanted.

Yes, why would it not?

In the Matriarch's hall, is the first Nauti sphere you are allowed to read the most useful?

Never. Our entire culture is based on withholding information and deception. I have been trying to change it, but we seem to be genetically programmed to behave this way.

And the 'thn culture, the ones who run the Library?

Crabs!

What did Jesus say? The word say always rubs me and he knows it.

He stayed to do more research.

If you want an answer, wait until he returns. Number one rule with dealing with anything the 'thn touch: never accept the first answer, even if it true. You can't know it is true unless you see the rest of the answers.

Which one will be the truth then? I am confused. Do they not accept us as their saviors? Don't they owe us many favors?

The truth is usually the one they will hate the most. They will not owe us for forty billion years and it has already been done. We are no longer needed.

They are worse than Ceph. At least with us anyone who did not respect favors would soon be out of power.

They still believe they are too big to fail, to be hurt. They do last until

the end. Maybe they are right.

I should return to normal time. I need to find the truth and tell the others. You could help.

I am, in my own way. There is much the OMs know, but it takes time to get anything out of them.

Don't be timists. Silver is showing amusement. I don't think OM shares the emotion.

Paradise

She said to go back to the beginning. This is the beginning. The monitors will have picked me up by now. That means they will know I am here. At least I will be watched. Comforting feeling actually.

All of the settlement structures have disappeared. Long ago rotted back into the soil. A few iron artifacts scattered about. The transport bubble was removed long ago, but the pad remains. No settlement has a transport system any longer. But especially not this one.

Is this the fate of my own 'project'? Will all my family be nothing more than dust soon? Was the buffalo a vector sent by the Bugs to get me?

I am getting distracted. I need to focus. Return to the beginning.

I pop to outside the ruins. Overgrown almost like when we first arrived. The opening was sealed of course. I would have left it open. They were only doing what they thought was right. I would have left them to roam the surface in peace. The Matrix keeps them in check. Wish it did these small bugs. I check my mini matrix. Tuned to the small ones. So far so good.

I phase shift to the inside. Did not noticed anything going through the rock. They hated tech, but I still have a hard time believing they did not have any of their own. How can you exist for billions of years and not use every tool available?

I walk to the lower chambers. Less likely to miss anything. The dead glow sphere is still here. I make another one. Sometimes good old regular eyesight works best. There they are, just as we left them. Or rather as Rooi and Silver left them. Dried out shells now. They sure look alike. Old Hu concept. All red skins look alike.

I am just not used to seeing the differences. A game then while my subconscious is working. Find the difference. I take two standing next to each other. Legs are in slightly different positions. Expected. Dessication artifacts are different. Also expected. Time to do deep. Still pockets of 'meat'. Bug jerky. I smile. Wonder if it tastes good. Not that I am going to try it. Too much silicon. Seems to stabilize them somehow though. Maybe a necessary adaptation to this earth froth variant. Probably stops the bugs from attacking them.

DNA scan. The other one. Both of them are identical. Matches reports. Makes sense now. A hive by definition is really one super organism. No individuals as we think of them. Still, life treats each of us

as individuals, whether or not we have the same DNA. Developmental and experiential differences, closer to the source of warmth, the amount of nourishment you get, sun exposure, whatever. Even what the queen felt like the day your egg was laid can make a difference. As can the queen who laid her egg.

All I am seeing as I scan each one are the dessication differences. That was dependent on micro climate differences and the stance they were in when they died. Died. They don't look like they moved at all after control was taken away from them. Turn off their TK and they died right then and there. Were they that dependent? Whatever for? That would be a severe handicap and a totally unnecessary one.

Sacrificed? Maybe it did not matter. Like ants building living bridges across water. Many die, but even in death they serve their purpose. Maybe Paradise was a trap, not for defective TKs from other systems, that was just garbage collection, but to get us, if not immediately, then later. They know us now. Just a matter of time before we are all tracked down and killed. Why? Because of Rooi and Silver's trip to the end of time? Because we are a threat to them having proved ourselves powerful?

Start over. How could we be a threat? We are insignificant compared to the trillions they must be. A minor annoyance. Start over.

My mind keeps saying that. How can I go any further back? I don't know the time methods of the two rascals. Somehow I don't think that is what she meant anyway. Start over. Take the opposite point of view. What is the opposite point of view?

Switch roles. We are the bad guys and they are in the right. Well, we certainly did not try for that role. That means all of our assumptions are wrong. That's what she meant. So, what if our assumptions are wrong? What does that mean?

We made a lot of assumptions about the Bugs, about Paradise. The biggest was the idea that everyone on Paradise would die if the froth happened. What if that was not the intent at all? That they would survive the Mirror Paradise inversion, that there was even going to be an inversion. Heck, we had not seen it happen before. Thirty five million years ago we were lemurs or some such. If they were killing a million TKs every thirty five million years you would think word would get around. But they are not the ones being shunned, we are.

That would mean we were kicked out because we were not supposed to be here. We were not called, we just figured out where it was going to happen. Party crashers. We were not mature enough, nor experienced enough to actually help. Then why hasn't anyone told us we were wrong?

Instead we are shunned, as if that would limit the damage. Giving us time to grow up? Or are we . . . sick, diseased, or . . . contagious? Shit, no. No that can't be it. No way a virus or bacteria would cross that kind of species difference.

DNA is not the only contagion though is it? Anyone who remembers what happened to my people can vouch for that. It was not just the white man who killed us with smallpox blankets, tricks and superior tech. It was their ideas. No Great Spirit, no Coyote, or Spider Woman, none of them that kept us safe in the ecology for millennium. Instead we took their lies and watched our world destroyed. No, helped destroy our world. We either actively joined them, abandoning the old ways, the true ways or we gave up, climbed in a bottle and tried to forget. Even I got sick of all the whining about how we were abused. Get over it.

So, we are sick with the contagion of bad thinking. But believable thinking. Something another sentient might buy if they listened to us, helped us, associated with us. Hell, I would avoid us too.

They did not die here. They have been TKs for billions of years. No way could we trick them so easily, so thoroughly. Silver used this method when he tricked Sauron at the Center. Oldest trick in our bag.

We have no evidence they killed a single individual actually. Everything is subjective. I need to go to the surface. I latch onto to one of the dessicated bugs to bring with me.

Takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dwindling light. Immediately the psiotic parasites are drawn to me only to be stopped by the repeller I am wearing. I scan one. High silicon just like the Bugs. They even look similar. That's strange. The DNA is wrong. I look at the Bug I have brought up and scan it's DNA again. We had assumed that the Bugs brought this ecology with them when they chose this location. It took some time to set all of this up, might as well be comfortable. We assumed they set up from their own ecology, their own genetic heritage, but this bug and the Bug says differently. They are as alien to each other as we are to them.

What then did the locals feed on before we arrived? They were and are here, they are still here and they are still very active. There must be another source.

The white man beat us partly because of superior tech. The Bugs do not like tech. No, correction, they do not like our tech. We must be incredibly primitive to them. Stone age or worse. A stone spear hurts even a level five tech culture sentient if thrown by an expert.

If this is truly an earth froth world, and my path through the

dimensions says that it is, then it started with similar starting materials. The soil shows the same ratio of silicon, iron and other elements. The continents are different, so this is a long ways from my birth world. Not unexpected. Everything here uses silicon more than we do. That suggests at least two billion year gap. Life evolved differently here. Different OM starting stock.

OM! I was just with our OM. They do a lot of manipulation. There is no way she would allow the Bugs to come in and destroy her world. Not after working so hard to bring it to this state. The Bugs would have needed permission. That would explain a lot of the time they were here before starting. They could not have bargained with anything that would allow her to let them destroy her. Confirmation I may be on the correct path this time.

Reports say there is nothing sentient present. Timist! Caught again. Nothing sentient in our time frame I should say. I need to talk to this OM and explore other time frames. Too many unanswered questions. Far too many.

Dungeon

^Did you have to kill her? A simple get off you bug would have worked. No, you had to kill her.^

Silas is still free. He will figure out something.

^And why are you still here? Why don't you just pop out and abandon me as well?^

I can't. The infection is draining me.

^Maybe this wonderful food will help.^ I throw it at him. Not fit for dung beetles.

Soon I will not be able to mind speak.

^Well, things are looking better then. I will finally have some peace, just before they kill me for being with you. Definitely a nice day it is.^

He is quiet finally. It has been days, I think. Too dark down here to tell. I am loosing weight and I didn't have much to start with. I should have eaten the 'soup'. Soon enough I will look forward to it. If they feed me they don't intend to kill me that day.

What I don't understand is why they have not implanted one of the grubs in me. Why waste a sen they could use to feed their young for free. No questions asked.

I am staring at the wall we came through so long ago now. I would curse it if I knew how. A dart would have been better than this. The not knowing is the worst part. Every time a piece of metal clangs I am not sure if something else is going on or it is time to die. Metal clangs a lot here. This is silly. Staring at the wall will not make it open. Would not help anyway. We are chained just out of reach.

When I die, please eat me.

^I am never going to be that hungry old mangy Cat.^ No reply. He must be feeling bad.

“Hey, keep it down over there. Trying to sleep.”

^I thought we were alone down here. Do you understand Ba?^

“Do you think I am some kind of freaking idiot? The overlords are all Ba. What I don't understand if why one of them is in a cell next to us. You must have done something really nasty. And what's that thing with you that smells of wet dog?” Us?

^That is my friend. He is particularly fond of sentient pork. Why not reach around to give him a snack to take the edge off before the next wonderful meal?^

“Ha! A sense of humor in this place. You have been here too long.

How many meals have you had?"

Strange question. I have to think. Nothing is memorable here.

^I don't know, at least two, after that I can't remember.^

"He has a better memory than you do Jack."

"Or better math skills than you do Hans." Strange names.

"How come the Cat is still here? They don't like confinement."

^How do you know about Cats? There are none here. He is the only one and we only recently arrived.^ Well six moons ago anyway.

"Oops. Now look what you have done Jack."

"What's wrong with him?"

^The Bugs injected an egg into him. It would have eaten him from the inside out, but he got rid of it. He has an infection from the injection site.^

"He popped away from the egg. Skillful or desperate if he tried that."

"How much intestine did he leave on the egg? They stick pretty good."

^Only a little. A few cell layers.^

"Does not sound like internal bleeding then. That's good. Tell me about the bugs."

^You live here, certainly you have seen them. The fact that you don't means you are off world visitors too. When did you come through the gate? Not in the last eight day anyway. We would have seen you. Your accents are strange too. Not from Hu-Eden anyway.^

"Actually we are . . . ooof! You didn't need to do that Jack."

^Further, even a Ba in a dungeon should intimidate you. You know almost nothing about this place. Do you have any idea where you are?^

Silence. Not giving any more away huh?

I am feeling much better. Maybe it was just something I ate.

I try to speak more quietly, ^Judging from the smell in here, you have left it behind. Remind me not to share quarters with you again.^

Who were you talking to?

^There are at least two Hu in the next cell. Not from this world either. Not from Hu-Eden either.^

I sense only two. Males, middle age. Ragged cloth coverings. Not a threat to anyone but themselves. Probably drunk.

^You would know Nipper.^

Once I feel stronger we will leave.

I fall asleep. I am not sure how. There are no perches here, just straw on a stone floor. Perfect for Cat, but torture for me. I dream of the wonderful life we had working the fish processing line. The good days. I

may never have mated, but I was not hungry, cold or in pain like I am now.

I wake from a wet tentacle across my mouth.

^What the?^ I shake my head and gasp, ^Get that thing away from me.^

Silas! I hear him being licked by Nipper. Yuck.

He is happy to see we are still alive.

^Have you thought of how to get us out of here?^

The latch on the door springs and the door opens.

“Hey, let us out too!”

^Shhh! You want to bring the guards? Haven't you ever been in trouble before. Stupid Hu.^

A second latch springs in spite of my protests.

^What are we going to do with them? They will only get us killed.^

We need numbers friend. We can always eat them later.

^Good idea Cat. I hear Hu taste good over an oak fire. Oh, you prefer them alive and still bleeding? Well, save some for me to slow cook thank you.^

~We need friends not enemies Pok.~

~Hey, you were not the one stuffed into the cell for an eighth with smelly one.~ I hand him.

One of them whispers, “Oh, not the sewer. Anything but the sewer again.” Again? Maybe I was wrong about how long they have been here. Of course one sewer is pretty much the same as another. Maybe they meant one on their world.

Once inside I comment, ^You would think they would be smart enough to close this path after our last visit.^

“Maybe they did not figure out how you got out last time.”

“Or maybe they thought you would have learned from your last experience and would never try that again, no matter what the cost.” He hits the first on the upper arm.

“Cat, I think this is actually improving your smell.”

“I believe you are right Jack.”

~I agree.~ Silas hands me. I show amusement to myself. Too dark down here for anyone to notice. Mustn't upset the kitty.

We make it as far as the gate across the sewer line that was not there before.

“Oh God, trapped in a sewer. Only thing worse than being in one. We have to go back and take another route.”

NO! He growls the most hideous yowl I have ever heard a Cat make.

Sections of the grate go flying or popping would be more accurate. They fall away. It takes him some time, but piece by piece it disappears. He is clearly exhausted afterwards.

^We should have waited.^

Out in the low light Silas washes the dirt off with slightly less dirty water. Enough so we can read him anyway.

~ I overheard guards talking. Orders have come down to execute everyone. Now explain who these two are? No one mentioned them.~

“Ah, we were just visiting. We should, ah, be going now.”

^They are not of this world or ours. They may know a way off this hell anyway. Even if it is not home, it will be better than here.^

“They did not bring you here?”

~They brought you here? We are doomed then.~

^We were not brought here. We made use of a portal to arrive here. A one way portal it would appear.^ I glare at Nipper who is cleaning himself!

^Oh, that is beyond gross. How can you eat that stuff?^

Tasted worse from my own behind. You get used to it.

“The most disgusting things in the universe in my opinion.”

“Don't let Owa hear you say that.”

The three of us all start on hearing that name, especially Nipper. He immediately jumps up and pins the sayer to the ground like he is about to eat him.

^Go ahead. I won't tell.^

Ignoring his companion pinned to the ground the other says, “You came here through a portal. How can that be? We are half a universe away from earth.”

The other pushes Nipper aside like he is a paper cat.

“Explain. Very important that you explain. The entire universe may be at stake.”

“We don't have time. We need to finish our recon and return. Mei will want to hear about this portal. Especially if it came from Hu-Eden.”

“And leave them here?”

“Shit happens, you know that. They are not going to be able to tell us anything more. Besides, you think it will be safer on board either ship?”

~A ship shows fine.~

He means a war ship. Cat looks annoyed.

~Anything nearer the ocean is an improvement.~

“Silly Ceph, not the ocean.”

~Ships go on oceans. What else could it be?~

Nipper looks up.

^Now I am excited. Always wanted to ride an airship. Silas, you remember the one that docked a few years ago. She was magnificent.^ Only Ba crewed her. Hu liked the experience of riding them though. Ceph stayed below in terror and only rode under extreme circumstances I heard.

"He is as crazy as a Ku."

^What's a Ku?^

Something good to eat I imagine.

"A flightless bird. Smart, at the same time evil. May they rest in peace."

All gone? What a waste. Nipper licks his lips.

The Hu laugh well. One comments, "You will like Owa. Bet you two get along great." At the mention of the sacred name again, Nipper crouches down and pays respect this time instead of jumping the sayer.

"Oh, you have heard of her. Word of advice, never turn your back on her. Ask Silver."

"Time remember. Take us to the Bug colony. We need to see for ourselves."

Nipper looks frightened and tries to back away. *You are crazy.*

"We will protect you scardy cat." He laughs again.

^You don't understand, this is a very dark evil world. The Bugs rule by injecting grubs into beings to be eaten alive from within. The Dia have nearly all died as a result.^

~We don't know that.~

^Yes we do Silas. The smell. Even you can taste it on them. They had the Bug taint. And for some reason the Ba are immune. We might not taste good. I don't know. They act as the rulers, but without the consent of the others. The Hu, being less favored, do not appear to be infected, but neither are they chosen for leadership. They act as the enforcers.^

~And slaves to do housekeeping and raise crops. They have a fish pond up hill from here with lots of fish. Appears to be the major protein source. You can see the ocean from up there, so we appear to be in the same location as on Hu-Eden.~

"We are no were near an ocean. This world does not really have any. Just lots of very large freshwater lakes."

^We have proof we are from Hu-Eden and the rest too. Everyone except the Bugs came from Hu-Eden originally. Through the portal.^

I hand Silas that it is okay to show them. Reluctantly he reveals the Nauti sphere.

This gets their attention.

“How did you get this? You must have brought it with you.”

^Neither Nipper nor I can read or write ancient Ceph and Silas and I are not scholars, just fish workers. We only recently were named.^

We are under orders from the Matriarch herself to retrieve this sphere and return it to her care or destroy it. I recruited Silas and Pok to help when a series of new thefts struck our settlement. We found it in the castle in a storage room in the upper area.

“You have no idea what this is do you?”

~I have read as much as I can, but even my eyesight is not good enough to read much of it. The part that I can read and have shown the others, show the history of how this settlement among the Bugs got started.~

“I want to know why we never heard of this serve breach in security. It seems to have started right at the time of Paradise. We were a bit distracted at the time.”

“But this says that it continued for some time. Aren't the Rooi spheres monitored?”

“It appears not well enough.” He turns to us, “And you came through this same portal?”

^Yes, it brought us to the same cell you found us in, though was escaped from there moons ago only to be returned when Nipper killed one. On Hu-Eden there were much smaller ant like creatures crawling in a break in the sphere that was buried in the hillside. We came though the cave entrance following the thieves to find the trail ended at the sphere chamber.^

~I was able to reach in and somehow activate the device to open the portal. It was clear from the disturbance in the dirt that the thieves went this way, so we followed only to find we could not return the same way.~

It appears the portal only opened to those who activated it on Hu-Eden. They must have worked out a time schedule of activation to go back and forth.

“There was a recent report of the damage to the sphere. Pushy Paws or someone found it, but could make nothing of it. I believe it has been repaired. No permanent damage reported. No idea that this has been going on for over three hundred years and apparently several Matriarch were in on it. This is not good. Keeping secrets of this magnitude from the Guardians is not good at all. We are already spread too thin.”

“Ah James, thinking out loud is not helping.”

We are paralyzed in shock and fear.

“He is the Guardian James and I am simply known as Q.” He makes a strange hand sign for Silas' benefit, but Silas is white. Q we know as a Guardian also, nothing simple about it.

^I have never seen Hu so dark colored before. Nearly as dark as a Ba. Is that what makes you a Guardian?^

James laughs, “No, though that thought, given Hu history is very funny. We have no choice now Q. They have to come with us.”

There are locals who know our story to some extent too.

^Jasmine helped us escape the first time, through the sewers also. No gate over the entrance that time though. She lives with her mother in the Hu servant's area and works in the kitchen of the castle.^

“Show us where you saw the Bugs emerge.”

~Actually we saw the nymphs as we escaped the castle the second time, though the hidden room and tunnels under the castle. We followed the tunnel to emerge ourselves at the edge of the forest. We followed the path into the Bug area closest to the castle. That is where we saw them emerge from the mound. We can go there now, but be forwarded. It is likely to be guarded now. Though I suppose to you two that will not be a problem.~

“Ah, actually, it could be. We can't afford to use our abilities much this close to their area. It would draw their attention before we wanted to.”

“Just get us close and we will take it from there.”

Follow me. I will never forget the way to such extreme pain.

Q laughs, “From scardy cat to hero Cat in one eighth.”

“Our presence no doubt helps his courage.”

“Good thing all of us see well in the dark.” No moon tonight and gathering clouds. Even I need some light to see.

^This might be the safest time. If they are like normal insects they are more likely to emerge at dawn as the sun warms the mound.^

“Unless they are night crawlers. Tunnels and underground mounds. They will have good night vision also. Our readings indicate they could see in total darkness. They have abilities not afforded normal life forms.”

The hair rises on Nippers back and he hisses a Cat curse. Brave Cat. I am ready to faint myself. Silas is dark and textured trying not to make too much noise. Q touches Nipper on his back and Nipper jumps nearly a quarter meter into the air. He then whispers something into Nipper's ear and he calms down, but does not remove his hand.

James picks up Silas and puts a hand on my head.

We will help you see. Suddenly my eyesight improves. Do not use

your chirp sight. They will be able to hear us coming if you do. I had not thought of that and I had just inhaled to do so. This ability will only last as long as I am touching you. Got it.

The sewer in on the downhill side of the castle and the Bug mound on the uphill side. We slowly make our way around the castle from some distance. There are patrols as we have noticed before. The castle is well lit up with gas fires or something. Flickering.

Stop.

We are in the forest, just at the edge. I look through the few trees between us and the castle. We are some distance away, but I can see a line of Ba in formal attire entering the castle. I had always assumed they lived in the castle itself. Where do they live then? Someplace high. The castle is already near the top of the hillside. The mound we are heading towards is a short ways off only slightly higher. I look up. In the trees then? I had not noticed anything before.

They are in the castle, but we are not motioned to get up again. Why not? Nothing happens, but we are still not moving. I start to get nervous and move a little to attract attention.

No. Stay down.

Then I see a line of Hu guards. They are bringing in prisoners. Jasmine!, her mother and a few others.

I can't say anything so I hand Silas, ~We need to do something. They saved our lives. We owe them a favor.~

We understand Ceph communication methods well. Rooi insisted we learn. Rooi? Your friends will be safe for the moment. They are to be questioned about your absence from the dungeon. That makes sense. They won't know anything, er, except the sewer. I wonder if James and Q know Jordon?

Neither of us knew Jordon personally. Sorry. Knew? Later. We go now.

It takes less time that I thought it would. Maybe because I am so nervous. We arrive at the clearing. I remember not to touch any plants here, but I see James and Q freely touching everything we pass.

I think to them, as they have seen my thoughts before. Do not touch the plants, severe reaction.

We are immune. Do not worry. It allows us to examine without drawing attention. Totally different from earth. Probably you were as poisonous to them as their world is too you. So, why would they raise their young in you? That would take some serious genetic engineering. And what is so different about Ba, Hu and Dia that separate you.

I only understand part of that, but it sounds like they needed to change themselves in order to interact with us. This would take some time I imagine.

Depends on their abilities. We could do it in a few minutes, ah, arn, sorry. It might have taken them years or even centuries.

Hu and Ba are warmer. Dia are cooler.

I hear an involuntary chuckle. Silas had the same thought. I would suspect that Ceph are not here because of the lack of enough salt, the magnesium mines notwithstanding. Good for pleasure, but not sustainability.

I feel Silas, ~That would explain much. I am suffering from salt deficiency.~

There is enough salt to sustain you Silas, but no ocean for reproduction. You are fine. The last Ceph probably died here at least a hundred years ago, probably longer. I feel amusement.

We sit watching the mound. I want to climb a tree to get a better view, a Ba view, but I don't dare touch anything. There are no guards here. I am surprised, I would expect someone to be watching after the incident.

We left a trail going downhill for them to follow. Just glad they don't have dogs to track us. A low growl cut short comes from Nipper.

Shhh, be very quiet now. They come.

Hu guards appear first, carrying light spheres of some kind. They are followed by Ba in very fine cloth covers I have never seen before. Heavily decorated in very fine elaborate detail. Almost like leaf art, but of course more permanent. Every four Ba carry a cloth covered package, guarded by two Hu each. I smell the Bug scent. Very strong. They are coming from the direction of the castle along the path that we originally took when we escaped the second time.

They reach the mound and spread out in a circle around it. One set of four is only a few meters from us. I nearly stop breathing. Nipper is nearly flat to the ground. He is the lightest color of all of us and would be very visible from the glow spheres. Silas and I are well hidden behind trees. James and Q's skin is dark enough, but now their cloth covers are also dark.

One at a time they approach the opening at the top where the covering is removed by the two guards and carefully folded and carried back to the circle. The four Ba carefully hand their nymph to a head that appears in the opening. Another Ba! I am surprised at this.

The Ba are the only ones small enough to perform this service. Dia are small also, but their tails would get in the way and their night vision is

not very good. The weight would not be a factor given the final weight of the adults at least. The nymphs would have a much higher water content, but four Ba should be enough.

Try and clear your minds. You are all broadcasting too much. Huh?

Think meditation. Okay. They must have helped us because by the time I become aware again the circle is gone and the sky is starting to glow with morning.

“There are hundreds down there. They harden up in the warmth and safety of the castle and then are brought here for a winter diapause.”

The one that attacked me was coming out now, in the fall.

^How do we know it is the fall?^

“Right. Maybe they have two sets, summer and winter ones. A lot of creatures do that.” They do?

“We need to get back to the castle.” Jasmine and the others, finally. Nipper goes up to sniff at the opening.

“Don't even think about it Nipper. That would bring them on us in force.” All the same he does kick a few grains of sand into the opening. Cats hold grudges.

Nipper runs ahead and nabs a rat or something. He does not offer any to the rest of us. I'm hungry too and keep an eye out for normal looking bugs.

Silas finds something possible first. ~Help me roll over this log.~ The four of us push and manage to get it turned over. Thousands of grubs and beetles inside.

“Here are sacks, grab now, eat later.”

Q hands me a sack which I take and then concentrate on getting as many as possible before they hide again. We don't get that many, but each of us has a small meal by the end. I don't wait for the others and start snacking on the contents. Not too bad. The beetles are a little sour, but the grubs are great. I am surprised to see James and Q consuming their bugs as well.

^I didn't know Hu liked such delicacies?^

“Protein is protein. I will admit to liking them better roasted, but we don't have time. Water is next. Clean water.”

~I know a small stream not close to the castle. No taint of waste in it.~ We slowly follow Silas to the stream.

~This stream is used to irrigate the fields further down, so it should be safe.~ I drink my fill quickly. Being nearly black I can't hide as well out in the open like this. Nipper blends into the dried grass well, but stands out again in the greener plants nearer the stream.

I go up to him, ^How are you feeling?^

Better, they did something to me. I don't trust them. They are not here to serve us.

^If they can get us home or even away from here I am going.^

Agreed, just be watchful. Paranoid Cat. He sits tall looking at everyone as they drink.

I notice James off from the rest of us and go up to him to see what he is doing. He has some strange box device he is tapping with his fingers.

^What's that James?^

“I am telling the ship what we have found so far. If we get caught I want them to know about the sphere. I have copied the surface and sent the information along with my report.”

^The ship is that close?^ I stand higher and look up to try and see it.

“It is not even around this world. But the device knows how to find an intermediate device which will relay the information.”

Q comes up, “Your band of brothers has done well for the limited resources you possess. Most would not have survived nor learned as much. You have done all of us a great service. Thank you.” He is looking at James when he says this, not at me. Strange.

^They are likely in the dungeon.^

“I doubt it. The dungeon appears to be too easy for us to get into and out of. I am guessing the top of the tower this time. Not as easy to sneak up to.”

^Ba elders would certainly be more comfortable up there, but would they want these Hu with them?^

Another worry. They are not likely to let us live this time. We are too dangerous now. I am sure they kept us alive the last time in hopes of obtaining the sphere. Things have gone too wrong for them to make another attempt now.

“He is right there. The death sentence is already pronounced. They will not hesitate this time. The two of us on the other hand are not likely to be noticed.”

^They knew instantly I was not a Ba noble the first time they saw me. This community is small. Only a few hundred of each species remaining. They will know each other.^

“Ah, but you don't look like anyone here. We do, or will.” His face changes before my eyes. His skin becomes lighter and his cloth covering changes to match that of a servant. He then becomes older and less vertical. James sees this and accomplishes the same transformation. Good idea. Old Hu are less likely to be seen. Sort of like fish workers at the

docks back home.

I am concerned though, ^I thought you could not use too much of your abilities.^

“Since these changes occur just to our own bodies, they are likely to go unnoticed. If I were to say, remove the castle from this world, it would more likely be noticed.”

“Quit scaring them James. You would do no such thing.” Not that he could not do it, just that he would not. Nipper looks straight at me until I acknowledge him. These two are dangerous. Q looks at me and then hits James on the arm. James shrugs it off, but does stop smiling.

What do you want us to do?

“I suppose if I said to stay here and wait for us, you would not do so.” We all stare at him without saying or showing anything, but I am sure we are all thinking the same thing.

“Of course not. How about you make your way to Jasmine's home. We will meet up there. Try not to get into any trouble on your way.” He looks straight at Nipper when he says this. I have to show amusement. He scratched the right tree there. That Cat has certainly gotten us into enough trouble.

It only takes a moment before we lose sight of James and Q. They can be sneaky when they want to be. I hope they come back for us and don't abandon everyone to this world. We clearly have no place in their society, even if we wanted to stay and the area we are confined to it really too small to stay hidden for long.

~I don't feel good about having the sphere with me when we return to the Hu servants area.~

The only one who would not be out of place is you Pok. A Ceph and a Cat would be easily seen and reported.

^I am sure the Ba do not visit the servants quarters. Only Hu guards are likely to from the leadership. I have a feeling that this might be a test. Can we get to the home without trouble. If we can they will accept us. If we can't, they have tried and we were not able to climb high enough.^

~This is worse than the naming exams.~ Definitely. The Ba do not really take the naming seriously. Not like the Ceph, where those who fail are part of the celebration dinner. Those of the Ba get to try again the next year. Our shorter lives are given as the excuse. We can't afford to lose as many workers.

Ceph are best eaten raw with fresh sea salt and mouse liver pate. He is going to make me sick if he keeps pushing the virtues of Cat cuisine.

^And if you ever get caught eating one your hide will decorate the

Matriarch's wall.^ Silas shows amusement and does a good imitation of a Cat hanging on a wall. Nipper pretends to be hurt.

^We still need a plan to get in.^

Night would be best. Hu can't see at all in the dark and as you say the Ba won't be present. Translation, he wants a nap.

~Night may be too late. We have no idea how long it will take them to free our friends.~

^We are near the fields currently. They bring in their tools and enough food to cook the evening meal. We have seen them do this before. We need to be hidden in the carts before then. Nipper can sleep in the cart, if he does not snore too loudly.^

Cats do not snore. We purr. Both Silas and I throw small stones at him, but he pops out of the way just in time.

~Someone is feeling better. One problem. Those carts are not big enough for all three of us. Pok and I could be in one, but Nipper will have to be in another.~

I will not need to ride in a bumpy cart. My stealth will be enough.

^Let's get closer to where they store the carts. Maybe if we see someone who knows us they can help.^

This time we are purposely slow and careful. No doubt there are patrols anywhere near the castle. Further out, they probably figure it is just a matter of time. They have the time, we don't. Our pattern says we will sooner or later return to the castle. They will be ready this time. Hope the two do not get into any trouble.

^Now what do we do? The carts are in the middle of the field. We would be noticed trying to reach them.^ I turn to see what Silas and Nipper think and Nipper is missing.

^That Cat is going to get us killed.^ Suddenly there is a commotion near the sheds on the opposite side of the field. A swarm of insects scatters in all directions. Bees! Nipper upset the bee hive. The workers run towards the disturbance to try and right the hive again and many are stung in the process. We don't wait, but make our way as fast as we can towards the carts to bury ourselves in wilting vegetables. Not a nice smell. I suppose all of the good ones were already taken into the castle for the cooks to work on.

We overhear them as they return, "What could have upset the hive?"

"Racs maybe? The young are no longer being feed by their parents and are getting desperate. We will have to set traps. Meat is meat. We could use some."

"I would prefer snake, but I'll settle for a young rac. I can see to many

of my bones. Now with the ones missing we will have to work harder to bring in the harvest before the cold season.”

“Yeah, just when we really could have used the help the most. Hope they are okay. Any idea what upset them this time?”

“Rumor it was over those aliens. We should have killed them the first time we saw them. Nothing but trouble.”

“I say we turn them in and collect the reward. They promised to make a house keeper out of anyone who does.”

“To be fat. I wonder what that would be like.” I don't think we are going to get any help. They come closer. I hear tools being placed on top of the pile of vegies and us.

~Crab, they had to stick the last one into my arm.~

I hand him back carefully, ~You going to be okay?~

~All I need is seven. Rubbing dirt into the wound is going to make it hurt bad.~

~If you are feeling pain, you are still alive.~ Old fish packers joke. The numb from the cold can prevent you from seeing or feeling a serious injury. Many have lost limbs. Not so bad for a Ceph. They can grow theirs back and get by with fewer for awhile, but only the well favored are allowed the painful treatment for Hu or Ba and it takes much longer.

Remind me never to ride in a cart again. My teeth are going to come out of my head soon. Either that or my head will be bashed to bits against the side of the cart.

It stops. Thanks to the Flying One. Grubs, it started again. It was not that far to their huts. I move far enough and slowly enough to just see through the roots. I don't recognize where we are. Hope Nipper knows where we are.

It is near dark now. We could have followed our original idea and had fewer bruises. Finally we stop. I wait until I hear no further voices or movement.

Did you two go to sleep? Come on, we have some work to get back.

I worm my way out. I hurt all over and I am covered in debris. Silas has taken it better. Maybe bones are not better. One arm is curled up tightly. I had forgotten about that. Must hurt.

^Where are we?^

Sniff the air. You are at the composting area. All the offal and rotting scraps and such are brought here to rot to dirt and be reused. It does smell bad.

~We are not going to sneak in anywhere tasting like this.~

We have no choice. Silas climb on my back. I heard a ruckus coming

from the castle. We have no time if it was them.

We run as fast as I can. Nipper keeps looking back to hurry me on. We reach the huts just as a large group of people are gathering. James and Q in their new form are in the center with Jasmine and the others.

“They are here. Come forward Silas, Pok and Nipper.”

The crowd parts to let us in or to avoid us. I don't know which is the stronger motive. Jasmine comes up to us and hugs all three of us, stink or not.

“Thank you for saving me. You are my heroes.” She rises to include James and Q in the statement. “Now we all must leave. We can no longer stay here. The Ba have ordered the guards to beat or kill most of us. They are going to start over with a more docile group.”

“But my own son is a guard. He would never beat his own.”

Another speaks up, “He has beaten members of my clan. Simple to sort us out and do the deed. If they are coming for us, we have no choice.”

“But where will you take us? Beyond the perimeter is death. Everyone knows that.”

“They're coming! Run for your lives.”

Q shouts, “Gather closer and you will see our escape.” Most do so, but some out of fear scatter. He will lose the rest if he does not act soon. As soon as I think the thought we are in blazing sun and standing on a barren landscape. No plants, buildings, water. Nothing but rock and sand. As my eyes adjust I notice and shimmer around all of us. As we are near the edge I go up to the shimmer and press my hand to it. Solid.

“The air outside is not fit to breath. We will be here only a moment. It helps confuse them and prevents them from following.” They really are Guardians. They have shown their wings and cannot return.

Q says, “Please make a path to the edge for me.” There is a large covered object behind him. He goes to it and removes the cover. There is a Ba elder and two Bugs inside. The cage floats behind him as he walks to the edge. The cage merges with the edge and goes outside the barrier. Immediately the three show signs of extreme distress. The cage returns inside the barrier.

He then says in perfect Ba, ^This is to prove to you that what you see is real. You are no longer on the world you were born or ecloded. Further, you will never return to that world.^ A pause and then a cheer rises from the crowd. The next reaction is to press towards the three. I am guessing to kill them. I have a similar reaction, but not the movement. I can't imagine how strong the hate must be in their minds. Generations of

abuse. I will never complain about being a fish pusher again.

“You will not be allowed to harm them. They have some questions to answer with the Guardian council.” There are murmurs of surprise and awe.

We pop again. I am more used to it than the others and am not as startled, though even I am not used to the sun moving. Now we are near sunset, but on a greener world. The barrier is gone. We are breathing clean cool air. Well almost.

Both James and Q look at us with a disgusted look on their faces. The others turn to look as well. Suddenly we are drenched in water and the crowd cheers again. With the slight breeze it feels very cold, but Silas is enjoying it.

“Follow the path before you until you reach the settlement. Make yourselves at home. It will be your home for a time. You will find enough food for a year and the necessary supplies and seeds to start a new crop. No animals to eat, but the plants themselves will provide all you need.” A series of torches light showing the path. A larger fire is visible in a fire pit. Must be the center of the settlement. I can see outlines of structures. It is an improvement over the Bug world, but it is not home for us.

As the others move forward past us James and Q come up to us and hold us back.

“Not for you three. You have another path do you not?” The cage is next to them.

~We would be honored to serve in anyway we can.~

“Good, you understand.” We pop again and then again and again. The worlds flash by beyond number. We finally stop for a moment under another bubble. The bubble rises with us in it. We move faster and faster until we are well above the world.

I hand Silas, ~What did Q mean?~

~Guardians do not reproduce, or at least the Ceph and Ba variants do not. The Cats do unfortunately, but not at the same level as the genetic donors.~

~How come you know all this?~

~Our naming exam was much more rigorous it would appear.~
Apparently.

~You mean we are to become Guardians?~ We near a large ornate object above and to the right of my orientation. As we get closer I see more details, but have no idea what it is other than the fact that it is huge. Nearly as big as an entire settlement.

~Guardian helpers is my guess. Though I have no imagining as to

what needs they would have from us.~

We enter though a portal in the side of the structure and a solid shield closes behind us. I hear nothing at first and then slowly, louder and louder sounds of wind. This finally fades and the bubble around us dissolves. A small enforcer squad appears from many portals with weapons raised.

“All suppressors are in place and active. They are as harmless as we can make them.” James tells the other, though I am sure he used mind speaking earlier. I would not wait so long before posting a guard. Before us are Ba, Dia, Hu, Di, Dio, and Diu I think. But mostly lots of Hu.

Two of the Hu come forward. They are wearing strange covers. Scary actually. Lots of metal bands and sharp angles. The weapons they carry are equally strange. Curved blades with handles at the center instead of the ends that I remember from history lessons. They salute James and Q from a distance of a few meters. James and Q return the salute. They speak in some strange language I have never heard. Living in a harbor settlement means I have heard many languages and dialects. Nothing like this though.

Eyes turn toward us.

“And them?” Hu at least.

“The only reason we are back so soon is because of these three. They are natives of earth.” Earth? They keep using that word.

“Which one?”

“Doc's, not ours.” No reference I understand.

“That is a relief at least.”

“Time reference? Generations I suspect.” I show a negative.

“I am guessing they left Hu-Eden and were picked up somewhere else.”

“Both wrong. About six months ago from New Shanghi marine lab or what's left of it. And they were not picked up. They did it themselves.”

“I sense no psiotic above norm. How can that be? Some kind of secret project?”

“The rest of them were abducted nearly three hundred years ago, again from Hu-Eden and from the lab area.” He holds up the sphere to show them. “Well documented. In both cases it was after the Rooi spheres were in place. No TK was involved. Neither were they.” He indicates the Bugs.

Silas looks concerned and hands me, ~I thought I left it behind. In the rush I completely forgot about it.~ I hand him back, ~They do seem to have many abilities. It is in the right hands now I believe.~

~I confirm. I would like to see her when she is confronted.~

That will be your job if you survive Silas. Pok can be there too. Right now you are here to help us sort this out.

Bugs

"Master, they are gone. Nearly all of them. We have lost our helpers. We are questioning the few remaining now."

:Any chance they used the Path?:

"Not unless they can fly as well. We were close behind them when they left the castle. Footprints led to the center of their shelter area, but do not leave again. What we have so far does not make sense. They simply vanished. All at once. Apparently they were being led by two Hu whom no one had seen before and the three strangers we have been following."

:If they have a way back we need to know it. We have learned all we can about your species and will not be able to assist much longer. The sickness will soon affect those remaining as our species reclaim the surface. There are not enough of you now to affect a second trial.:

"Understood. It is clear that the first three strangers arrived through the gate and the last did not. We have been monitoring the gate and them continuously. It was trivial to pretend to be pursuing them and they were never aware of our observations."

:It is unfortunate that we were not able to learn from the one who could move without being seen. We suspect there is a similarity to the function of the gate.:

This advanced one makes it's way to the council chamber to join with the conclave. The messenger leaves to pursue the questions presented. There is doubt to the possibility of further information.

This one addresses the council.

:Too little information was gathered to form consensus. Monitors indicated that the light colored furred creature of the set of three was able to make short gate jumps without actually opening a passage. Most interesting. The warrior class is actively pursuing the possibility we may be able to adapt the Frnj device.:

:Precautions will be taken. A repeat of the Eno era disaster is to be avoided.:

:The other two of the first set are unremarkable. The dark furred one is of a type well known. It was remarkably creative for this type. Our servants have become weak. The second is of the wet creature type from the time of this gate's opening. It lasted longer than the previous specimens. It is possibly the finding of the wet boned water enclave helped. This has been recorded. The magnesium sulfate pond confirmed the weakness observed at the beginning. Shortly after this first set arrived

by our design, the gate was rendered permanently inoperative. All contact with the small servants has been lost.:

:What of the wet one's sphere used as bait?:

:Moved with the departure. Not receiving telemetry. It is possible the transmitter was compromised.:

:A new design will be needed. This is the second time it has failed.:

:Multiple designs per unit are needed. Lack of information is not acceptable. Opportunities are rare.:

There is quiet in the chamber. Most disturbing. All sensors are on the last contributor. Noting this, it removes itself from the chambers for processing. The prime states that creative thought by an advanced one is to be immediately shared.

:Very little information was obtained from the second set of two.

Their arrival was not recorded. It is unknown how long the time interval of presence was. Attempts to attach tracking failed. They appeared to be of the nearly hairless variety with unnecessary non self plant covers, but were much darker in surface color. Insufficient time to attempt implantation. Their presence with the first set of three at the eclosion site is cause for concern.:

:We are the gatherers. We do not share information.:

:Information not considered relevant before this meeting. The first set of three did not understand that they were on a different world not of their galaxy. Until the second set of two arrived they transmitted the information they were on a different form of the world they arrived from. This indicates experience or knowledge of parallel worlds or universes. Information that might bring incite to troubling inconsistencies in understanding.:

All sensors turn to face this one. Honor bound this one removes itself for processing. In times of need, many are honored.

The trip an advanced one must take is long. This allows for as much processing of creativity as has been determined to be necessary by previous experience. Many council mounds will be passed, but must be avoided to prevent contamination. Likewise any other sentient enclaves encountered are to be avoided. Most importantly is to avoid predation of this form. Paramount that this form reach sharing. Two of the warrior class notice this ones presence and assume honor guard. More will be attracted based of perceived importance of this form. This will afford the necessary removal from predation avoidance to concentrate on processing.

Processing may now begin as this is a low predator risk area. Parallel

worlds would explain much and afford even more possibilities of information gathering. Much more. More information as to parallel formation including intervals of formation are needed to judge significance. Small ones production will need to be ramped up.

Herding Cats

“Garfield! What are the Cats still doing here? Didn't she do anything?” That lazy Cat. Where is Pushy Paws? I told her the answer. All she had to do was work out the details.

I look around. The lab is totally ruined. I don't even want to think about the greenhouse. Everything I have gathered to study is gone. Hundreds of years of work gone.

“Ah, there you are, you miserable creature.” He does look pathetic. Of course all Cats are good at this particular deception. He does look thin though. Not like Garfield to let himself go that far. Fur looks bad too, all matted. He has not been cleaning himself. Smells bad too.

I sigh, “Looks like I have to do something. Even more time lost. Hopefully this will be over soon and we can get back to our research.” Garfield shows some sign of hope. He was not ever one to be excited about the work before. Maybe now that he knows it can be much worse he will take a more active part. He nods his head up and down in the human manner.

Not polite to read other sentient's minds unless given permission.

“Fine. I will work on the Cat problem. Top priority. I promise.” He gives me a totally dirty look. “Really, I promise.” He turns his head away from me in disgust. He is probably right. I am not very good at staying on mundane tasks.

“Well, let's start anyway. What do we know?” He lies down to take a nap. I can hear the others in the background. They probably need care. They will need to wait. Enough easy life. Time to work.

“One. I will assume these are the lost ones. I have no other explanation. Given the savageness of the disease or attack, they were not in a position to be making choices. It is unlikely that any of them would choose this world. Certainly not all of them. The odds are just too high against that.

That means, two, they were brought or guided here. That means an outside agent, but not necessarily a malevolent one. They are all still alive, but changed.”

“Three, the change may have been part of the process of bringing them here. Given the intensity of time critical nature of the process this does not surprise me. That means we are actually seeing the package rather than the contents. We need to unwrap the package.”

“That brings me to the fourth point. Why this location? If the agents

were bad, this could be an unsolvable puzzle meant to torment us. If the agents were good, then they did the best they could with what they had and believed that what ever was necessary to complete the change would be present here or could be gotten easily. Otherwise this location does not make sense. Garfield and I are the only two sentients present and there is very little here in the way of resources.”

They must be bad. I have been tormented beyond endurance. He rolls over and plays dead.

“My guess is that they are very disappointed in us. I am guessing that they expected us to solve the puzzle quickly instead of taking months or years. The question now is, have we waited too long? Is the change permanent?”

Please do not get distracted or give up. I cannot take anymore. He sticks out this tongue.

“I owe it to the others to come to a definite conclusion.” One way or the other.

The assumption that everyone else has made is that the Piskon Hive, whoever they are, were responsible. The TKs were attacked using a genetically engineered prion selective to just them and the attack vector. Once armed they only had seconds to deliver the package before they died themselves. I know of no prion that could act that quickly, but they have been around for much longer than us and did take three hundred plus years to figure it out.

If the point was to kill us, why allow them to escape to here? A distraction? The ones here need not be our TKs. They could be made? They certainly appear not to be sentient. They are acting like newborn kittens. When they first arrived they could barely figure anything out. Not used to even being a Cat. They were not just taken from worlds with Cat natives. The cranium is too large for a wild cat. Definitely TK sized. Even a TK2 Cat can pop and read minds. Even a suppressed TK would show more attitude than these and know how to act like a Cat.

Not necessarily. TK cats get lazy about cleaning and eating. At first, if suppressed, they would have to relearn some Cat moves.

But even a suppressed Cat would have something going on inside their heads. None of us has sensed even simple consciousness. Most likely they would show surprise or at least pissed.

True.

So, what if we assume for the moment, the opposite, or even that the Piskon was not involved in anyway. Then how do we explain how hundreds of TKs all suffered the same fate? Statistically impossible.

All at Paradise. No TK hurt that was not there. None.

I look at Garfield, “That is the most intellectual thought I have ever heard from you. Seems you do pay attention more than you appear to.”

Anything to get them out of here. Please!

“I am trying.”

Strange that only Pushy Paws thinks it's strange that so many Cats appeared on this world. Even Sussi got out of here as fast as she could and she was almost a victim.

Should not have been. Was not at Paradise.

“You were not even born then. How would you know?” I go to the com and type in a search for the Paradise list. He is right, Sussi is not on it. She was on assignment on Blu. So there goes another theory, that only those who were on Paradise were attacked.”

So far no layer two or ones have been hit.

“That is not much comfort. Is one of those in the greenhouse for me or you?”

Not me. Have touched, sniffed, been sniffed by all of them.

“Okay, one of them is my vector. Where do I go when packaged? Here but as a Cat? We have not had a new one in a year.”

Thirteen months, five days and one hour. I can give it to you in Ceph too if you want.

“Hmm, been that long already. I had no idea. I'm sorry for leaving you alone with them for so long.” He mews. I have to smile.

“Okay, a treat.” I make him some turkey with gravy. His eyes light up and he digs in making a huge amount of noise consuming it.

“Thank you Ed.”

I thought I just did with my actions. He looks hurt, but then finishes the ration and looks up for more.

“Sorry, I need you awake.”

I walk over to the greenhouse to look at them. They are certainly acting like cats now. Not Cats, but cats with a small 'c'. They are acting like house cats. The original stock we used to raise them to sentient and TK status.

We were already sentient. More than you monkeys ever will be.

I ignore the pat Cat chatter. Anyone who still gets excited by a paper bag has nothing to boast of. He ignores me.

To sum up.

If this is a malicious act, then these creatures before me, whether or not they are the missing TKs, are meant to torment us. And there is no way to recover them.

If they wanted to torment us, they would have given us dog TK.

I smile. That would be some sight, a Cat and Dog war. However, if they acted in the best interests of those before me, then they are here to be saved, and the sickness that started all this was not the fault of the saviors.

The second scenario leaves some questions. Where did the sickness come from? A third party? Or something they all picked up on Paradise? Sussi almost getting it says the sickness was not picked up on Paradise, but maybe it was transmittable.

Hmm, another possibility. She was forewarned. She already knew all the symptoms and scenarios. Maybe, just maybe, she unknowingly made it happen. A false positive. An N of one is not reliable. That leaves me with all the affected sentients being on Paradise and of the fourth or fifth layer or generation of TKs. Yet, ones and twos were present. Why were they immune and Sussi, a third, only partially affected, and yet all of the rest were? Was being a TK longer the reason for immunity? Maybe.

Paradise has to be the 'ground zero' of this plague. All of our sentients were kicked out just before Rooi and Silver pulled the plug. I wonder if any of the other sentients were affected? Frustrating that we can't ask them. We are anathema. No one will get near us. Haven't even seen a 'thn in ages. Kinda miss them, even now that I know it is just a construct.

But we know we were somehow different. There was a reason we were kicked out. We thought it was because we soured the pot and we were kicked out to die on the surface at turnover. Is that what gave us this plague?

Then there is my own research here that says the froth may serve a beneficial purpose. The multiverse depends on it setting up a gradient and maintaining it. I don't have conclusive evidence yet, because green worlds are so much more complex. But if the greening of the brown worlds and the browning of the black worlds is any indication, this change in life energy must come from somewhere. My guess is it comes from the green worlds. There are far fewer green worlds, that means when this catches up with them it will be very dramatic. Will sentient life still be even possible?

Two problems both related to the froth. Are they related to each other? Garfield and I are fine. We have been on these worlds for hundreds of years. But we are high level TKs. It is possible the slight drain on us is not apparent. It is rare we get stretched to our limit. Maybe I am only an eight or seven now by comparison, but am not even aware of it.

Through the scale then. TK, check, Scan, check, Molecular level,

check, Atomic level, check, Psiotic level, check, DS level, I move a few feet away and open a portal to the next room, check, TP, check, though can I be sure? TP is a level two ability for Garfield and he is the only one here I can TP with. Next, PS, I walk though the closest wall, check. Precog, I feel nothing. That matches. I am only an eight. Never saw the need for going to nine even though it was offered.

If we are affected, then it is not in the number of abilities, that is we are not knocked down the scale, but, we may be limited in the strength of the abilities. An eight can scan ten to the eighth meters or ten to the fifth kilometers. This world is approximately thirteen thousand kilometers wide. A seven could scan only ten thousand and not reach the other side. No problem there I see the same rock and shallow seas on the other side. But an eight should be able to scan a hundred thousand kilometers. Many times the diameter of an earth world, but not enough to reach the moon. I could be gradually losing my strength, but how would I know? All I can say right now is that it is not ten fold.

“We are going on a trip Garfield. The moon is approximately four hops from here. If it takes substantially more, then I know I am right.”

This is not going to be like the last time is it? He looks to see if I am carrying my specimen bag. Last time I wanted to see how long lichens and plantimals could handle the vacuum and solar exposure. The lichens did better. The separation may have been a good thing.

I make a bubble outside and then DS us into it. So far I notice nothing out of the ordinary. I rest my hand on Garfield's back. Okay, first step, I DS us to the side facing the moon currently. No problems.

“Start counting.” One, two, three, and finally four. I was tempted to hold back on four, but didn't. We are a few kilometers above the lunar surface. Scary close. Now I need another way to know how far the moon is right now. The distance does vary. At any rate, it is close enough to the expected result that I am not going to be able to tell. If there is an effect, it is a small one so far. Could be exponential. Three hundred years is not much time on thirty five million. Maybe a few thousand years from now it will be obvious.

That means the green worlds are really dogging all the psiotic energy, if so little leaking back can do so much.

“Very good Garfield! Very good. Yes, that could be it. As much as I like my dear friends the lichens, they really don't need much psiotic energy. Slow time and no interactions with others other than running over each other.”

Now, to our guests. I quickly take us back to the lab.

They were brought here because this site has lower psiotic energy than a green world. The other aspect is that it is increasing, slowly, because the froth did not happen. Is that slow increase keeping them safe in the next room, or preventing them from coming out of their shells? Do I dare experiment with friends?

“Garfield, time to feed our friends.” I just can't rush into this.

Dark Night of the Soul

“Hey! Blue sky!”

The call goes out and everyone comes out from whatever they were doing to stare at the sky like it is something they had never seen before. We have been here for moons. I have had no opportunity to see my precious sky lights. Xot is equally depressed. We share that in common.

~You think it will hold?~

+Did it the last three times?+

~It looks like it is getting bigger. The area of blue.~

+Might be. I will wait until dark before I get excited. What is left to do on our project?+

~Something to calibrate on. We need stars or even the moon.

Everyone else has been done with theirs for days.~

+I do not see this as our last effort. Only the beginning. We know what can be done once we advance. This is merely practice.+

~Still, I need to see the stars. I don't really care this is only equal to what I was using on Ba-Eden.~

+It was better than what I was allowed to make before. Besides I am learning much that helps with the mech classes.+

~Mech is easy, all just simple push/pull. You are doing well with the math though. One of my best students.~ He shows amusement.

+Wish I could show the same for your fighting skills. I thought I was horrible. How did you ever survive to naming?+

~I hid of course.~ Same with me. Just that I watched from my hiding place at what was happening to my friends. You can learn a lot by watching.

+The blue is nearly gone. Did not take long.+

^Party over. Back to work.^ No surprise, but we are still the first to move. We are on kitchen duty. I had some practice at the Ku enclave on Ba-Eden. Xot's only practice was eating something raw in a hurry before getting back to his 'telescope', as the Hu saw it. New word for me. I like far see better, even if it means the same thing.

We enter the kitchen. More sentients, mostly Di are coming in each day, so we never know what to expect. Unfortunately that also means mostly Di food. I am so tired of tasteless melons. I need more protein, but we ran out of raps moons ago. We are getting some eggs from the herbivores, but it is slow and does not go too far. I am hoping the fours and fives get the knack soon for duping stuff. I am losing weight and I

was not big to begin with. Well, not by Ku standards.

+Looks like Sam is still in charge.+ He acknowledges me. We both stay towards the back and try to remain hidden. For some reason Sam has fixated on Xot. Feels it is necessary to watch out for him. I somehow became part of the bundle. There are no other Ku students here. We are the most unusual pairing. Does not help that my head is above everyone else's. I hide by standing next to an ornate column motionless. Xot just blends in and stays low.

Not being in front means we get the least desirable tasks. Does not matter to me. Melon rinds or melon slices are all the same to me. It is dark by the time we are done. Being a level two now I need very little rest, but we are given the night for our own interests all the same. The Hu call it homework, that does not make sense to me.

#!How many star nauti do you see?!# Lessa is nice enough for a Dia. I am not used to anyone being nice. Not this nice anyway.

~What is the problem Lessa?~

#!There are supposed to be ninety five nauti in here. I am responsible. If any are missing then I have to spend a moon in isolation. I know nothing about them. I did not see them when I was here the last time and don't know what to do!# The star nauti sit mostly in the rafters and poop on everyone's food. You have to use your abilities constantly to avoid eating it.

+That is harsh. Why are they going to this extreme?+ Dia hate to be alone. They are the most social of the sens.

~Then we will help of course.~

#!It is your free time. I do not want to burden you with my problem.!# Standard Dia answer. Probably not even aware she is saying it.

The star nauti like to be high up. We look to the rafters and see many of them. But they are hard to see against the same ornate woodwork that I used to hide in. I use my ability to turn off the lanterns around the room one at a time.

#!I do not see well in the dark. I do not understand.!#

+The nauti will light up in the dark.+

Xot hands me, ~A few are trying to escape out the portal. I cannot get there in time.~ I concentrate and using my TK ability I bring them back to the center of the room. They are calming down enough now to start lighting up.

#!Oh, I see. Beautiful. I will have to remember this for art class.!# Dia and not known for their creativity in the arts. I can't imagine how she will use this idea. She jumps as high as she can in an attempt to scare a few

more towards the center, but all it does it cause them to go blank as if sensing a predator. #!Rap, I've made it worse again.!# Interesting to me what each species considers to be curse words. Pretty consistent on some nasty organic material of the waste variety or a predator. Only the Hu seem to call on a mythical being that is all seeing and knowing. Crazy Hu.

We eventually get all the ones present to the center of the room.

+Watch these carefully Lessa. Xot and I will make a circle of the room looking for any that are hiding. Start counting if that helps you relax.+

#!Understood. I was a Trader and a Pollution Officer. This is all so new to me, but I can count. The other Dia know so much about living on this world and I am no help.!# And therefore useless. Without abilities or kin she is truly alone. The others won't trust her.

~How many did you count?~

I hand him back, ~Ninety four.~

~Same. This tastes like a setup.~

#!I am in trouble. I can't believe this. Maybe I should quit and go home. But I can't do that either. Maybe I am better fed to the raps. There are only ninety three. One is bad enough, but two missing is humiliating.!#

#

+We both count ninety four. Why do you think there were ninety five?

+

#!Guardian Mandhi assigned me this task and she said that was the number.!#

Xot reaches up and turns up the lights and shows, ~The star nauti will now stay where they are. We can try and find the missing one.~ I am not convinced there is a missing one.

#!I'm sorry, but what did he just say, I mean show? It was too fast and I was distracted!#

She continues in Di, !Di is my first language. I know some Ceph, at the social level really. Guardian Sussi took pity on me and gave me Dia ability, but I was on my own to learn Hu and Ku. Both only at the social level though too.! She looks concerned, #!I'm sorry, I am supposed to use any language but Di.!#

+Many restrictions. Barb is being soft on us.+

~Indeed. We need to ask for harsher treatment.~

#!Did he just say he wants to be beaten more?!#

#!No Lessa, harsher, not beaten.!#

#!Oh, you are excellent indeed. I had heard you were good at

languages. Did Sussi impress Dia on your mind too? I like Ku for some reason. Easier with my voice to sound than Hu, or Ba especially!#

~What number did Mandhi show you? This one?~ He shows a ninety five. ~Or this one?~ A ninety four.

#!You embarrass me. Please show more respect for the Guardians.!# She looks upset with both of us. She does not answer the question but attempts to misdirect us.

I hand Xot quickly, ~She does not know Ceph numbers well. She is not sure.~

#!I am sorry. I was in an accident of sorts and lost much. At least Guardian Sussi tells me. I don't remember it. Frustrating. I think she hates me.!#

+That is a strong emotion. I have never seen that emotion in a Guardian, well except maybe when they discuss the Bugs.+

#!After the accident I was asked many questions over and over. Questions I did not know the answers to. Then we went to very, very cold place for hard work, freezing scales and more questions. After that we came here. The questions stopped, but not the emotions. Bad colors I think you call it. Finally I was forced to visit a place so horrible that I can't describe it.!# Sounds like Dark Night. I have heard or seen others com about it.

She goes limp as if she is asleep standing up.

Her head rises, #!I'm sorry. I just came off of Dark Night training.!# Got that.

~Too much. This is grounds for a protest.~ TK protocols allow this.

+Stay here and watch the star nauti.+

#!Of course, I have kept you here too long. I'm so sorry. Please enjoy your free night.!#

We leave, but I am not happy about it.

Sam finds us before we get even halfway to our hutch.

“Hidy ho! Nice night for a stroll.” Her constant happiness depresses me.

Xot being older goes straight for the worm, ~We wish to lodge a protest against a TK.~

She hesitates. She has been studying Ceph furiously, but not there yet. She still has to translate everything into Hu first.

“I see. Whom is the protest against?”

+Do you know the procedure?+

“Yes. Never had to use it, but I know how. A word of advice. If this sentient is above your own level, it will be tricky.” She is a three. One

level ahead of us. Everyone wants Doc as a teacher.

~She is a nine.~

“Holy Silver! Are you nuts? What makes you think you have the right to question the actions of a nine?”

~We have the right. No one is above the question.~

“Then you feel you have all the facts and are better qualified to render a verdict?”

+No. We don't have to. A question does not condemn, it merely calls for an investigation. Other nines can do the work and judge their own.+

“Do you both still feel you want to go through with this? Nines judge themselves you know.”

We both answer in the affirmative.

“Excellent. Come this way. They have not had a nine called in for the question in ages.”

I hand Xot, ~Are we worm food?~

~Better that than live a lie.~

We pass Lessa on the way to the council chamber.

#!Sorry guys, they made me do it. Er, well, actually they asked if I would help.!#

~We have been set up, as the Hu say.~

+We are not going to the council chamber. It is over that way.+

~I know.~

Suddenly everything goes black, but I am not unconscious. I try to scan but sense nothing. I try and reach out to Xot, but can feel nothing. I am weightless like before. I try a screech. It bounces back instantly except from one direction. I use my arms to flap my way in that direction. We may not be able to fly in gravity, but we have enough going for us to do something in a weightless situation.

It turns out to be a small chamber. I bump into Xot almost immediately. He grabs me to stabilize us. He, of course, is stuck fast because of the suckers on his arms.

~Did you have to sound so loud? Nearly clouded me.~

~Sorry, I had not idea how big the chamber was.~

~Remember Fa, start small and work bigger.~ Yeah, I remember that afterwards. The first gears I made for the far seer were too large too. But that was better. You can grind down, but not add to metal or wood. The principal stated is not universal.

I fall and hit my shoulder on a hard surface. Xot sort of splats next to me. There is a dull red glow at some distance hard to determine. We are now on a flat surface, glass smooth. I can squat, but not stand. It is too

slick and frictionless. I try scanning, but can see nothing but expanse. But a hundred meters is not really very far.

!Welcome to Dark Night. Tonight we offer you your choice as to the manner of your own death.! I can hear it, but not determine where it has come from.

“The Hu methods are possibly the most numerous and creative.” True from what I learned in history class. Is that Doc's voice? I did not recognize the Di's voice.

In a high voice that is irritating to hear, ^If you fear heights chose our methods.^

A design appears in the relative sky. It resolves to be in the Ceph written language, ~A simple dart to paralyze and then the prospect of being eaten alive are best.~ It goes to dark.

!!Being torn apart by one's enemies is honorable!!

#!Shunned and left to die alone give time to reflect on one's errors!#

+Like the Ba, our method involves flight or lack of it.+

We are one. Disease is removed by the one so that the one may persist. I am guessing that is the Blu or maybe the Pink?

We are one. Sickness of thought or form is removed by separation from the one. Left to rot alone, rather than feed and further the sickness. That is the Pink!

Who's left?

#You already know the manner of your death. Embrace it to give strength.# Where did a Qes come from? I have never seen or heard one outside of class images. How was I able to understand it?

Dark.

Suddenly I am pushed down by a huge strength and pinned against the floor by a great weight. Then just as suddenly let go.

Run and I will chase you down and test your honor to the highest. Rest assured I will catch and eat you in the end. Run now! Test your honor against the best!

No doubt who that is. I can see why all bird type species fear the Cat.

What happens next is fascinating and horrific. A lit circle appears. On it is some kind of platform with two inverted “L” shapes on one edge with the inverted L section extending towards the center of the platform. There are ropes of some sort with a loop at the end extending from the inverted Ls. A hidden portal opens. Somehow we are drawn closer to this scene, yet I can feel no movement. Nor can I scan the scene in front of me, though it is well within the required distance.

Though this portal come heavily black covered amorphous shapes of

indeterminate species. Behind them come a Ku and a Ceph. As these two get close to us they turn and look at us as if they know we are here. It is us! At that moment of realization I look around me and see Xot next to me, but we are on the stage and we are being led up the steps to the top of the platform. Once there the rope is tied tightly around my neck. It is scratchy and presses painfully against the feathers on my neck. I look to my right and a rope is tied around Xot's mantle, but also his arms are gathered and an additional rope is tied around them with a heavy looking sack.

A portal below us opens and both of us fall through the portal to the stage below, but before we reach the bottom I am jerked back with excruciating pain and the horrible sound of my neck and head being pulled from my body. Just before I lose awareness I see my body pumping out it's life blood onto the stage.

I awake to being on the side of the stage. I am looking at our lifeless corpses. The platform is gone. Just our bodies and our blood. Xot's body has been torn in half, arms on one side and his mantle on the other.

Darkness.

I see a huge tree. Larger than I have ever seen before. There are dessicated corpses nailed to it's surface. Some are little more than a few bones and scraps of dried flesh. Some much more recent. Maggots and other creatures crawl in and out of holes that should not be there. Nearly every species is present.

Someone grabs my arms and legs and pulls them taunt. My back is against a rough surface. The tree is gone, but I see smaller ones near by. Sudden excruciating pain to my limbs as the dark shapes pound wooden spikes through them and pin me to the tree at my back. Silence. Throbbing pain.

A small bird like creature flies in the distance. Soon there are more. They appear to be coming closer. Suddenly one is right in front of my face. It has hideously huge teeth in it's beak. I shake my beak back and forth to discourage it, but it alights on my shoulder just out of reach and pecks at my arm, tearing out bits of flesh and consuming it. I can't turn my head far enough to see if Xot is similarly tortured. I try scanning, but it does not work. There appears to be something in their saliva that instantly clots my blood. All the unnecessary parts are removed and consumed first. It takes days for them to do enough damage to finally lose consciousness and die.

Darkness.

I awake. I am on a wet slick surface. I see movement above me.

Sentients are looking down at me from a ringed edge. I am in a bowl of some sort. I see a Ceph in full battle armor. I hear a strong puff of air and feel a sharp pain on my back. A dart is fired at me and I am instantly paralyzed. A ceramic ax is brought forth. I can't move as a crew of three chops me to bits and hands those bit to the surrounding sentients, piece by piece. They leave to consume their prize. At least this one is relatively quick.

Darkness.

I am on a stone platform. I see trees behind me, Xot to my left and sky before me. I am pushed off the stone platform and quickly fall to my death against sharp rocks and corpses below. Very quick.

Darkness.

I am on a plain of grass. It comes to my chest. I walk down the path that is before me, but not behind. Soon I come to a clearing. Two large Cats are eating Xot. A third awaits its turn at the meal. Far too late to do anything. Instinctively I turn and run. I hear pursuit. I try a zigzag path through the grass, but I leave an obvious path. I am nearly out of breath when I see a copse of trees. I make a last great effort to reach the trees. I start to climb them, but in one mighty leap the Cat jumps up and knocks me off the tree. I hit hard. It comes down on all fours gracefully and waits. I take this break in it's behavior to start running again. I see water and cross the water. It simply leaps over the small stream in one graceful arching jump. I reach a group of rocks and scramble up them. I wedge myself down into them as much as I can and freeze.

The Cat slowly comes up the rocks, sniffing at every crevice. I am still breathing too hard from the run and am sweating profusely. I can see it looking down at me with heavy breath and sharp teeth. It reaches in with a paw and scratches my face and beak. Little damage is done.

Well done prey of mine. You have brought honor to the hunt.

It then reaches much further in and disembowels me easily. There really was never a chance.

Darkness.

I am in water. I instinctively hold my breath. I try to look around to see by body but cannot. Finally I have no choice as I nearly black out from lack of oxygen and inhale water. Only it does not kill me. I inhale again and grow stronger. I try to walk. Ku do not swim well, but it is strangely effective. I move forward rapidly. I find I can steer with what I can't see as my my arms. It is exhilarating. But the world around me is almost featureless and it is hard to tell what I am really doing.

Finally I perceive a blurry shape and swim towards it. The shape

resolves to be a collection of many shapes. Something changes and the shape moves. It moves again, this time growing larger. They are fish! Or fish like creatures. Blu?

They come closer. I try and wave, but this only causes me to drift off course. Blu com by something on their sides.

Hello! It seems to work.

They come closer. I am soon surrounded by nearly identical shapes all flashing at me in a way I can't understand. Then they turn and I am ripped to shreds and consumed.

Darkness.

!The council has spoken.! I am pushed out a wooden gate. The raps descend on me and I am ripped to shreds.

Darkness.

I am overwhelmed by a feeling of self doubt and remorse. I feel emotionally horrible beyond comprehension. All I want to do it get away from everyone. I feel such shame, like I am responsible for all the problems in the universe. I cannot live with this shame. I cannot live with the shame. I refuse to eat. Days pass. I feel my form growing weaker and weaker. Parts of me become infected and begin to rot. I am nearly a puddle of putrid goo when I die.

Darkness.

I am in space. There is a beautiful blue green world below me. Something clicks inside my head and the world turns dull, then brown, then black and airless.

I am responsible. I just killed billions of sentient beings. What is this power worth if all I do is kill? What if I do it again? And again? I am too dangerous to the universe. But who can remove this horror from existence?

My attention is drawn to the sun. I know what I have to do. With increasing speed I am drawn to the cleansing purity of the sun.

Darkness.

A Ku appears before me, confused and frightened. When it turns I recognize the beak marks. I no longer remember his name. Yes I do, Smelly. I remember the torment I felt at his beak and arms. I am filled with rage and hate. I look down and see a knife in my hand. I raise the knife and bring it down on the one before me. Stabbing and stabbing and stabbing. There is blood everywhere. Finally I stop. Dead beyond dead.

The shape of the bloody corpse changes. It morphs into a new shape. Of Xot. I have just killed Xot! I back away and collapse in grief.

I awake in my own nest in my hutch. Startled I quickly get up and run

as fast as I can to Xot's pool and desperately try to find him, but to no avail. I must have really killed him!

The portal to our hutch opens and a very wet stressed out Xot enters, sees me and reaches out with an arm and touches me with Ceph affection.

~I thought I had killed you. I am so sorry.~

+It is I who killed you. I am the one who is sorry.+

An unseen Ku interrupts us, +No one who has been through the Dark Night can explain to one who hasn't what occurs. There are not words enough. Best not to try. At some point in the future, you will be asked to participate in some way in the Dark Night of another. Do not hold back. Do not hold back.+ She disappears. The fading image of Barb still exists in my mind to this day. I no longer feel sorry for Lessa.

Luna City

“Incoming request to land from the Pink delegation.” We hear over the com.

“They have space ships?”

“They have TK, good enough. Guess what color the ship is?” I am already looking outside the view port.

“Some shade of magenta no doubt.”

I smile, “Green.”

“No way!” He comes over to look himself.

“I’ll be. Didn’t even know they could see green.”

“Looks black to them. Someone must have helped them.”

“Guess we should get over there to translate.”

“After you.” Too bad I lost my interest in the amorous arts. Ravi has really been taking care of himself these last thousand years. No matter.

We finished the central pavilion last year. Looks great even if only Ravi and I can see it. Well, and the occasional visitor.

“Wonder what the Pink want. They rarely get off the ground.” Ravi comments.

“Whatever it is, it must be important.” I smile.

“Oh, yeah, like the last time, when they wanted the recipe for mashed potatoes. They could not get enough. I thought they would all burst.”

“That was impressive. Have you heard anything more from the Enterprise?”

“You really want to know?”

“Would be nice to know when we make it to the most wanted list for every species, not just the one in this region of the galaxy.”

“I do miss the visits from the Jssxi. Nice sentiments.”

“Smell gets to you eventually though. Look how long it took us to get it out of their quarters. They still call it the evil place.”

“The smell was kind of pleasant. I don’t know why everyone is so upset.”

“We are TK. Norms said it prevented them from ever wanting to do anything ever again. Had to come in with suits and take people away one at a time.”

“Wish we could express more often. Making us clean it up with kitchen scrubbies was kind of harsh.”

“They wanted it to serve as a reminder to think first and act second. Something we are known to be very bad at.”

“True.”

We reach the receiving area and prepare to wait.

“This place could use a little TLC.”

“We have not had a visitor in years, why bother?”

I scan but no one about. Ravi looks at me and I nod. A moment later the room is clean and in order. I am sure we will get into trouble later, but for now we will not bring dishonor to our guests. As to why we are to limit our use . . . Well, that has to do with the Piskon Hive. They see us as targets or more likely beacons. We could bring the Hive here. The norms would not stand a chance and they know it. Two TKs is not enough against who knows how many.

“The others are here.” He means the official delegation from Luna City. The usual dignitaries, that sort of stuff. We move back out of the way. We are only translators and will be called upon at the proper time. They line up in the Hu fashion with an aisle between. The Pink will not understand this of course. No matter.

The airlock cycles and the door opens. Now comes the wait. Pink are not in our time frame.

Suddenly a cart comes in at a walking speed. I have never seen this before. The cart goes past the honor line and comes up to rest right in front of us.

“What is going on?” The Director is huffy. We shrug in unison. I have never seen anything like this before. First the ship and now the cart. Not the Pink I know.

The cart opens, but only one Pink is present.

I must be taken to the Silver as soon as possible. Again, not Pink like. *I don't understand.* I send back.

Information must be shared. Oh shit. It wants to be eaten. They would not be doing this unless it was very important. They know of our aversion.

How are we going to tell the Director?

I don't know.

Information must be shared. Imperative. It seems to be shifting it's weight back and forth. I did not know they could do this.

I lean toward the delegate. *Are you TK?*

I am the one who is to be shared. Right. A TK would not need a ship on an 'imperative' mission and certainly not this cart.

Pretend that the Pink is a TK?

We are taking too long.

Not possible with Pink.

“The Pink is here on Guardian business. We are to leave with it on a mission of utmost importance. We are not to be delayed for any reason.” God I hope that is enough.

“We would be helpless without you two here. Not acceptable.”

“I can stay. Spider will go.”

“I don't like it. What can one do against the Bugs?”

“What can two do against the Bugs. Besides, with only one of us Ravi is less likely to cheat.”

He raises an eyebrow, “True. Come Ravi, you must work off the TK you two used to clean this room in time.”

You owe me.

Sorry. I will make it up to you somehow.

Just get there and back safe. I really don't want to be the only TK here.

I don't want that for you either. Well, it started out as a nice quiet day.

The Pink is still shifting back and forth.

Okay my friend we will leave.

The space station will have the current location of Silver. If he remembered to post it.

Let us go back to your ship. It looks better if we don't use TK to leave.

Ship has no more energy. Must share information.

“Got it. We still go to the ship.” The door closes on it's cart and it starts to move back towards the ship. I follow it for appearances sake. And apprehension.

Great, the ship is really too small. They never expected me to come aboard. I begin to pop out the engine and other components we will no longer need.

No food. Die soon. Soon by Pink standards could mean years. Won't take that long I hope. Impatient little devil. I look back at it as it comes out of it's cart. I must be seeing things, but it looks like it has grown pink horns. Once inside, the door closes and I pop the cart out. Won't need that either. Now there is enough room for me to stretch out at least. Yeah, I know that means lots of space.

The ship is heavy, but I manage to make it look natural. Once a few hundred clicks out though I speed it up. Takes us about thirty minutes to reach the station. I don't bother docking, but just pop both of us into the main chamber.

Stay here. I need to access our information system to find out where he is.

It licks the structure I am working at.

Very inefficient.

Works for us. I type away.

“Shit! It says here he has not checked in for eight years. I know he was at that meeting recently. When was that? At least a year ago, no two?”

Where was Silver last known?

“Huh? Oh, it says he was just below us on Earth. I mean Hu-Eden. At the Mesa. A sort of Holy place for Hu TKs.”

Take there please. I look out the port. Of course we are on the opposite side. I still don't like popping through Mother Earth. It seems some how wrong.

“If you knew he was down there, why come all the way to the Luna City.” If he is there, I sense nothing. No TKs in fact. Where is Pushy Paws?

Not know, take there now. Not sensing any TKs on Earth, they went to the first place they knew did have Hu TKs they could get help from. Logical sort of. Not the logic I would use, but it makes sense. It starts shifting back and forth again.

“Okay, we go below.” I take a chunk out of it's ship to make a bubble and pop us over to it. Just a simple 'thn shield bubble this time. No gravity either. I was curious. It simple reaches out like an amoeba's pseudopod, sticks to the side and draws itself to the side. Once settled I pop us to the other side in a few jumps and then down to the Mesa.

I set the Pink down on the desert floor.

It really struggles with the dust and sand.

“Sorry.” I raise it up and remove the dust. If Silver has to share with it, might as well be clean.

From somewhere inside of it's own body a device appears. I didn't know they could do that or that they used small tech. Three items so far today. When did they learn all of this? The device emits odors. No lights or sound. Interesting. To each their own.

This way. A vision appears in my mind. All in pink colors. I scan in the same location as the vision and find him.

“Slow time! I should have known. How could I have been so stupid?”

Inefficient information sharing. Yeah, tell me about it.

I am suspended at his level with the Pink on my lap.

He opens his eyes.

“Hello Messenger of the Most High One, Guardian of the Holy Insight, Bringer of Knowledge and Peace.” Whoa! I never knew that.

Then to me, “Hi Spider.” At least he looks happy to see me, even if I

am just hi, totally informal like. Best way with friends. Good enough for me. Never wanted a title.

“It wants you to eat him.”

He smiles and nods, “Not as bad as it sounds. They exchange life mass all the time. Only in extreme cases is it necessary to consume an entire being and even then the being will be shared among thousands. Messenger has shared with one such being and now needs me to know. It's alright.”

He gently reaches out and removes a piece from the side of the being and places it in his mouth. He closes his eyes and lets it dissolve slowly. Gross. I wait patiently. I should be going back, but now I just have to know.

I make a shader to shade all of us. Messenger is definitely not used to this much sun with no moisture. I am not used to the gravity either, but I can compensate here. No rules about not using TK. Not like I can hide on Luna. They figured out what caused the spider look and compensated early on. There was only two generations of beings like me. It was either find a solution or have to redo the entire city. One person inconvenienced is one thing, but everyone? Not going to happen. I'm okay with that. Can't hide in a crowd, but I like being different. Ravi is still normal sized.

The sun will set soon. Always pretty on the Mesa when there are clouds. No clouds today. Someone has entered the Mesa altar and library. An older couple. Just cleaning up. Sweeping and dusting. Scans like nothing has been disturbed for decades. Others further away are cooking evening meals. Not much to eat here except corn, squash and sheep.

Stars are coming out. Crescent moon. Luna City is out of view. At least the moon is still there.

All the kitchen fires have gone out. Coyotes and wolves take over. The locals snore. We have some really good ones up above. Glad I don't need sleep.

Hey Silver, if this keeps up I will have to slip into slow time to avoid going crazy.

“I've been ready for an eighth. Just waiting for you.” He smiles.

“Oh, too bright! Too bright!” We are in full sun. Can't see a thing. Just know we are no longer on Hu-Eden. Finally my eyes adjust. We are on Pink. Messenger slowly leaves my lap and resumes munching the local life forms.

We pop again and we are back to Hu-Eden. Just time enough to register and we are above Luna City. Then inside.

“One jump. I am impressed.”

“I need to find the Enterprise immediately.”

“They are years away from here.” He looks at me with a scowl.

“Okay, current location.” I palm my hand pad. It takes me a moment to find out, “Says they are in orbit around a brown froth of Paradise II. They have already sent down James and Q to recon Paradise II. Sensor reading say . . .”

“Are you coming with me or staying here?”

My mouth opens. He reaches over and closes it.

“I will take that as a yes. I promise to get you back before bed time.”

“Ah, can we have a craft of some sort?”

“No time.” I grab as much mass as I can on the way out. Someone is going to be pissed about that desk. One jump up. We are well away from the moon. Then we are, I have no idea where.

I am going to make a froth change. Okay. I knew that.

Not much happens. A few stars jump a little bit. Then I look down relative. There is now a world below us. Similar to earth. Would have to be to qualify. I don't understand all the math he and Rooi do, but I have read some of the summaries.

Okay, now the fine tuning. Our notation does not allow for an exact match most of the time. Especially on the brown worlds. Greens are easy to match, fewer of them. Browns and blacks are the hardest. Best place to hide for that reason.

We sort of flicker. The surface below us blurs with all the changes. He must be going through hundreds of froths per minute. Just long enough to get a fix on a ship in orbit.

He stops. A large rock comes hurtling toward us. We pop again.

What was that!

A captured asteroid I suspect. Very rare, but the same mass as the Enterprise. Thought it might be it.

We flicker for another few eights before we find it, or rather them.

There are two?

Bird of Prey. I suspect this is Rachael and Jame's doing. They are totally into Klingon art. Threw me off. Must have passed this froth by a few times. Sorry it took so long. It would have been nice if they had told me.

Maybe they were worried the com was not secure and wanted to hold something in reserve.

Then we are on the bridge of the Enterprise.

#Silver on deck!# The com officer is the first to notice. No one else was even looking in our direction. Strange sentient. I am too sheltered on

Luna.

Mei pops in a moment later.

“What are you doing here?” She looks pissed.

“An urgent message from the Pink continuum.”

“What do those slugs want now?” Xenophobic to say the least. Or maybe she just had a bad experience with them.

“They have evidence that the Piskon Hive was not responsible for the lost ones.”

“That's it? You came all this way because of the lost ones? What is three hundred compared to the millions they will sacrifice when they try again? You are wasting my time. I am expecting the away team back any moment.”

“There is time. I flashed by Paradise II. It is not ready for rollover. Far from it. The caverns are only just beginning. The culture is very rudimentary actually. I surmise that they will simply skip this froth and wait until the correct time for the next one.”

“You do, do you? Who made you such an expert all of a sudden?” Why is she so bitter? We all lost friends. No one could have anticipated what happened.

“I hope for your sake you did not lead them here.” She turns away and leaves.

“I guess we all have bad days.” The others on the bridge all look away from me like I have just spit fire.

We will wait for the away team to return. This ship is in a very dangerous position according to their view of the universe. Obviously not a view he shares. I am getting tired of waiting and getting nervous about our elders. He has already curled up into a meditation position. You would think the year he just spent with OM would be enough. Oh well, do as the Martians do. Not to pick on any particular group. They do lord it over us, their ability to handle twice the gravity, that is. I assume a meditation position, with a lighter gravity, TK has its benefits of course.

I have no idea how long we are quiet. Ship life goes on around us as if we are not here.

#Incoming message from the away team. They have just formed a bubble on the surface. Or rather will in a moment. Bubble formed. Sorry.#

I can't help but smile, her precog must be annoying at times. Must be hard for her as well. Hu nines are somewhat precog, but not to her extent. I wonder how long she knew the message was coming in before she announced it?

Mei pops in and glares at Silver.

“Okay chumps, we need help down there. I have over a hundred sens and three candidates for special school.”

Silver has risen at the Kes announcement, but has said nothing. Of course they could be TPing. My first impulse is to volunteer, but I am under Silver's shelter and wait instead. Others line up and they all go down together, Mei included.

“Should we go down too?”

“Not yet.” He sits down again. Oh well.

An eighth later Mei comes back up and storms out of the bridge.

We are suddenly on the surface. Shelters have been put up. Supplies have been laid up in an extensive network of caves below us. Hu are rushing around confused.

“Just pick one and claim it. No one will bother you. One is as good as another. You can always change things later.”

Then they see me. They freeze.

“Hi, they call me Spider on account of my shape. What are all of you called?”

“What's a spider?”

“A small bug with eight legs, from Hu-Eden.” They react to that and back up away from us. Most decide it would be better to get about their home setting up and go to shelters further away from us, only to find others already there. Now they are not sure they want to come back towards us.

Then the unexpected. A Cat, a Ceph and Ba come out of one of the shelters, see us and start to walk towards us. A number of people bow as they pass or even pet the Cat affectionately. The strange part is that the Cat leaned into the petting instead of snarling at them.

Q appears next to me, “Meet the candidates. From right to left, Nipper, Silas and Pok. They are from Hu-Eden, recently.” I raise an eyebrow.

“How can that be?” I certainly don't remember them and they are candidates not TK.

“Good question. They say they came through what sounds like a Rooi portal. In one jump.” Silver raises an eyebrow.

“What else?”

“The rest of them have been here since just after Paradise. Well, their ancestors anyway. And no one on Hu-Eden reported it to the Guardians. One of those Ceph matriarch secret projects.”

“Who was on earth at the time?”

“A succession of twenty or more TKs. No one caught it.” How did the portal work then? I find it hard to believe it could have been hidden that well.

“Might have worked if the spheres were only off line when a transport occurred. Probably never for more than a minute or two. May have even waited until the resident TK was occupied elsewhere.”

“Most of it ended three hundred years ago, but these three stumbled onto it by accident when chasing some thieves.”

“These thieves also used the portal?”

“Yeah. They didn't find them after a half year of searching. Did find the Nauti sphere that was stolen though. Mei has it now. Silas was able to read it. Has a lot about how they adapted to the native allergens. A local plant helps, but they also burned out a section and planted Hu forms. An enclave if you will.”

“Just Hu?” I ask.

“No, Ba and Dia were here too, but now all the Dia have died. It seems the local sentient lays it's eggs in the victim and the grub eats them alive, slowly. Dia were a favorite.”

“Surprised that worked.”

“Nipper, the Cat was almost a victim. We have taken traces. Interesting DNA construct. Triploid.”

“Not the Piskon Hive then.” Q smiles.

“Now she has to be really pissed.” They both give me a dirty look. What?

“There are still many Hu and Ba left there. The Ba are the leaders and the Hu the enforcers. We have most of the workers and grub chow. The exoskelton life forms are the true rulers though. They pupate at first in the castle then eclode in specially prepared mounds.”

“Not exactly a complex cave network. I know, I scanned them on the way in. More than one enclave too. Hundreds currently and evidence of many more in ruin.”

I turn to him, “I was with you. When did you have time to learn that much?” He smiles. Q smiles. I need to go back to school. I have been goofing off too long at Luna City and Mars.

“This is definitely not the Piskon Hive, nor is it Paradise II.”

“Yet.” Silver says.

“Yet.” Q answers.

“I have a question. The other enclaves. Hu-Eden also?”

“Nope.” Q smiles.

“Let me guess. The portals are the local's doing. They bring other

species here to study them. Saves a fortune on space travel. The general tech level is not high enough to support the portals, so they got them from another species. Probably one who was using them just like the locals do now, only did not expect to run into someone quicker or nastier than them.”

“Or the portal makers were just a curious species. The grub appears to absorb the knowledge of whomever it eats. The resulting bug is about one fourth the weight of the sentient it consumes. It is then consumed by many in turn.”

“Similar to the Pink then.”

“Pink do not eat without permission.”

“The bugs consider it an honor to be chosen.”

“So do the Pink. Think the Pink were the precursors to the insect form?”

“There are separate animals and plants on PII. Pink are the more normal plantimal form. Interesting similarities though.”

“Indeed. Convergent evolution.”

James joins us, “Bring them up to speed.”

“Silver agrees with us.”

“Hi Spider.” James at least remembers me. “What do you think?”

I am flustered.

“Ah, I don't know. I have been hearing Mei's version for so long. It is hard to switch diodes. The anathema part must fit in somewhere. Why does everyone suddenly hate us?”

“What you would think of anyone who races halfway across the universe to go after a phantom enemy? Wouldn't you be worried?”

“Would not what to be the chosen world.” No you wouldn't.

“I am not sure that kidnapping sentients is exactly innocent.”

“We did the same thing in our history. Only it was fellow Hu.” True enough. I witnessed some of that first hand. Well from a distance anyway. News reports, that sort of thing.

“Definitely need to upgrade our node protocols.”

Silver answers, “Already done. Pushy Paws found the damage to the one they used there and Sussi or someone fixed it. I have been with OM. She says everything is secure again. They were not able to determine where the portal went though or even how or what they did to the node. Weren't even sure it was used as a portal, just that foot prints disappearing at a stone wall suggested it. Nothing ever came back, so they stopped worrying about it.”

“Whoa! What are the odds?” There are not enough electrons in the

multiverse to explain those odds.

“I smell setup.”

James says, “Convergence. I keep trying to get you guys to embrace it. Only explanation.”

“Hey guys, when is the war?” She nods at me. Rachael has just popped in.

Not our place to answer. We are just messengers.

“Silver, what are you doing here? See you brought my favorite string bean with you.” She gives me a bear hug and nearly crushes me. The Klingon gear does not help. She is about half my height too.

“Just delivered a message to Mei. The Bugs did not cause the lost ones.”

“What did?”

He shrugs, “Pink consortium did a most thorough study. No outside force was involved.”

“He has seen PII.”

“Crap, you didn't bring them here?” Paranoia is contagious. James and Q were there too, but she does not accuse them.

He smiles, “If this is the Piskon Hive, it is going to be a long time before they are ready. Those 'mounds' that Q and James saw are only a few meters deep and could have been done by any animal that size.”

James smiles, “Only the enclaves are all over the planet. They have been kidnapping species for some time. If they are using them to extract knowledge, it won't be long before they jump way ahead of expectations.”

Rachael looks confused, “What did you two find? And who are all these people?”

James says, “Just a few new friends we found on PII. The ancestors of those who arrived over three hundred years ago. The interesting ones are those three over there. They are recent, six months ago.”

“Just before Pushy Paws closed the hole apparently.”

“Explains why they did not get back.”

“There is no way back. One way only. My guess is that they send those weird ants we have been finding everywhere. Some get lucky and find the necessary materials or tech that allows them to adapt it to their use.”

“Pushy said something about ants being found at the node. Did not know it was they who caused the damage or if they were just exploiting the hole in the node.”

“The ants bring fresh grub bait for information extraction.” Q adds.

“What are you going to do with them?”

“Up until this moment I would have said they would have to stay here, but now that Silver and Spider are here they can take them home. They are from Hu-Eden after all.”

This makes me nervous, “What about quarantine?”

Silver smiles, “I can't think of a better place Spider. I'll help get them set up. How long do you think they need to wait? Standard is six months.”

Rachael shakes her head, “This is PII. Ten times that would not be enough for me.”

“This is not PII. We don't approve of their method of cultural advancement, but it is not ours to say.” The Diversity Imperative.

“Don't listen to him!” Mei is furious. “Get the hell out of here you two. Take this bunch with you.”

Ahab and the white whale. Silver raises an eyebrow. *A single nine remaining could vaporize Paradise II. You have to convince all of them or this trip was worthless.*

A trip is never worthless. We have learned much. Those engineered helpers are still out there. I don't think the locals made them either. They understand enough to use a tool, but not make it.

It is not the sentient bugs who are the threat. It is the small autonomous ones then. Who were the ones at Paradise then?

They may have been used just like these were.

They hardly seem used. Certainly having benefited from the exchange.

Have they? Their world is about to be destroyed. “Come we go. Gather everyone together.”

“Shit, they just got here.”

I shrug, “Mei ordered us out. Best not to get in a fight over this. She will have her own accounting at some point.” As will we. Religion is sort of a strange thing with TKs. We are not sure what it is. We have seen or heard of so many belief systems, including the Cult of the Guardians. Quite popular at the moment across several froths. That part is scary. Means we unintentionally influenced a lot of sens.

James and Q come up to us, “We are going with you. It would not hurt to watch and wait. We are not saying this is not our enemy, but who ever they are, they are not a threat at the moment. Better to take back what we have learned and present it to the Library. We are newbies compared to many.” There is much wisdom in what he says.

“I am going to stay with Mei. I may still be able to talk her out of this. She listens to me at least.” Rachael nods and pops out. The rest of the

crew goes as well.

“Besides, the locals are more likely to go if we go with you. They at least know something of us.”

“Especially those three. Pretty amazing for norms.”

I laugh, “A Cat is never a norm.” Nipper hears this and come running up to me.

Finally, someone who understands. You will be my mentor? He does his best to look sad and cute at the same time. Pathetic. *Hey guys, I have found our mentor.* What? James, Q and Silver are nearly doubled over laughing. Great. They approve.

“You don't understand Nipper. I am stationed at Luna City.”

Pok catches up, ^Where's that?^

“Ah, the moon. You know, that ball of rock above your heads.”

~What's it like up there?~

I look straight at Silas, “No oceans. The biggest body of water is a tub. And the gravity is one sixth what it is on Hu-Eden. No outside to play in. Few trees, mostly just uni-strut.” I try and paint a depressing picture. It does not look like he understands a single thing I have said.

“Give up Spider. It won't work. You don't have to take them all the way to nines. Just to four or five should be enough.”

“I could do that in a week.”

“Ah, you know the fast track is not approved any more.”

“Could be a problem. Ravi and I are the only two permanent TK residents allowed.”

“If I remember, they felt put out by this little trip of yours. Maybe if there were more TKs present, this would be less of a problem.”

“That would start a war. The Lunies have not been filtered of bad behaviors like the rest of humanity. Everyone wants to live forever, or so they think.”

“That is why these three are perfect. They are not Hu and they are outsiders. Besides, they will be at least threes before they get out of quarantine. Know any norms who would pick a fight with a three?”

“Good point. So I need to make a new city for the hundred and raise these three all by myself.”

“Hey, you've had it easy for a thousand years, about time you got to work.”

“You try protecting the entire moon from meteor strikes all by yourself, with only one other person to spell you and doing the rest of your chores as well. Speaking of which, Ravi is going to be pissed at me for taking so long.”

^Do you sens always talk like the subjects are not there?^

Silver smiles and I roll my eyes to answer, "Most of the time. I'm sorry. Do you have any thing to bring with you?"

Nipper looks up at me like I am insane. Mid lick, tongue hanging out. Cats don't believe in baggage. They pride themselves on being totally self reliant. Going to be lots of fun having these three at Luna City. A lot of fun.

James and Q come with the hundred in tow. One of the Hu is ahead of the others.

"Hi, my name is Jasmine. We were taken from our homes at meal time just before rest time. It has now been at least two eighths later than that. We are all mixed up, confused, hungry and tired. So, please explain to me why we have to move again so soon." She is calm looking at me. But being so strange to her, I am sure it is difficult.

"I am a worker, just like you. A different culture, but I work for others all the same. We all do here. This place will be in extreme danger soon. We got you away from the prison you were in. Now we need to take you to an even safer location. Once there you will stay for at least a half year. Then you will be allowed to return to the land of your ancestors. If you can be patient, you will soon see home. Your true home."

"I see. Why are you going to destroy the Honored Ones? What have they done to you?"

"Some of our number believe they did a great harm to a great number of sentients and need to be stopped from doing it again."

"The Honored Ones are practically helpless. If not for the protection from the bad plants and animals we would have had no need for them and easily removed them from leadership. We have to do everything for them, including raising their young." She looks down when she says the last sentence. I have already scanned her. She does not have a grub. Some of the older ones do though. Have to get rid of those first thing.

"Those of us here believe you. We don't believe they are the ones that did the great harm. That is another reason to remove you from this location. There are others who do not believe as we do. It is not safe for you to be in the middle. Not because either of us would harm you, but in the confusion you may be forgotten. Look around you. There is no life here outside this bubble. You would all soon die if left alone."

And older woman comes forward, "Just do it. We can sort this out later. I heard the anger in the other one's words. We need to leave now." She turns to the others of the group and motions for them to come closer.

James nods and looks to the outside of the bubble. He raises an

enormous cloud of dust from the landscape. This slowly forms into a shell of a space ship. The group can't see inside like I can, but he and Q quickly make rooms with beds and other necessary facilities. No kitchens, we won't be in it that long. No windows. That would only scare them more.

“Spider, you have grav control. They are used to slightly less than one G, but I think if you get it up to half that would be enough. They will bounce around a bit, but will rest easier. Will help them get used to Luna.” I suspect they will sleep through most of it and not care.

The shell comes closer to the bubble and then merges with the side of it. An opening appears in it's side. Stairs are visible. The people file inside after Q and Silver lead the way. Lights come on as they they do. I am the last to leave. I clean up the landscape, dissolving all the structures and then finally the bubble as I enter myself, only leaving footprints. Hey, I'm a Loonie. Traditions are important. Just as we are pulling away I remember to leave a Chinese flag. Take that Neil Armstrong.

Paradise

I am convinced that the ancestors knew of the OM on Hu-Eden. It is the only explanation for their wisdom and the practice of going out into the wild for long term meditation. Hu-Eden was billions of years old and had much wisdom to share, in her sneaky deceptive manipulative way. I sigh. My home.

This one however is all but useless. I was barely able to link with her and she acts like a newborn. Asking far more questions than giving. That makes me suspect she really is a newborn. The ecology here is transplanted and did not evolve here. That much is very clear. Which makes sense if this world was used for at least one froth turnover. She would have been here no more than thirty five million years, probably much less. It would have taken time for Paradise and Mirror to cool afterwards. This ecology could be less than a million years old in fact.

I come back to normal time to find an entire colony of those pesky ants surrounding my 'thn bubble. They have nearly gotten through in at least one location. I watch them carefully. They can actually bite into the shield, albeit slowly and only the tiniest bite at a time. How can anything organic attack the 'thn shield? I switch to psiotics. Ah, that's how. They are very low level psiotics and all of it is concentrated on their mandibles. Very single minded. They are certainly ants from that perspective.

I turn off the psiotic shield that I used as a backup for the shield. Immediately the ants change behavior. All interest in getting through the shield ends and they start falling away. Interesting. I turn it back on. They come back to the shield. I move the generator next to the area they have nearly gotten through and they go frantic. So they can sense direction and intensity.

Deciding that at this rate they will not take long I wait. Silly me. 'thn shield material is not that easy to get through. After waiting an entire day I decide to make it a little easier and thin out the shield where they are working. It only takes few eighths longer before they get through. They stream in to confront the generator. I purposely make myself as psiotically invisible as possible. With such a strong presence next to me it swamps my signature and they ignore me. I am nothing more than something to crawl over to get to their goal, whatever that is.

They surround the generator and go to work. They clearly have a purpose, but it is not to turn it off. Instead they change it. By secreting an interesting substance from their mouths they form a network of wires and

connections. Upon drying the wires surprisingly turn into a 'thn based superconductor material. The network is channeling the psiotic energy from the generator into a pattern. So much for the gold carbon theory we used all this time. The pattern gradually grows as they add more to the network and adjust and tweak it. Eventually over the period of a few more days it becomes apparent what they are doing.

I step back and brush off the ants on me. They immediately join the task at hand. A day latter just at sunrise it happens. The portal opens. Before me appears a forest, but not one I have seen before. The trees are all wrong. Nothing like here or on any froth earth I've been to. Interestingly the ants do not enter the portal and a moment later it collapses.

Each sunrise for the next few days it opens. A few of the local fauna do accidentally enter and confused usually do not find their way back. When they land on an unfamiliar plant and try to eat it though, they immediately die. I have scanned the other world of course. Would be poisonous to Eden worlds as well, but not to a TK.

I have to wonder if this is the same world that the Hu-Eden portal came too or if the choice is purely random. If it had been on any other world but Hu-Eden I would have instructed others to watch the portal to see where it went. But, Hu-Eden was too valuable to loose to anyone, much less the dreaded Bugs we have feared so much.

On the fifth day of watching life through the portal as it opened each morning I see something I dreaded. One of them! Or at first I think it is one of them. Eight legs, exoskeleton, but there the similarity ended. They are smaller and clearly lighter weight. The face, if that is what it is, is very different. There are no apparent eating means. Nothing resembling the sucker or mandibles or even teeth that would be expected. They are able to make sounds and do so readily, but through the spiracles on the abdomen, not from the face. It does not seem to be upset by the portal and seems to be as intent on watching the goings on of this side as I of it's world. Interestingly it does not seem to notice me. Or so I think.

The next day, there are several more when the portal opens. They appear to be building a structure of sorts around the opening. It takes several more days for them to finish. I wait a few more to see what is going to happen. Of course, as soon as I recognize the structure I become very suspicious. It looks for all intense and purposes as the inside of a small 19th century western style cabin, complete with wood burning stove, wash basin, and curtains on the windows. It would appear they know of my species and are inviting me.

On the next day there is only one present. It waits on a chair of all things, facing the portal. When it sees me, it speaks. The accent is intense and barely understandable, but I soon adapt. Helps that it keeps repeating the same sentence over and over.

“Welcome. We have been expecting you. Please help. The settlement is in danger.” No idea what the missing word means. Their word, with no Hu equivalent apparently.

Just as an experiment I try, “Who are you?” It seems to have heard me. It rises and walks out the door. I can see that it has difficulty with the door knob and even in moving the door open enough to exit. I see the outside of the cabin for the first time since it was completed and see not the strange plants I had seen before they raised the cabin, but at least shrubs and flowers from Hu-Eden. The distance is still the native fauna.

The next day another Bug awaits me. This time it is very fluent in Ba, with no apparent accent. I cannot tell if this is the same individual or another.

“The settlement is in danger. We need help in rescuing those left behind. If you cannot help yourself. Please find others who can. The Helpers will continue to open the portal for the next eight by eight plus seven light dark cycles. We will be unable to sustain them longer than that. The ants or the settlement they mention?”

Seventy one days, but whose days? Paradise days or Bug days? I have sensed no more than level two psiotics through the portal, but even I know what can be hidden if necessary. I was doing the same, keeping myself at the apparent level of a norm. The right thing to do would be to get others. The wrong thing would be to go through by myself, tempting as it is.

Well, I am no hero. I get up and TK myself into the air so as not to disturb the colony. Then I make myself go back to Hu-Eden though a careful route. I even change bodies on one lone world in case the ants were able to do something to me that I was not aware of. Having seen these same ants here and on Hu-Eden, I do not trust them at all.

When I get back, there are no TKs present on Hu-Eden. I am pissed. They know we need to always maintain at least one to watch the Rooi spheres. If they did it once, they can do it again. I check each sphere carefully for any evidence of the ants. That wastes a few days. Time is running out.

Still no others. I scan my people on the plains. The plague is still rampant, but when I check with the shamans they assure me that they are maintaining isolation from each other to prevent further spreading. Still,

teenagers are curious and always seem to fall in love with the wrong person. All it would take is one to pass it along. Well, it is not the first time there has been a winnowing in human history.

Still no other TKs. Even Silver is missing from the Mesa and he is not hiding in slow time either. I pop up to the station. Nothing on the board. Some are lazy about checking in though.

Okay, now what? Luna City is close enough. Maybe they or Mars knows what's happening. Less lag to Luna with out going to the psiotic com. I type in my request to com with either Spider or Ravi. I almost forget to add a priority code. Otherwise it would have taken weeks.

What comes back is unexpected. Instead of a TK, I get a minor com officer.

“Sorry Honored Guardian. Chaos up here. Three Guardians and Spider are to come back with a hundred Hu to be housed in a hurry. Ravi is with them as well. Mars has said there is a meteor strike headed our way. If we experience a strike we are dust. If you can help in anyway, please come up.”

I sigh, “I’ll be right there.” Sounds like one of Silver’s messes. Who would bring a hundred norms to Luna? He hasn’t grabbed them from here has he? There are not that many Hu below me, but I would be pressed to notice a hundred missing unless I knew them personally.

Luna is not my favorite place. The Native American in me I guess. Even a desert looks like a jungle compared to Luna, even the city. Too controlled, too white man’s idea of perfection. Oh, I know there are no longer any pure breed white devils any more. Shame. It was so much easier to blame everything on them.

No mass to spare here, I pop back down to a sandy area with no life. I won’t kill unless I have to. Dark thank goodness. There are settlements near by, Bedouins of sorts. Nothing like the Arabs of old, but a similar climate breeds a similar solution. I grab what I need, make a shell and pop back into space. Others try and do it in as few jumps as possible. I prefer to see where I am going, not really trusting DS space. I was so glad when the Ceph showed us the portal variant. Only out here, how would you know? No land marks. Okay, I am not anxious to see what mess he has made this time.

I come in over Luna City and find the central admin structure. I press my bubble up against it and then PS through the wall to the inside. The com officer was not kidding. Everyone is running around like it is a major catastrophe.

Ravi pops in and sees me, “Oh hi Pushy Paws. Not a good time to

visit right now.”

“Not visiting. I was requested by admin. Something about a meteor coming in.”

“I wish. It is not one, but an entire storm of them. Hundreds at the least. Spider left me alone and went off with Silver just before they were detected. I could not raise anyone else. I have done the best I can to get ready.”

“What happened to Mars? Wasn't Aimee posted there?”

“The swarm hit there first. I was helping them until she could take care of it herself.”

I sigh, “Tell me what to do.”

“See that screen?” I nod. “We have set up repeaters along the axis of the projected hit. Most would hit safely beyond any settlement, but the shock waves would still take us out. We were not designed for quakes. No tectonic plates here to cause problems and on one expected this to happen when we were off planet. No offense, but you are not as practiced as Spider and I.”

“No offense taken.”

“Good. I will label the ones I want you to take care of.”

“And how do I do that? Mass is still mass, even if I vaporize it.”

“You do understand. Even a gust of air traveling at 18K clicks would cause massive damage. No hurricanes here either.”

“Then what do you do?”

He smiles, “Rooi portals. We let them pass through the moon via portals.”

“To the earth below?”

“Any that get through the atmosphere will land in the ocean. Most will not even hit the earth. Wrong trajectory.”

“Most. What do you tell the family who loses someone?”

“Look Pushy Paws, if we had a better solution we would use it. But the only other alternative is to send it to another froth. Are you sure they would not cause more harm there? Do we even have the right?”

“Hold a second.” I pop out. I am in orbit above Disaster. I scan and broadcast a greeting. No one answers. Not really expecting anyone. Most do not stay here long. I set up a warning buoy in case someone does show up. I pop back to Luna City.

“Send them to Disaster. No one present. Fire away. Here are the coordinates.” I type them into the console and they appear on the screen.

“Got it. Okay folks, keep us in the loop. Let us know what is getting close and we will take care of it.” I imagine a portal big enough to catch

them all then immediately dismiss it. That would cause a gravitational anomaly that could throw the moon off course, as Disaster is not in the same location relative to our moon and earth. Small portals will not be measurable.

One lights up red and Ravi is on it. I scan his method and see him open a portal ahead of it, confirm it has entered the portal and then close it.

“Take the next one. I will back you up.”

“When are the others due back?” I am nervous.

“Don't think about it, just act.” He is concentrating on the screen. I do the same. Don't like being dependent on tech. Gotten to rely too much on TK I guess.

“Pushy, pay attention!” I take a breath, open a portal, wait for it to get within scan range.

“Hole in one!”

“A swish is what we call it. After basketball. Just make sure everyone is a swish. No fragments allowed.” Even bullet at 18K can do a lot of damage.

“Got it.”

After an hour I am sweating profusely and getting fatigued when Aimee comes in and pushes me aside from my console. I say nothing to distract them and sit back to watch.

Ravi notices and starts to feed Aimee many more than he was giving me. They are both very good at this. Years of practice. Just like the People, practicing long hours as teenagers, in bow and knife or sacred dance.

Spider pops in and immediately goes to an empty console, but does not interact. He notices me sitting to one side and comes over to me. She is certainly strange. The People revere her when she visits below. Even gets to keep her name.

“Exciting isn't it?”

“Scary is more like it.” She nods.

“I will spell Ravi in a moment. Could you help with Silver, James and Q when they come in?” She hands me a com unit. I look at her questioningly.

“I had to go through several bodies to come in this fast. They will not need to. They can stay outside our network. Once you are with them, do not come back in. We have a large load of sentients, mostly Hu, coming in from PII.”

“What do the local sentients look like on PII?” She is shocked by my

question.

“Sort of like the Bugs, but different. Faces are very different and they are generally smaller.” It certainly sounds like the world I saw and this explains a lot.

“You did not bring everyone back. There are still others there.” I say this as a fact, not a question.

“How did you know that?”

“I was told by the PII species while I was on Paradise.”

“What? How?” I smile as Ravi is starting to get frantic for Spider to take over. I point to Ravi and Spider looks pissed, but leaves me. Ravi comes over and collapses on the couch next to me. He does not say anything, but goes into a very quiet meditative state. Not sleep, but close to it. So, he was affected by it.

The com chirps, “Spider, are you there?”

I answer, “Silver, Pushy here. The others are dealing with the meteors. I have been volunteered to assist.”

“Do they need any assistance? Looks nasty.”

“They seem to have it covered. Should be nearly over. Less than when it started anyway.”

“I am impressed. So, do you know where we are to set down?” Set down? I scan above me. Right in the path of everyone's work.

“Shit, do you have be there? Get out of the way! Other side of the moon now!” The huge makeshift ship pops out. I sense it on the other side. Good place for a quarantine.

I pop over to the ship. First outside and then inside.

Q greets me with a smile.

“It is like an ark in here.” He raises an eyebrow and then his arms.

“We did not have much time to work on it.”

“The PII Bugs want us to go back and retrieve the others too.”

Silver and James pop in and say in unison, “WHAT?”

James then asks the obvious, “Okay, out with it. What are you talking about and how do you know?”

“They told me of course.” They look at each other.

“But, you were not there.”

“Nope. I wasn't.” I smile. Silver starts to laugh loudly.

James and Q look at him with nasty expressions.

“I was on Paradise when the ants opened a portal to PII. Only at the time I did not know it was PII of course.”

“And how did they do that?”

“I sort of helped them. I was communing with OM, really dumb on

Paradise by the way. Anyway. I did the standard 'thn shield and psiotic backup to keep the local fauna away from me. When I came back to normal time the ants were there trying to get to the generator through the shield. I thinned the shield enough for them to succeed. They would have eventually anyway. They built additions to the generator that resulted in the portal. It only opens once a day for a few minutes. After about a week the Bugs communicated to me that your expedition had not removed everyone.”

“Is that all? You just happened to be on P1 and just happened to help the locals create a portal that crosses half the universe and several froth zones.”

“And you thought I was just another dumb Indian.” I smile. James and Q are now laughing.

I finally notice that we have an audience of three, a Cat, a Ceph and a Ba. From my scans, most of the rest appear to be Hu.

“You three appear to be out of place. Where did you come from?”

You are the Guardian Pushy Paws?

“I am.” The Cat goes into a full Nauti bow. He had to have learned that from the Ceph, or other Ceph. Cat, Ba and Ceph, who are comfortable around Hu. That describes nearly every world we are on. But only one who would know me and expect to have to show respect in this way

^We followed thieves from Hu-Eden to . . . ^

~Paradise Two is what they said it was. After some adventures, we were rescued.~

“You three were the ones that last went through the ant created portal on Hu-Eden. The one at the bottom of the cave.”

The Cat looks startled and then suspicious.

“I have been in your cave. It will never be a portal again. There are no more ants on any of our worlds.” And never will be as long as the Guardians are here.

“So, the ants set traps for species to be sent to PII. Interesting.”

“But only on worlds that have the necessary psiotic tech. They don't build the portals from scratch. They have to have a psiotic power supply.”

“Yet, they hide their work from the local TKs and only norms go through. They want the starting material, not the finished work. Something they can mold to their own purpose.”

“Maybe Mei is right after all?”

Silver jumps in, “Not yet she isn't. They won't be a threat for some time. And now that we know of their little trick we can warn others. They

won't be getting any more material to work with.”

I ask, “Then why did they ask for us to rescue the remaining sens that came through and specifically the ones from Hu-Eden. They recognized me as Hu without my speaking a single word. Then when I spoke Ba, the next day so did they.”

“Try Xylltl and see what happens?”

“Maybe this is also a trap. You come in to rescue the others and they have you as well. If they don't recognize you then they know they have a new one and act accordingly. I suspect bribes of 'shiny' things and if that does not work, then force.”

The com box squawks, “If you lazy ones are done goofing off how about setting up camp for your guests? We are nearly done here. Talk about strange. Why did all those meteors suddenly decide to hit now, just when we were short handed? We should have seen this coming for months.”

“Yeah, that is weird. It is like it is open season on Hu touched worlds. Nearly everyone seems to be in the firing line of celestial objects lately. They couldn't get us with bug juice, so now take out the innocent as well with heavy loads.”

I raise and eyebrow, “And why is it we always assume the most pessimistic militaristic motivation and cause?”

“She does have something there. You know as well as I do that worlds are not immune to hits from debris. Too many times in the 25 mil I was on earth did one hit. Set me back many times until I learned to distribute my stocks and keep some in the cooler. I'm sure OM could give you a better accounting and tell us if this was out of the ordinary.”

James sighs, “Do we have time for another OM reading?”

The ark sets down on the lunar surface. So gentle that had I not been actively scanning I would not have noticed until the gravity eased up slightly. I look to Silver with a dirty look just to annoy him.

“Not me, I wasn't driving.”

James shakes his head, “You can be such a princess sometimes Pushy.” We all laugh. Our three guests don't get it.

I nod towards them, “Candidates?”

“Seemed only fair.”

“I noticed that some of the Hu are infected with grubs. We will all have to go through several body changes before we can leave here. If they are coming, they will too.”

“Yep.”

Can I be all gray this time, like Owa? We all start laughing again. If

he only knew what Owa is really like.

You know Owa?! He rubs against me purring.

I bat him on the head, "Not polite to read without permission.

Remember, I can do the same. Do you want me to tell Pok and Silas what you really think of them?"

He backs off and slinks away. "I thought so."

^What does he think of us?^

I look towards Nipper. He looks horrified.

"I'm not telling." I pause, "For now." He actually thinks very highly of them, but he would not want them to know. Cat pride.

James makes a table and then lays a set of plans on it.

"We will start with the ship itself and then expand from there. We need hydroponics first. Need to start making food as soon as possible if the are going to be self sufficient."

"They won't understand soil less agriculture."

"Lunar soil is actually quite good for growing crops, but we need to place it in tubs or the water will disappear quickly into the lunar surface. We can fuse the soil itself to make an air tight seal for chambers and traffic areas. We will need to train them in space suit use."

"That will be a jump."

^You have not met them. They are very intelligent and resourceful.

Remember they had to endure the Bugs for hundreds of years. These are the survivors.^

~Then why did they say to Guardian Paws that they wanted her to rescue the rest of them. I don't think the ones here would be happy to see their overlords again.~

As nice as this lesser weight is. They will grow soft if left here. Certainly there must be another Eden to place them on.

"Yeah, that would be a good idea, except you all just came from a world that might be the bad guys. Not sure anyone wants them on a froth earth. Too easy to transfer. At least here they would also have to develop space travel as well."

~Are we a threat then?~

"You weren't there for since hatching Silas." James then looks at Nipper, "And none of you are infected."

"What are you going to do with the grubs. The represent a sentient life form. Would be wrong to kill them."

"They studied us for three hundred years, might be time to study them. Give them an artificial substrate to feast on in isolation. See what comes out."

“What kind of substrate are you thinking about? I doubt they would eat cat food.”

Nipper perks up. I pat him on his back, “He means cat food, like for small rat catcher size. Dumb as door nails. The food, if you can call it that, are these dry crunchy things. Tastes horrible. Even the cats don't like it unless they are very hungry.”

I might be hungry enough. He looks up at me with soft eyes.

^Don't believe him. He ate like a starving tor on the way here.^ He turns to Pok and growls, then turns his back.

~Now you see what we have had live with for nearly a year.~

I laugh, “Is there any other kind of Cat?”

Silver asks me on tight mind, *Can you process them and then take them to Di-Eden? They have set up a training center there to assist the Di to recover their world.* I nod. *We will investigate Paradise. The pieces are falling into place.*

Talk to Edwin. He has important information we have been overlooking. He and I both think that the Cats on Brown are the missing TKs. There are exactly enough to account for those we had thought had died. He thinks he knows how to bring them back.

“Whoa. I need to find Rooi then.” I nod.

~You know Guardian Rooi?~ Silas bleaches. Ah, newbies are so much fun.

Paradise II

“Just the two of us. It should be enough if we act quickly.”

“There are several million sentient down and a few thousand innocents if you don't accept that the locals are sentient.”

“You are not going soft on me are you?”

“Being smart is not soft. Do you really want a mistake of this magnitude on your conscious?”

“How many wars have you fought in Rachael?”

“Too many. Thousands.” She shrugs.

“An innocent sens never died in these wars.”

“They did most of the dying. If we were the equal to those below you would have a point. They can't fight us. Not equal. And since when does might make right?”

“They killed hundreds of TKs and threatened to kill millions.”

“Really? Are you sure? Are you even sure these are the same ones? All yellow people are not alike even in our own species. Look at these images. The ones below are nothing like the ones we met on Paradise. Clearly different species. Even the prelim seq is very different. They did not evolve on the same planet.”

“Any species capable of the froth event could change everything about themselves. We can.”

“If you wanted to hide from us, why take a similar form? Why kidnap sens from Earth? Why pick the obvious location? The first one we looked at in fact.”

“Why not. We are mere annoyances to them. Something to be easily brushed aside.”

“Then why kill fourth gen TKs. The first, second and third gens have the most experience. The fourths were the easiest targets.”

“Simple attrition. They would come for us next. They are clearly patient.”

“We are recruiting faster than they are attacking. They will not get very far at this rate.”

“We are still very low on eights and nines. Numbers will not make up for experience either. It was mistake to dissolve the Enforcers.”

“Give those psychos TK nine? I don't think so. Too unstable.”

“Instead we have two nines against an entire world.”

“I sense nothing over a two down there and nothing has happened to us yet. If they have a defense they are either not aware of us or are very

sure of its effectiveness.”

“But which?”

A chirp from the com.

“Interesting. It says that someone down there contacted Pushy Paws and pleaded with us to save the rest of the Hu-Eden sentients. That, for some reason, they would not be able to host them much longer.”

“Ha, this from a species that plants their young in sentients. Save them my ass. A trap if there ever was one. When was Paws here? I never sensed her.”

“Ah, she wasn't. She was on Paradise One. Those pesky ants made a portal between the two.”

“That's it! What further proof do you need? What are the odds of a portal between P1 and P2? Aren't enough electrons in the universe to predict that one. They must be linked. They must be the same.”

“Or the sentients below are not the enemy. They are being used, just like we were.”

“Are you saying the ants are the enemy? Be realistic.”

“Mass wise there was eight times as many ants as Hu, even at at our peak, not to mention now. Who was the real dominant species? All our tech and they still got into your apartment.”

“I still think these are the ones.”

“You think? Who made you God to decide the fate of millions because you think?! You had better be dam sure before doing this.”

“Leave me Rachael. You are trying to talk me out of this. You nearly succeeded.”

“If you are wrong and destroy these sentients, what then? What happens to a TK who makes that kind of mistake?”

“I do it to save everyone else. My own life is of no consequence.”

“Says who? Where are the legions backing you up? There is not even a single 'thn here. When was the last time you saw a threat to the universe where they were absent?”

“'thn are afraid of their own shadows.”

“Are you saying that Silver and Rooi are too? All the rest of the first, second and third gens. Are they afraid too? One by one they left. Not from fear. Definitely not from fear.”

“And when you leave? And you will leave.”

“Not from fear. From disgust. From pity. From sadness. Not from fear.”

“You will tell the others that you have failed. That is your only misgiving. You don't like to fail.”

“Where have you been? Oh, yeah, bottled up in a pod forever. With only a 'thn for company. I have failed so many times I know failure better than success. I am under no illusions as to my fallibility.”

“And I am. Right.”

“All I am asking is to give it more time. When in doubt give it some time.”

“We don't have time!”

“We have thirty five million years! Look below! Look! They are not going to froth any time soon. Even if they start trapping nines today, it will take then centuries if not millennium to gather enough. How many nines do you think they will trap after we tell everyone to avoid this world and to kill those ants anywhere they are found?”

“They have us. Who is going to tell them?”

“If we don't come back, they will. Pushy found the ants and what they can do. They know.”

“If I fail, then they still die. The others will avenge my death. I win either way.”

“Boy are you stubborn.”

“You mean pig headed. Stupid. Loony. Possessed.”

“I would have chosen obsessed. There is another problem. Have you checked to see if this species is registered?”

“There is nothing down there but twos, they are not registered.”

“I remember when all of us were off site for a time leaving our world without anyone over a two. We were registered automatically when we showed up at the Center. If we had all died, Hu would still be registered. All a species has to do is prove it is possible, not that there are any currently who qualify.”

“So what?”

“It means if we 'delete' them then the others will delete us. It is not a win win situation, you could be signing a death warrant for all of us.”

“Sounds more like a win-win for them not us. That's not fair!”

“Neither is it fair for you to destroy this world because you have decided to play God and demand it. They could be innocent by galactic standards.”

“You mean 'thn standards.”

“Doesn't matter whose standards, it will be enforced. You remember when Ly'thn was made? How many 'thn were present? It would take far less than that to take us out.”

“I don't sense any. They usually show up in large numbers if they predict trouble.”

“Have you checked to see if they are surrounding earth? Why be here? They may not even bother to warn you. Heck even a sector head, a mere TK 11 could take us out from a hundred times further away than we could sense. Never know what hit us. I was there when Ar'thn and Silver squared off. I thought for sure we were toast. A sector head monitors us. We make our hit, she makes hers and then reports to earth to finish us off. And all of the froths we are on.”

“Not earth zero. We know they made it.”

“For a time. Long gone before we left to come here. They would know that. May see us as no more than a cancer.”

“You sure know how to ruin a good day.”

“Let's go home. Not forever, but for now. We need to set up monitoring, see about rescuing the ones left behind, studying the grubs taken to E1's moon.”

“Grubs!? Are you insane?”

“Relax, they won't get anywhere near any settlement. Totally isolated on the far side of the moon. All TKs go through triple body swaps before interacting with anyone else.”

“Let's go.”

“What about the ships?”

“Leave them as space stations for use later. If they disappear, we will learn much about their capabilities. If they are still here, we have lost nothing.”

“I'm so glad you came to this decision.”

“I reserve the right to come back here and finish it. I am only agreeing to a temporary pause.”

“Fine. I will take what I can to save the rest.”

Di Eden

“Hey guys, have you seen the new recruits yet?”

+I heard they came from Paradise.+

~Paradise Two is what I saw.~

#!Saw? Someone else knows Ceph?!#

+All the instructors know Ceph. You heard a Guardian say this?+

Attention! Attention! Xot, Sam, Lessa and Fa report to the Admin Office immediately.

“Shit, all of us at once? Which one of you got us all into trouble this time?”

#!We are always together. How could it be any other way?!#

~We are supposed to keep each other out of trouble, not help get into it.~

+Smooth your feathers. We don't always get called to the Admin Office when we are in trouble.+

~Really? When was the last time you saw the inside without a crabby look?~

It does not take long to get there in spite of the almost daily changes and ever increasing amount of traffic. So many have shown up as this has become the place for all remnants for the southern hemisphere. Most of the north has already gathered into eight centers up there. Only the one center here and a much greater service area. The Ceph could be the difference. They are organizing the north. Guardians may have great powers, but organizing is not one of them. Or I could be biased towards my own kind. What I wouldn't I do for a carry crab right now. A Ceph among so many Di is asking to get stepped on and I can't depend on Sam always carrying me, though she never complains about anything.

+Hey, watch it you overgrown lizard!+

~Be careful Fa. They may not understand your words, but they can get your intent.~

+The no TK rule is unfair against such big clumsy toads.+

#!We are here to help them, not criticize.#!

!Oh look Sephira, a little one. I think they are so cute.! The large female Di bends down to pat Lessa's head. She hates that. I have to show amusement. She is quiet about it though and plays the dutiful servant.

After they pass us she spouts, #!The no TK rule is so unfair!!# Sam laughs heartily. She seems to be amused by almost everything.

“Here we are. I have to wonder what surprise they have for us today.”

~We are not alone.~ A mini portal collapses.
+What did you see?+
#!Curious as a Hu.!#
“Actually I believe the Cats are worse.” She smiles. No insult sticks.
~There are three I don't recognize. A Cat, a Ceph and a Ba.~
We all show a lack of knowledge.
“Might as well go in and introduce ourselves.”
We enter with our TK suppressed as much as we can. No point in announcing our level. Rude anyway.
The are all eyes staring at us.
~A Ceph! Thank goodness. I have not seen intelligent life for nearly a year!~ He comes up to me. ~I am Silas.~
~I am Xot. The Hu is Sam, the Dia is Lessa and the Ku is Fa.~ They all look at Fa with fear.
~I assume you have never seen a Ku.~ Silas confirms.
Does it eat Cats? A beautiful gray specimen. Subtle highlights of shimmering green. Interesting.
~Only if she is provoked. I hear the nads are the best part, though I have no personal experience.~
#!He is sliming you. Ku do not eat Cats.!#
No response. They look to me again.
Fa comes in, ^I speak Ba as well if that would help.^ The Ba looks at her startled, but says nothing.
Sam tries handing, ~We come here to meet, ah, told to come here.~
I see the Ba hand Silas out of my sight.
Lessa, who was born on Ba Eden, ^I am guessing you three came from Paradise II. Sam was born here on Di Eden. Xot is from Dia Eden and Fa was hatched on Ku Eden. Ku Eden was destroyed by a meteor. I was born on Ba Eden, where I learned Ba.^ She waves in a circle, ^This world, Di Eden, was hit by a comet, but will survive, though it will take a few years before we can raise enough crops and get civilization going again. All of the Ceph settlements were wiped out, but no Ceph were lost. They were all in north and the comet hit in the south. Lots of warning to get to high ground. We are barely in the southern hemisphere here, pretty close to the equator. This is a gathering spot for all those south of us. More sens come in each day.^
Pok finally speaks, ^Actually we were all born or hatched on Hu Eden, though you are correct, we were recently on Paradise II. We all received new bodies to be able to come here. The rest are infected and still on the Hu Eden moon.^ Silas hands Pok something. He withdraws

and looks hurt.

We don't know you and they are afraid Pok gave away all the secrets.

~You are here to learn to be Guardians are you not? There are no secrets among Guardians.~

~Are all who are here to become Guardians? There must be thousands of Di alone.~

^It only seems that way at times. The Di are not recruits. We serve them in our training though. Teaches patience supposedly.^ Oh, Fa, such a sour look.

“Tell them we usually come to this office because we are in trouble and it usually means cleaning Di shit pits or worse. I hope they are not here for the same reason.”

I am able to pass your thoughts to the other two. No need to repeat. No need to speak actually. Annoying creature.

~May I ask your name sir Cat?~

I am Nipper the Great. Tail and head go up. I have to remember he can read me. Not polite, but when have Cats ever been polite?

+Definitely a Cat.+ I show amusement. Silas and Pok do also. Guess they are used to it.

A large nearly white Di enters and growls at us. We all turn to look but none show distress. The new ones are learning fast or they have more experience than I thought. Maybe there are Di at Hu Eden as well?

!Show some respect for your teacher worms.! Oh crab, a full of himself nasty Guardian. He looks at me like he is going to eat me, drooling even. I feign boredom. The Cat yawns, circles a few times and then lays down facing away. Pok curls up with him as if going to sleep. Silas disappears into the corner.

Sam goes up to the Di like she is going to challenge him to a wrestling contest.

+Sam, you are big, but not that big.+ She ignores Fa. Lessa looks nervous now.

!Ah someone with spirit. Great!! He circles Sam and then the two engage. They push each other back and forth a bit then disengage.

!Strong for a fem Hu. No TK either. Good for you.! He then looks at the rest of us. The others have woken up from their 'nap' to watch.

!Time to run! See if you can keep up.! He smashes the door open and nearly hits a group of Di. They ignore him, but stare at us. Must have been isolated from non Di sens.

My name is White, on account of my beautiful lack of pigment. Great for blinding your enemy. If the sun ever comes out again that is. He is

several tens of meters ahead of us. Sam runs back to me and grabs me to hoist on top of her shoulders.

“I am used to the Di culture. A good greeting always involves a test of strength.” Soon Nipper and Silas run ahead of us. This just spurs Sam on and it becomes a race. I am going to be turned into a jellyfish if the bouncing keeps up. I look behind and see Lessa and Pok taking their time. Both speaking Ba must feel good for Lessa, not many here do.

We get closer to Guardian White, but never catch up. He keeps just ahead of us. Even without me on her back it is unlikely Sam could catch her in the short race, but Sam has long endurance and would make up the distance in the long run. Nipper I think is just being lazy. Cats are fast on the sprint, but soon grow bored. Silas' ride looks worse than mine.

~Are you okay Silas?~

~Worst crab I have ever had. Have to trade him in for a new model.~ I show amusement. Of course Nipper read every thought and purposely makes it worse for a moment.

We are soon into the new orchards being planted. Nothing that interests me, but the Di go crazy over some of the fruits the Hu brought with them. I am surprised the Guardians allowed it, but hey, this mud ball could not get much worse than it is now. Now some of the melons. Oh those are good. Layered with raw fish and then wrapped in salted marsh gator tail.

Lose the melon and I am interested. Where do we get these marsh gators? The rest can eat the fish. They used to work as fish handlers.

We 'run' for the rest of the afternoon. I am past sleeping because of the TK, but I need a rest from the jostling. I signal Sam to let me down. Nipper and Silas catch up and Silas immediately slips off to lay near me. Nearly an eighth later Lessa and Pok arrive and White returns to see where we are. He probably scanned first.

He looks at us carefully then decides, !We will rest here till light.! We may be resting, but White goes off somewhere outside our ability to scan him.

~Lessa, what did you learn?~

#!They brought back over a hundred prisoners that the Bugs captured from Hu Eden. The prisoners are unfortunately infected with the young of the Bugs. The Guardians are going to study the grubs by taking them out of the infected and placing them in artificial bodies.!#

~Good idea. Why do the Bugs put their young in off worlders anyway?~

#!He says it is their way of learning the new sentient's ways.

Apparently they learn by reading the thoughts of the host while obtaining nutrients from the blood stream.!#

~Doesn't this harm the host?~

#!Eventually. Mostly it slows them down and makes them less able to work hard, and reproduce. They were dying out. Too few are born to continue. Apparently the Guardian Pushy Paws, whom I have met, says that the ants are the real problem. The Bugs are doing the best they can with the invaders that keep coming to their world.!#

~Weren't they going to destroy Paradise II?~

#!That was the plan. Still not resolved.!#

“Are Guardians still being hunted?”

+Speaking of hunting, is anyone hungry?+ Fa and Nipper return with small game. Only thing left at present. And they are doing a number on the roots of everything that survived. Catching them is a duty for all of us. Away from the ocean I am more or less useless though.

Have you even tried? Silas has no trouble. He sticks his arm down a squeaker hole and scoops them up.

~Really?~

~Easy to do, taste horrible, especially raw. Have to be very hungry to appreciate.~

The rest eat the small ones retrieved. Silas and I do without. Not that hungry yet. I am so sore from the ride it is just as well. I curl up to rest and think. Silas curls up next to me. It has been a long time since I was with someone of my own kind.

Silas hands me, ~Have you seen the moon yet?~

~Too many clouds still. We only see the sun occasionally fortunately. We will have to build shades before too long.~

~That is not what I meant.~

~Oh, that. No, I was too much into my work to ever mate. There was one fem, but my work is normally at night and hers was during the day. We never bonded well enough to commit. When she finally got tired of waiting, she went with someone else. You are still young though.~

~I worked on a fishing boat. Pok worked in the processing plant for the catch we brought in. We were only named a little over a year ago. Now, I see we will never watch the moon. Only the Cat Guardians still do.~

~Nipper looks to be a pretty old Cat. Wonder how many are his kits?~

~He was in the secret service for the Matriarch. We were recruited against our will to help him and all of us ended up trapped on Paradise II. We make a good team though. Better than any of us would be alone.~

~I was first matched with Fa and Sam sort of happened. Fa is a strange. One of the last of her kind. Very curious and picks up languages very quickly. She figures out sky lights as she calls them almost intuitively. She noticed an asteroid coming towards Ba Eden in time to avert it with the Guardian Barbara's help. That was quite a ride.~

~Best if we get some rest if tomorrow we are to ride Cat and Hu again.~ I affirm.

At first light White returns.

!I have food for the two Ceph, which the rest of you neglected. Shame on you. A team is only as good as it's weakest members.!

He glares at the Cat and Fa, !You are both good hunters. There are several streams nearby with fish in them.!

^Oh please no more fish. That is all I have had to eat for a year.^

!THEY WEREN'T FOR YOU.!

!I should make you carry them again today. You too Pok.!

He goes around a group of nearly dead trees and returns with a cart.

!Instead, you can take turns pulling it. We go.!

Silas and I slowly climb on top of the cart and balance ourselves as best we can, remaining blank.

Nipper, Fa and Sam look at each other. Trying to figure out who pulls first.

+I will. I did not carry anyone yesterday.+

White attaches a harness for Fa to hold onto. The cart has an interesting construction. Unlike the Hu carts, this one can travel over rough terrain. We make better time than yesterday. Fa does most of the pulling. I feel sorry for her. I am sure she was talked into not fishing by Nipper. Sam, being the higher TK may have let it go to see what we would do. She is always testing us at the command of a higher up. Eventually she will resist. I can feel it increasing in pressure.

When we stop at last light, both Silas and I go on the hunt as well. Instead of putting my arm into a strange hole though I make a small portal and push the portal along the inside to scoop up the residents to the outside, where Silas grabs them and places them in a utility sack we all carry. This method works so well that we soon have more than we can carry.

~Now what?~

~We could make several trips.~

~They are already trying to eat their way out. These sacks will not hold together long.~

White appears with the cart. I should have guessed he would be

watching.

!I also did not hunt last night. Raps, you two have been busy. Still alive too. I am impressed. Load them up and climb aboard.!

Somehow we get most of them back to the camp.

When we arrive there is a feast of fish awaiting us. Most of it raw even.

Too dark to show, White announces us.

!Looks like we have enough for everyone tonight.! He swings the sacks we filled to the ground next to them.

^You are good at this Guardian White.^

!Corrections two. I am not a Guardian, only a higher level and much older and more experienced TK than you. Second, I did not catch them. You three have been outdone by Silas and Xot.!

I hand Nipper, ~Tell the others thanks for the fish. I am going to start now if that is acceptable.~

Nipper reaches down and with his teeth picks up a bowl and places it before me. He gets another one and places it before Silas. Pok and Fa bring the fish and place some of each type in each bowl.

Fa speaks, ^We are sorry for neglecting you last night. It was selfish of us to play this game. We did not realize that being carried was so painful. It was false thinking to assume you did not work yesterday.^ Ah, so that was the problem.

I hand Fa, ~Thank you for understanding. Riding Sam for a short time is sometimes necessary. It is never comfortable. Riding all day should not be repeated.~

+Understood.+

~Please feast on the small ones.~

+Fish is good too and very plentiful.+ I don't tell her that freshwater fish are not as tasty. Silas and I will need a source of salt soon to balance out the lack. Maybe White can help on this. Wish atomic changing was lower on the Ceph scale. Maybe Sam is high enough now?

I never learned what they did with the small ones. They were gone by first light. White is awake and active however.

!Gather around.! We gather apprehensively. Been fooled too many times by the 'learning experiences' they dream up.

!I would imagine you are wondering why we are out here in the wild. Well too bad.! He growls at us. Wait for it guys. We stay attentive, but otherwise show no emotion. One thing we can do as a team at least. Hope they taught us more than how to put up with teachers.

!No fun I see. Maybe after a nice long run . . .! We still remain

emotionless.

!Fine. Some groups are a bit resistant to being relocated.!

^If they think they can do it on their own, why not? They are sentients and allowed to make their own decisions are they not?^ Fa of course.

!Normally that would be true, but look around you. How much in the way of resources do you see? Not everyone can live on a few fish and small ones. With the surviving population even they will be in short supply soon.!

So, how are they doing it then? Nipper knows or suspects something.

!They take from others of course. The healthy are made into slaves and slowly starved to death and then eaten by the slaves remaining or newly acquired.!

They learned that from the Hu. He sneers.

!I am afraid that all sens have something of this talent in their histories. These are hard times and sens will do desperate things. We need to provide an alternative, not a confrontation.!

Lessa is affirming. I don't think anyone wants a confrontation.

!The pack is now over several hundred, armed, hungry, nasty oh and dangerous.!

^Ah, what level did you say you were?^

He laughs, definitely a Hu trait, !I will not being doing this alone. Come.!

He takes off running. Of course.

The two of us are quickly packed into the cart and Nipper takes a turn pulling it, with Fa pushing from behind. Strange to see a bird and a cat working cooperatively and a Di laughing. Strange times indeed.

White stops us before too long and motions us to spread out along a ridge. It is soon obvious why. Before us is a day camp for a large group on the move. The lack of food alone would necessitate this. Probably patrols out looking for anything they can find. How long before they find us or our tracks? Even the well designed cart leaves some obvious marks.

We will follow them for a day to see how they operate. Watch closely, but do not be seen. Use any skills and talents you have. This is not a game. Lives can be lost. Will be lost. Hiding what we are will help no one.

What do we do if found? Nipper looks apprehensive.

The world is not ideal. Use your best judgment. Nasty indeed.

I have seen Matriarch's work of course. One of the reasons I moved to the Ba Eden capital, to get away from her influence. The silence of the observatory was much preferred. Now it looks like I am back into the

mess.

+Xot, this worries me. I did not sign up to become a bully. To become a warrior.+

~Remember he said we are not here for confrontation, but to provide an alternative. We have to figure out what that alternative should be.~

+I have been a slave. I would set them free.+

~To go where? To starve? We need food more than anything. This is all about food.~

+There are too many. Remember our experience of Hell? Is this another test? A test of futility, of a no win situation?+

~It looks that way. Watch them. They are well trained from much practice. See how one can watch many. Their spirit is broken.~

+Ah, but watch how they also watch each other. I suspect there is a thin line between oppressor and oppressed. Their search for food must be failing.+

~Back to the problem of food. No doubt White could make what is needed.~

+With so many that would be all he would be doing for the rest of eternity.+

~We need to get them to the City. There they can be fed. There they can find peace and honest work.~

+With so many well armed, they are likely to try to loot and pillage the City instead of embrace it.+

~I think you are right.~ That would be fun to see them try.

We need to convince them that what awaits them there is more powerful than they are. Nipper walks past us and straight into their camp. He is insane!

His thoughts recede, but we still see, *Ho! What have we here, such skinny lizards. No worth in eating. Sigh, guess I will have to look for game elsewhere. Maybe I will go back to the City. They have lots of juicy ones to feast on there.*

He then sits in the middle of the field and burps and proceeds to wash himself.

A Di that obviously has never met a Cat before comes forward with a metal get. A stone strikes him on the back of the head. He turns his back on Nipper. Really stupid. Nipper looks up, but then goes back to cleaning.

~Did you do that?~

+Not me. Maybe Pok or Silas?+ Makes sense.

When the Di turns around again to face Nipper, Nipper has sprung and pins the Di to the ground to be breathing on his face.

Faintly we see his thoughts, *Too skinny too. Are there not any fat enough to please my tongue.* He opens his mouth. *Or teeth.* He licks his lips drooling on the poor Di.

By this time, three more surround him with lances pointed at him. Not so sure of themselves. They wait.

Finally their leader comes forth. He is definitely fat. Nipper starts to purr loudly. Disgusting.

!I have never had Cat. Did not know there were any about these parts. Take him.! The leader turns to go. Nipper pops to be in front of the fat one, leaving the other three staring at each other in disbelief.

!Well at least you are not stupid enough to attack me directly.!

I would not want to ruin the meat. He licks his lips again.

!You seem unconcerned that I have hundreds to your one. Or are you blind?!

I would have your manhood before they came even close. Do you really think your lizards could catch me?

!Many seek my position. To where would you run?!

He looks at the leader as if he is the stupid one, *The City of course, three days from here.* More like a full eight at the pace of this group.

Pok comes out into the field without a care in the world. Silas comes next. The leader is confused.

!What the egg is a soft one doing here? Forget where the ocean is?! He ignores Pok. Probably because he does not see him as threat. He would not know much about the Ceph to be absolutely sure. Ceph were rare in the south and none inland where the Di preferred. Still, leaders learn not to take chances.

They stop near Nipper and try and look hungrily at the fat one.

+Should we?+

~Hold back as a reserve. I want to see what they have planned. Nipper will call us if needed.~ I hope.

Lessa comes up to us with Sam.

“The pit. How well I remember that.” I look closely. There are thousands of small stones within easy TK reach. I show amusement.

#!Anyone see White?!# None have.

You might want to know that they are norms. Well, as much as any Cat can be considered a norm.

+Flight school if we don't help them.+

~Shield them. Sam and I will provide defense. Lessa act as lookout. I don't want any surprises.~

+What kind of weapons are they likely to have? So far I only scan

sharp ceram and metal hand helds.+

#!There are small ballista at the edges of the trees, but they are not occupied or aimed yet. They were not expecting a confrontation here.!#

~Good, let me know if they change their minds. I am sure the three of them show little threat to this group yet.~

!Tell me more of this City.!

Do you speak Ceph or Ba?

!I let my servants handle the slaves. Can you teach me this mind speak you use?! He has motioned to have others surround the three.

Fa concentrates on her shielding as I loosen stones in preparation. She brushes against me trying to shift position. I think nothing of it until I feel her shield fail.

~Fa, your shield.~ No response.

I make a soft squawk.

+Sorry. When I touched you I saw your entire life unfold before me.+

~You are 'lan?~

You are chosen. I saw the pulse in the psiotics. Feels like White. At least he is watching us.

+What does this mean?+

“It means you are the record keeper for your people.” She pauses. “But the gift can have other uses.”

+I remember the story of Ci'lan. She was much younger than I am when she first manifested.+

And the first Guardians have had twenty five million years of experience since then.

#!We need to focus on here and now. Our new friends need us.!#

Fat one shifts back and forth, !I am the leader here. I decide if we go to the city or not. What you tell me does not interest me. Why should it? Here I have everything, servants, food, females even. In a city I would not have such freedom.!

I know the ways of leaders. You must always worry about those around you. Many plot to take your position. Even those close to you. At least in the City you may survive.

!You see minds as well as speak to them. You would be an asset. Join me and you will live.!

And my companions?

!They will make a nice snack! He shows amusement.

Even the small one could have your position. I would not assume they are food so easily.

The Di shows amusement, !Not possible. Look at my necklace. See

how many challenges I have won.!

I know how you won those challenges. You cheated. Do you want me to tell everyone how? We know how to cheat as well.

~The Di is preparing for battle. Get ready. Notice how he is trying to deceive them with distractions by fluffing his head feathers. I have seen them in the battle pits. Ruthless.~

+I need to be down there.+

#!Where is Sam?!#

I look around. I thought she was with us. Scanning finds her on the other side of the clearing among the slave Hu. She is fast and quiet.

~Over there. Isn't that her?~

#!This is not coordinated. Lack of communication will mean failure.!

#

There goes Fa. Where did she get the amp stick? I feel a bulge and a sphere version appears next to me. I immediately grasp it.

~Which group should we help?~ Lessa is the only one left with me. She has a short staff with an interesting convoluted twists at the top. An amp for Dia. We have only had a few sessions of practice with them.

#!There are no Dia or Ceph slaves. We would not fit in.!

~Sam is waving to us.~

#!Quick, open a portal from there to here. She wants to get the slaves out of the way.!

I check down hill from us. Clearly out of sight of the Di bullies. I open the portal on this side to connect with one near Sam, but hidden behind the tents. Off by a meter. I need more practice. She directs them to slowly make their way there and they soon appear behind me in the field. Lessa goes down to greet them and reassure them.

Fa in the meantime has casually walked up to the group. What is she planning? The shield is intact at least. Crab! An alarm has been raised. Someone noticed the portal near Sam. She throws off her cowl and raises her walking stick. It is clear that our recent lessons with the amps are being put to the test. I just hope no one gets hurt. A lot of power here.

Sam guards the portal as the last of the slaves makes their way in. The guards are frozen in place. They can scream, but can't move to prevent them.

Looks like your army is afraid to act even against your servants. I hope you fight better than they do. No honor in a quick kill.

Why did he have to provoke the leader? I close the portal as Sam enters it. I soon hear her behind me.

"The slaves are always caught in the middle and suffer the most

harm."

~No hostages now at least.~ To complete her thought.

~More Di have gathered around the leader. They outnumber our group three to one. The leader has to wonder how many more are up on this ridge though. No enemy shows all of its strength.~

"They will try to outflank us. Oh shit! They just cut off the tails of the slave guards. Thought they were cowards is my guess. That is the most shameful thing that can happen to a Di."

~On our right!~ Three Di with light armor are trying to sneak up on us. I snap their swords and shields with small portals and Sam TKs the pieces some distance away and then grabs all three to rise into the air.

"I could push them all the way to the others"

~You don't have to. Just raise them into the air so the leader and his group can see them. It should get their attention.~

"Well, I could also raise their leader into the air."

~If you bring shame to the leader then we will have war.~

!You can have the servants if you wish. More trouble than they are worth anyway.! He is playing like it means nothing to him. He has to be wondering if this is a trick or real. The ones up in the air are really too far away to see clearly. Could be some kind of rope trick. There are no obvious trees around able to hold anyone's weight, much less a full size Di warrior. They even outweigh Sam.

#!Now what? If we had coordinated this we would know what to do.!#

#

~We can't always depend on everything happening as we plan Lessa. Think of this as a good exercise for the unexpected.~

#!We are not taught to plan for the unexpected.!#

Sam laughs loudly, "What do you think all of that training they have been putting us through was?" Lessa pauses to think about that. I have never seen her that surprised before.

#!We have them surprised and wondering. Too much and they will be afraid and scatter. We need them together and cooperating.!#

~Agreed.~ Sam nods, but is smiling. Then she looks concerned.

"What is Fa doing?"

I turn to look. Too many distractions. We should have been watching the entire time.

#!It looks like she is walking up to each of the guards to gently touch them. They are frozen wondering what this means. None have heard of or seen a Ku before.!#

~She is approaching the leader and talking to him too low to hear.~

She is asking permission to confer a blessing on him. Superstition.
You should know Nipper. Actually I have to admit we Ceph are so encumbered as well. So much seems to depend on luck.

~Wait, she is reading them! Of course. Excellent idea!~

“I’ll be, of course, good idea. We will have to get used to calling her Fa’lan from now on. Good for her. I am going down there.”

~If would be better if Lessa and I went down, not you. You need to stay with the slaves. If left alone they will panic.~

#!There is hope for you yet professor!#!

~Professor? Where did you see that old word?~ I rise into the air. I am not going to be carried any more.

#!Just make a portal next to the others and be done with it!#! She looks annoyed. When did I lose leadership position?

I make the portal and we go through to arrive near Nipper.

!How many are there?!

How many do you need to convince you to come with us back to the City?

He stamps his feet and raises his long knife in protest.

Fa speaks to him, !Is that the proper stance for a musician of your renown?! Her Di is excellent I think. Di sounds are still hard for me. Easier to hear the Ba.

She turns to the others, !Cook, craftswoman, carpenter, potter, master builder. Amazing collection you have and what a waste as guards. There is room for each of your talents in the City. You would be most welcome indeed!!

They relax to consider this. The leader notices too and gets more upset.

!Out here we are free! We can do anything we want. If you want to carve a tree go ahead. There are millions to choose from. No one tells you what to carve, what to bake, what to construct. We are free! Is that not worth any price?!

Fa answers, !When was the last time you baked a melon in grenass sauce? When was the last time you build a house for a family with each stone matching in perfect harmony?! She turns to the leader, !When was the last time you played the Illis March of the Raptor Defeat? Beautiful piece. Please come with us so others may hear and be awed by your skills.!

She starts to hum the piece. Soon others start as well. Then they start singing. Di music is an acquired taste, but I have to give Fa’lan credit for her thinking on this.

Which way to the City? A Cat who has lost his sense of direction?

~We came from up over the ridge.~ Silas shows.

~We can't go that way. The slaves are there. We need to keep them separate.~

#!Nipper, go help Sam.!#

Sounds like work to me.

#!Think of all the admiration you will receive from the grateful ones.!

I try not to show amusement at the obvious manipulation.

Tail held high Nipper bounds up the ridge to join Sam.

Silas hands me, ~Pok and I are norm and cannot do anything that will fool them.~

I hand him back, ~Lessa and I will lift you with our ability. It will appear as if you are doing it yourself.~

Silas hands Pok to be ready. Fa starts to lead the group. We let the leader go next after bowing to him. That was all it took.

Acknowledgment. He struts proudly singing now at full volume. We wait until several layers of Di pass us and then Lessa and I gently lift all of us. We are careful to stay below the height of the surrounding Di.

Pok hands me, ~How far can you make a portal?~

~Only about a kilometer at the moment. Level three.~

Silas shows openly, ~Strange that every sentient species has a different order to the abilities.~

#!Fortunately for us. Together we are stronger because of it.!#

Be ready. We will be tested soon. There is a bad storm coming. Best find shelter. Or make it. We have roughly a hundred and fifty sentients counting the slaves. Which we can't show to the ones we are among. That makes things much more difficult.

Storms have not been nice here. I am new to Di Eden, but from what I have seen from others there have been many more destructive storms than from before the comet. I look around us. Most of the trees would not shelter a sand fly. Everything is rotting fast. Lots of mushrooms and fungi everywhere. Tasty, but not much food value. The Hu have to be careful though. Many are poisonous to them. There is so much mud it is hard to determine what might have been underneath. It is no wonder that they have been eating the slaves when they die.

~What are we going to feed them? None of us are able to make food. Even we can die from starvation.~ Everyone shows concern.

Silas asks, ~Can't Guardian White make food?~

~He has not been helping much. We can't depend on him making food. A lot of the training we experience is in the form of tests like this.

We have done good so far. No one has died, though a few have lost tails. Let's hope it does not get worse.~

#!It is getting dark and we are not near night. The storm is coming. Even the Di notice.!# She breaks off from the rest and goes up to the leader. That leaves me with Pok, Silas and myself. I adjust and hope the others do not notice. The singing has quieted down at least.

She comes back a moment later and tells us, #!It was good to ask the leader what to do. It gives him respect. And they have had to deal with this before. Normally they would make the slaves do the heavy work. We need to dig shelter on the far side of a hill from the storm. Too low and we will be flooded. Too high and we will run into stone quickly and not make them deep enough.!#

~We can carve stone easily.~

#!They don't know that. Best if we spread out and help those who run into difficulty. I will tell Fa.!#

^But what can we do?^

#!We need food other than the slaves.!#

~Small ones are not going to be enough this time.~

^I doubt that Nipper will find enough fish for the hundred either, though anything they get must be more than they are accustomed to.^

The leader brings us to a stop and the digging begins. Fa is amazing. She knows just who to ask to help with each task. How does she keep so many talents in her head at once?

Carpenters help shore up the pits which have fairly extensive overhangs. The rain begins before we finish, but rain is something everyone on Di Eden is intimately familiar with by now. What little clothing the Hu wear now rots. The mud supplies the only cover for the rest of us.

The rain comes down now in massive quantities. This is going to ruin my salt balance. Then the wind starts. Our shelters are soon ruined. Even with TK I cannot hold them all. Just too strong. Fa seems unconcerned. Lessa is falling apart again.

^We need to find White. I will die soon because of the loss of heat. I am the smallest, lightest one.^

I scan around us. It is so dark I can't use sight. Without thinking I scan below us as well. I don't know why I did that. Ceph are handicapped just like the Hu, we tend to see in two dimensions. Benthic origins. We can swim of course, but only do so when in the ocean and that is only the once when we mate. It is large enough, but without light will it work?

~There are caves below us. I can open a portal to the main chamber. It

should hold all of us. I can leave a small portal open to provide air.~
Pok's teeth are making a strange sound. I feel him. He is very cold.

#!We need fire making materials.!#

^No dry wood. Just get us out of the wind and rain. Now please.^

I open the portal. Tastes okay. It would have been bad if it was full of decayed plant material. The sulfide would have killed us. Fa tells the leader who takes over.

!Listen, comes this way. Come towards the sound of my voice. We are going into a cave for shelter. Hope the servants all die of exposure for abandoning us.! Screeches of affirmation are heard.

We get everyone in quickly. Even full grown Di get cold. It is warmer inside if only from the lack of wind. The body heat from everyone should also raise the temperature of the chamber. The ground is not flat, but a weak enough slope that everyone can rest. I make the portal smaller. Fortunately they are largely self maintaining as long as nothing messes with it. Sort of like soap bubbles. Flying debris does get it a few times and I have to start a new one. At least the air will not go bad instantly. Even through the small portal I can hear the storm. I don't remember anything that intense before. Glad we are down here. I figure we must be close to a hundred and fifty meters below the surface.

There is no way to keep track of time. None of has any food either. I wait until I can't hear the storm any longer and then expand the portal. It is starting to get light on the horizon.

Fa is next to me and rushes ahead of me once the portal is big enough.

!The horizon is clear. I can see sky.! Others pass to get out. We empty nearly as fast as we entered.

When I get out I see the sky. There are a few clouds in the distance, but mostly it is grey green pre dawn sky. The landscape is something else. What few trees were standing are missing. Nothing but splinters.

~What happened?~ Silas asks me from behind me.

~I don't know. I have never seen anything like this. We were at the City for months and never saw anything like this on our field trips.~

#!Where are the trees?!#

+Over there. I see the others.+ They are some distance away. They look as stunned as we are, walking around looking at everything, or the lack of. Fa runs over to show with them. Sam sees her and meets her part way. We need to keep these two groups separate for the moment any way.

Too late. The leader has seen them and comments, !How did they survive?!

Lessa answers, !Probably the same we did. This place is heavy with

caves under us. Maybe they even found an entrance.!

Pok comes out last. Someone has given him a blanket. He looks around and then sees the sky. He just keeps staring at it.

#!Is he going to be well?!#

~I don't know. He was almost dead cold. Being near death does something to you.~

#!Fa is returning.!# I look towards her and wait.

~Did they find a cave too?~

+Nope. They dug shelters, only they did it better than our group. Their shelters did not collapse. I think they may have made a mistake starving the ones with the most knowledge on how to live outside. Most of ours must be city sens.+ That would be consistent.

#!What caused the destruction and how did the others survive?!#

+Sam says it was something called a hurricane. A massive spiral weather pattern. It was because everything was so weak from rot that this much happened. The others did a much better job on their shelters. Sam helped and Nipper supervised.+

I show amusement. I can imagine Nipper's supervision. ~I think we need more practice. I could have carved better shelters with DS.~

#!And I will TK.!#

^We are alive. That is the important thing. Nipper did not find the caves, you did. Remember that.^

#!And he clearly had experience with caves.!#

^Caves with portals still upset me. Never want to end up on Paradise II again.^

~Sorry.~

^Better to be alive.^ He walks off towards Silas who is investigating something in the ground.

~Let's get this group home.~

#!I am beginning to understand that Hu concept.!#

The leader asks, !If you two are done talking in your strange language and flashing stuff could you point us in the direction of this City of yours? We owe you our lives. Never would have made it on our own.! I do not show him what the slaves did on their own. Makes a difference when they are working for their own survival instead of the greed of these. At the City there are no favorites. New comers earn their rank by how hard they work, not how hard they work others.

We hear Pok suddenly shriek. Can't miss a Ba shriek. Hurts. I look towards the sound as does everyone else. He holds something in his hand. I go over towards him. I don't recognize it.

Silas comments after waving an arm over it, ~Looks and tastes like Ba bread.~

~Where did that come from?~

#!Looks like Pok has seen a silugi.!# A what?

^I picked up the only large piece of wood left in the area. Silas noticed it earlier. I was thinking about how hungry I was and how I missed my muti's sweet bug bread. Then this.^ He points at the bread.

+Taste it?+

^What did she say?^

Silas says, ~Taste it.~ He tentatively sniffs it. Then he breaks off a piece.

^Has the right smell and texture.^

Fa is now Fa'lan, Pok who was norm is now holding Ba bread. I was able to find the caves when I normally would not even try to see through that much rock. I reach out with my mind. About ten times further than before. When did it happen and why haven't I noticed before?

~We have all been upgraded. Silas, try forming a portal. Just a small one.~ I demonstrate making one about ten centimeters in diameter.

~I don't know how.~ He flashes frustration.

Nipper suddenly pops in. Way past his previous distance. He jumps into the air and pops out again. A loud pop occurs near us and Silas goes blank. He got it.

I look towards Lessa. She stares at me.

#!Me too?!#

~Probably. Let's just hope none of the bullies were caught in it.~

I am much better in my control than that.

~I want to know why he did not up us before the wind. It would have helped.~

#!A reward for good behavior?!# Maybe. At least no one has died yet.

^Could also be that we will need the extra abilities soon. Wait, didn't you say Fa is now something called 'lan? That was before the storm.^

Now that Fa is Fa'lan. I wonder if we will ever get to return to our far seers? If Silver and the others are twenty five million years old I guess anything is possible. They did warn us that we can never go home. Maybe this is what they meant.

Considering how large a group we have, we make good time. It will probably only take twice as long to get back as it did to get to them. White comes through with food at least. Our test was to get them moving, not to get them to the City without help. Though I do complain about it taking nearly the entire day before he comes through with the chocolate

we usually get after an up level.

#!Did you notice that most of the slaves were Hu and most of the bullies are Di?!#

~Hard to miss.~

^Hanging from high places in the cave has some advantages. The slaves are all followers of Saint Silver. The bullies are followers of Saint White.^

~How does White feel about being among them?~

^Haven't you noticed that he has dulled his color to nearly gray? I guess White is a common enough name that he not seen because of that. I have also noticed that he never performs any TK stuff in front of any of them.^

~Could just be because of Silver being Hu, at least originally, and White being Di obviously. To each their own.~ My thought too Silas. Why do Ceph revere Saint Rooi? Same reason. And when resources get scarce the strongest usually win battles if the tech is equal, and the smartest survive better if the environment is equal and groups are isolated from each other. Of course groups can quickly break into smaller groups as a way of reducing numbers. There is always an us and them. Especially if Hu are involved, though from what I read in the library of history, all sens have some sea monsters in their seas.

~I wondered why we always bring the food in from outside camp, as if we have found it some how. Food ration bars just laying around this muck?~

I will take ration bars over starving. Nipper has popped in. Sam is with him.

~How are things at the other camp?~

“Starved Hu are not as fast as fed Di, but are doing okay. About a day behind this group. Personally I can hardly wait to get back to eating Issis and Mik's latest creation.”

~I like their cooking.~ Bugs are good for you too.

“If I was meant to eat bugs I would have been born Ba or Ceph apparently.” She laughs. I have seen her eat large quantities, so this is more teasing. Another Hu habit. In some ways it is amazing that we get along as well as we do. Far worse than house mates. Stress the situation though and this is what you get.

~Do you know where White is now?~

“Sure. He is watching the other camp.” I scan and find them easily. Could not have done that an eight day ago. I sense that Fa is already with him.

~I need to show with him. Ah, hold down the fort.~ I show amusement and Sam laughs again.

Having reasonable TK ability means it is a simple matter to open a portal and walk through to his location.

Several Hu jump when I arrive.

~I scanned first. No one was in danger.~

!I remember being told that you are supposed to be practicing your DS ability as the Hu use it. Now, please go back and retrieve, let's say, Pok, and come back.!

Crabs. So much for efficiency. I have to concentrate to DS instead of portal. I scan ahead to be sure. Then carefully I DS there.

#!Why do you return so quickly?!#

~White made me DS.~

#!Sussi does that kind of thing to me all the time. Can I go back with you? I want to see the inside of DS space again. After each upgrade I hope I will be able to sense it.!

~Sorry. I was told to bring back Pok and I don't want to have to come back yet again on a technicality.~

#!Understood. Pok is helping to feed them.#! She indicates the prep area. I am not sure I like the idea of us 'lower' life forms continuing the misconception that Di are the masters here. Silver is the one who insists on this 'practice' as he calls it. Remain humble and they will not notice or believe what they see. Hard to suppress one's pride though. I want to go back to the observatory so much.

I find Pok in the compost area. Nice name for the latrine. One sens excrement is bad, mix in several species and really makes the air taste bad. He is putting waste food into the pit and covering it with dirt.

~Waste food from ration bars?~

^Yeah, amazing isn't it. This is a bad group. I am not sure we did the right thing saving them. They beat up on each other too.^

~I noticed. And the same ones do the same chores each time. No rotations as required. The leader does light duty sweeping the gather area after it has been done by three others.~ He affirms.

~White wants you. I am to take you there through DS space. Have you traveled that way before?~

^Don't like it. Cold and no air, sort of. Can't breathe anyway.^

~I will make it as quick as I can. I wish I could open a portal, but White said I had to DS.~

^Portals are much better.^

I bring us in close, but away from the Hu. We walk the last few eights

of meters.

!Good, now open a portal and let Pok go back.!

^Thank you. I really wanted to get back to the guano pit.^ Careful Pok, that kind of attitude can get you latrine duty for an eight day. White just shows amusement though. Guess he will leave it to their Guardian mentor.

~Who is Pok's mentor?~

!I have no idea. Pushy Paws brought them in. That was a surprise. She left right away though. They are without a mentor for the moment I think.!

~I have a question.~ White sits. I relax on my shoes.

~The Di are not very grateful about being saved. Their bad habits are upsetting everyone including their own. I have never seen Di behave so badly. Who are these sens? And second, what happens when we get in? We can't hide the Hu and Dia from them forever. What happens when they meet?~

!Aren't you making a lot of assumptions?! He shows amusement and walks away. Assumptions? We are going towards the City. That is where we told everyone we were going. Where are the assumptions?

Sure enough I scan the edges of the City a few eights later. They weathered the storm fine. I would hope so with all the TKs present, and of course all the stone.

White comes up to me just as we sight the City. Level going from this point. Thank goodness we did not have to take the high ridge trail. Hard on a Ceph.

!You understand why we are collecting everyone into these Cities?!

~I am guessing to allow the rest of the planet to heal without the enormous eco pressure of the remaining living sentients. Sort of protected areas in reverse. We practice the same thing on Ceph Eden.~

!And how successful is that practice?!

~Partially. Temporal problems. It works for a time, but increasing population pressure can undo it quickly without enough time to set up proper compensating measures.~

!So you are saying we have limited time to make this work.!

I think about it.

~That would be a logical conclusion.~

!What do you think we ought to do with the bullies? It is their planet and we are the invaders.!

~If we keep them separate they will break protected status very quickly. Definite problems with authority. If we bring them in, they are

likely to cause no end of problems, especially with the former slaves.~

!Unless.! He shows amusement.

~They fear the Hu. Weapons could be used, but they can be taken away and used against the Hu.~

!All weapons?! He is nearly as excited as a Di can get.

~That's why you allowed us to use TK on this trip.~

He shows amusement.

~You can't possibly mean upping all of them?~

!Wait and see.!

Wait and see. He is picking up Hu traits. They love playing that game. Hide and seek I can understand. Great training for hatchlings.

We stop outside the City.

Gather around. Nipper? The former slaves are on the City side well separated from the bullies.

In order to enter the City, you must pass the ones here. Amusement shows on most of them.

!And how are they going to stop us? With their rotten teeth?! Di teeth are more than a match for even perfect Hu teeth. More amusement. So, they have noticed that no one has visible weapons. I don't scan any TKs among them. Well cloaked? They learned fast.

None of the helpers who brought you here will interfere.

Nipper signals all of us to go to one side of the Hu leaving only space between the two groups now. None of the Hu look upset or worried. This makes for confusion on the part of the Di. Intimidation has been their primary means of getting what they want.

Understand that by rights of the Froth Accord, we have the right to dispose of all of you. Killing and eating another sentient is illegal. Enslaving another sentient is illegal. The punishment is death. But we will not do this.

The Di start to move forward.

Did I forget to mention that three of the Hu are now like us? You have seen some of what we can do. They have permission to do whatever is necessary. At any time for the rest of your lives. And your offspring's lives, and theirs, and so on. One step out of place. One nasty remark. One evil look. One ruffled feather and the sentence will be carried out. Have a nice day.

Nipper then walks though the center of the Hu who pet and hug him affectionately. We all proceed to do the same. Hu even hug me. Most Hu are repulsed by the feel of Ceph. Feels kind of good to me though.

They wait out there for several eighths. But everyone gets hungry

eventually. They will be good for awhile at least. Most were good sentients before all this happened. Hard to forget what you have done though. Some will have what the Hu call nightmares and some will not be able to let go of their new persona. They will either leave to the out lands or . . . The dart would be a mercy compared to what the Di do to the bad ones.

#!Xot, do you scan any of the Guardians?!#

Huh? I do a quick scan. They usually do not hide, so that we can find them if we get into trouble.

“Have you two seen Doc, Mandhi or any of them for that matter?”

~We just got here, but neither Lessa nor I can scan them.~

“Strange. That makes White ranking TK. Do you know if he ever told the Di who he was?”

He told them that Guardian White was very disappointed with them. All of the Guardians keep a low profile. The Di thought White was their savior now he is their devil. If Silver were to show up now and back the Hu the Di we brought in would be totally crushed.

Sam laughs, “That's just because they don't know Silver. From what I overheard, the Hu were not without fault. They were real pests. Insisting on maintaining their own culture even when in the minority on a world not their own.”

~Ungrateful. Not wise to mess with someone twice your weight and many times your strength.~

#!Not to mention just as smart. There is a prejudice even in our culture that bigger is dumber. Not so.!#

~Barbara was certainly proof of that. Imagine what the Blue Whale sentients must be like. I would like to meet one of them someday.~

Pok comes running, ^Someone named Issis says we are all to report to the kitchen.^

There goes the rest of the day.

Conclave

“Who set this up anyway?”

We all look around but no one comes forward. I don't really care. I don't want to be here, but as long as I don't put in for a limiter I have to be here. That limiter looks really good right now. I still don't feel right about PII. Did I make the right decision? I really don't know. I just hope if I was wrong we will find out in time. If I am fitted at least I won't know or maybe I would not be a target and I would see everyone else die. Just rewards for not believing me or would I be upset? I am so tired. Who says Guardians don't get stressed.

Mandhi comes up to me, ~How are you?~

“Okay. How are things on Di?”

~A mess. It will be hundreds of years before the sens are settled and thousands at least before the biosphere is even functional. Probably never be the same. But, we are making do. The school is doing great. I heard you met some of the new recruits on PII.~ She must have seen me squirm. ~Sorry, still sore. Tough call. Not sure I could have done it. I hope my lucky charm never puts me into that place.~

“I only saw them for a moment. Still hard to believe. A Cat, a Ba and a Ceph stumble onto an ant construct made from a node on Hu. They really confused me about the Bugs. It is damn hard to read an alien life form. How do we know if they are truthful? Their species could be pathological liars for all we know.”

~I did not read the sphere yet. Rumors are looking like it is those pesky ants we have to worry about. The Bugs were tech two at best?~

“The prisoners were two point six, lower than the Ceph settlement they came from. Means their ancestors were not the builders.”

~You would think that in three hundred years they would catch up.~

“Hu are not Ceph, too few and they digress, not improve.”

~Ceph would also without instructors and spheres. Not so different.~

“The strange thing was that they seemed genuinely concerned for the victims of the ants. They knew they would not be able to sustain the remaining Hu and Ba from Hu-Eden and wanted someone to rescue them. It was the only thing that stayed my hand. They might be victims as well. To what purpose?”

“May we join this conversation?” Pushy Paws and Edwin.

~Of course. Have you seen the pests anywhere?~

Pushy playfully says, “Oh you mean Silver, Rooi and Jesus? Have not

arrived yet. Aren't they usually late for everything. Don't expect them for another day or two."

I add, "You mean after we think we have come to some conclusion, which they will overturn."

~Yeah, that sounds right.~ We all show amusement.

"Good to see you laugh Mei." Doc. Aaaagh! He notices my concern and laughs again, "Don't worry. I meant that as a friend. Out of the shrink business. It is actually more fun to let everything be a surprise, behavior wise." I relax. Don't need someone in my head right now.

"Edwin says we have potentially a much bigger problem than the ants."

~Not your froth theory again.~ He nods.

"What froth theory?" I ask.

"Please don't get him started."

Ed looks pissed, "Told you this was a waste of time." He humphs off.

Now Pushy is pissed, "You SOBs. Someone has something important to say, a certified level one Guardian and you brush him off even before you have heard him?"

~We have all heard the 'theory' for years. The froth is important for the maintenance of the psiotic balance.~ Mandhi leaves. Doc shrugs and leaves.

Pushy looks at me. "You too?"

"I have not heard the theory. Let's find Ed. I want to know. If it helps explain PII, then I am all for it."

"Oh, it does and much more." A sly smile appears on her face. Hope I don't blow this one as well. Can I blame this on parents who pushed constantly for me to overachieve? Probably true of anyone in any space program at the time. Not exclusively a Chinese thing.

"I have another question. When I came in with Rachael, the place looked like it had just been through a large meteor shower. All of our structures here were damaged and needed repair."

"The Hilton needed repair?" She laughs. It really is minimal. "We had an assault on Mars and Luna of thousands of meteors. I made the judgment call it was better to send them here than let them hit Hu Eden."

"Good call. The remaining Magmotics are probably appreciative of the extra mass, little that it is." Probably enjoyed the heat from the strikes more than the mass. To each their own.

I ask, "Where are we going? No place to hide. I don't sense him."

"He knows that I believe him. He will leave me a clue." We arrive in some out of the way storage room. Ed's mark is on the door. We each

have one. Most put a backup sphere of their autobiography in it. I am surprised this room was not hurt by the strike. The place was under vacuum when I arrived. Anything volatile would be gone. My room demolished. That gave me the creeps.

Warming up, smells are starting to arise. Happens most times we come here. Leftover crumbs from meals rushed. Not everyone cleans up as they should. I abhor messy people. No reason for it here.

I watch as she pokes around in the boxes of papers and miscellaneous equipment. This room is particularly messy. Normally we would not be allowed in it and Pushy is taking a risk by breaking that trust. I see the source of the smells. There is an old style alcohol lamp with fluid in it on the disorganized desk. The cap is off and I smell an ethanol methanol mix. Denatured. Surprised he paid that much attention to detail. There is a simple light microscope, level four tech at best. Why?

Pushy looks at the microscope carefully, even looking through it. Then she takes the slide off the stage and looks at it carefully.

“I have it.” She announces. “Ready for travel?”

“What about the meeting?”

“Ed was the one who called the meeting. Nothing will happen while we are gone.”

“You mean probably nothing ever.” I have become cynical. Only Rachael was with me at the end. Now she is on Luna helping the refugees. She hoped to make it later. I quickly make a note and leave it on the desk. I have to think about it, then write a note in Klingon. Heaven knows she and the others spoke it enough on board. Since I have no idea where we are going I just state it was Ed who called the meeting and to wait for our return.

“Okay, I'm ready.”

We bubble and DS to orbit. I am letting Pushy 'drive' but I approve of her caution. Too many of the others try to do things in one jump and without the bubble backup. That is a good way to end up in solid rock or worse. Macho is stupid.

We DS the froth and end up around an earth far less green on the mainland. Looks different too. The rivers are much deeper. I scan, no topsoil from the lack of plant material. The air is oxygen rich, but there is nothing more than unicellular animals in the waters. Nothing on land, except for a lab on the far side from us.

Come on in. I have been expecting you Pushy. Who is with you?

I announce myself. It is Mei.

Welcome Mei.

We land outside the lab and Pushy dissolves the sphere.

Upon entering I see a duplicate of the desk, microscope and papers. He really does his work this way? Does this explain why the others are suspicious?

We proceed to the lounge area, obviously just cleaned up. I sense dust missed and materials hurriedly hidden behind chairs and under couches. A large ginger Cat is present and greets us.

Welcome. I am Garfield. He looks happy to see us. Tail in the air and purring even. Pushy smiles and gives him a treat. I quickly make something, a piece of yellow tail tuna, raw of course. One thing I picked up from the Japanese. Garfield's eyes go wide and he gently takes the offered treat from my hand.

"I am afraid you have spoiled him. Welcome." Ed comes in and shakes our hands. Very old fashioned and polite. I may retire here. Very far away from the others.

"Ed called the meeting because of what I told him about Paradise."

"The ants." She nods.

He says, "It was the last piece of the puzzle. Well, nearly the last. We still have three hundred Cats to deal with. I am still stumped by that one. I agree with Pushy Paws that these are the missing TKs. But I have not figured out how to bring them out of whatever state they are in.

I do know that if we don't restart the froth we are in very big trouble. The entire universe is in trouble."

"Wait a moment. Where did this come from? I have been out of town and have heard none of this. When I left the froth was evil, killer of millions of TKs, led by the Bugs who used it for their own gain and means of reproduction."

"That is what most of the Guardians still think."

"Ed's theories have not been going over very well."

"I am not surprised. However I am not in position to object. I am not exactly on the hot list anymore. You noticed how everyone tends to avoid me now?"

Pushy nods, "It was the logical conclusion based on the previous reasoning. But if that is the case they would be mad at you for not carrying through and they are not. They seem to be judging you for going as far as you did and nearly going through with it. Does that make any sense?"

That's because you monkeys can never make a decision. All chatter. If you slept more you would understand and be able to make use of the higher consciousness states.

“What has you been reading lately?” I look straight at Garfield.
The Fourth Zen Patriarch. Even you have to acknowledge the wisdom of your own teachers. He sticks his nose into the air with great superiority.

“Gee, I thought you would be more likely to quote Owa Moosa.” Ed smiles.

I use sources you would understand. I must come down to your level to be able to instruct.

I play along, “Oh great master. We seek your assistance in the universe shattering puzzle.”

Monkeys make a puzzle out of the simplest quest. If the 'Bugs' were all killed on Paradise over three hundred years ago, which Paws has confirmed, then how did they harm the level four Guardians recently?

“That's because we felt that all of the Bugs were not on Paradise. That there were still trillions of them throughout the universe. Only the oldest nearly dead anyway ones were left behind. Or maybe they volunteered for the great sacrifice.”

Trillions? Garfield's eyes go wide and he suddenly pops out.

“Oh Great Zen Scardy Cat.” We all laugh.

Ed asks, “Has anyone seen a live Bug since Paradise?”

Pushy sighs, “No one has, but that was explained by their being high level TKs with the ability to assume different forms. How would anyone know? They were even assumed to be stationed at every sentient system watching and waiting. Gathering enough TKs for the next Froth event.”

“Sounds more like a ghost story,” I say.

“We wanted to believe in an evil one in the universe so badly that we invented one.”

“Weren't the 'thn enough for anyone? Speaking of which, where are they? If we did not kill the bugs on PII, we should be relieved of our anathema curse.”

“Maybe they don't believe yet we have quit the idea. They are patient and willing to wait a long time.”

“True.”

Ed adds, “Or maybe the anathema was not because of PII, but rather because of our disruption of the Froth event.”

“Okay, so why do you believe that the froth is a good thing?”

“You remember the Rooi projection?” A Rooi sphere appears before us.

“Of course, we use them for navigation on the Enterprise.” I light up Paradise I and II. “You can see how close they are to each other in the

projection. It took the Blu months to do the math to tell us where in the universe it was physically.” Also took us months to get the Enterprise there. That really pissed me. Of course it may have saved their lives.

“This one is different. It is arranged as to psiotic level. All the Paradises are in the center, not at the surface as you have placed them.” The yellow lights move to the center. “Now we will color the rest as to their psiotic level. Black for the totally dead worlds.” A core in the center turns black and reaches out most of the way. The Ps are still at the very center. “Brown for the minimal life worlds.” A thin layer appears on top of the black core. “And finally the green worlds. The greens can be further shaded as to degree of life complexity.” The brightest green is at the very surface. “Here is Hu Eden.” A dot on the surface.

“Definitely not the center of the universe.”

“In either projection. Sorry.” Ed adds.

“Get to the end. I am not feeling sociable lately.”

Pushy blurts out, “Oh come on. Ask why the gradient?”

“Some worlds are stone and vacuum. What's the problem. This projection is artificial anyway. If you sort the available planets, this is what you get.” Ed and Pushy are smiling.

“Wait, where are the Mirrors?” Nothing changes. I look confused.

“They are the same location as the Ps.”

“But that does not make sense. The Mirrors are obviously black worlds and the Paradises were greens of indeterminate level. We never were able to find traces of sentients having evolved on Paradise. PII, could have, but we don't have enough evidence there either. Anyway, greens can't exist in the center of the black space. They should be at the outer edge with the other greens. The Rooi projection show the Mirrors and Paradises at opposite poles.”

“This is not the Rooi projection. This is our projection.” Ours?

“This does not explain why the Paradises are at the center.”

“No, it does not. Nor does it explain the gradient. Think about characteristics of the froth event. I great deal of psiotic energy is needed. Where does it come from? And where does it all go afterwards?”

Ed continues, “What if we were to start with everything equal, but the froth generators at the center.” The display resets to a brown color.

“So if the psiotic 'power' was evenly distributed it would all be brown worlds.”

“Very low brown worlds. Basically a soup of complex chemical reactions, but you would be hard pressed to see it as life as we understand it.”

“No chance of sentience.”

“None.”

“Now we start the froth engine. Watch what happens.”

The brown worlds closest to the Mirror Paradises get blacker and blacker. The ones furthest out are affected least. Then the froth happens. The front scrubs even more psiotic energy from the blacks near the center and concentrates the psiotic energy at the expanding front. When the front reaches the edge of the sphere it slows and subsides, leaving most of the energy at the edge of the sphere.

“So what happens when the froth does not happen?”

The animation continues. The psiotic energy slowly dissipates to low brown again.

“So without the froth everything reduces to a nice even low brown existence.”

“Precisely.”

“And we have proof. It is already happening. The brown worlds are getting greener. The black worlds are starting on the way to life complexity.”

“And the green worlds?”

“It is taking longer there, but even after three hundred years since the froth that should have happened there is a barely noticeable effect. If allowed to continue the green worlds will devolve. Probably not noticed in one life time, but over generations, oh yeah. Dumbville.”

“And it is already happening. Even we will be affected eventually.”

“How?”

“Our abilities will become degraded, as will our intelligence.”

“Won't that take something more than thirty five million years? That is how long the froth takes to propagate and I have heard no one complain about it at the Center.”

Ed comes in, “As the only one present that has lived long enough to know, I can tell you that I do know. It does have an effect. It would probably take something on the order of ten missed cycles to totally equalize the psiotic balance. That is the good news. The bad news is that it is an asumtpe. It gets noticeable pretty fast. We thought it was just aging. Much slower than norms, but aging all the same. Other TKs also complained of it.”

“Then how do you know it is not aging?”

“When we came back. It was like becoming young again.”

“So, you have been trying to figure it out ever sense?”

“I have lots of data from the first pass. Here it is different. Granted I

did not have as many worlds to analyze the first time. Still, I am sure. This is not an artifact.”

“What do the other level ones say about this?”

“They attributed it to being excited about our work again.”

“Then we have a real problem. I have no intention of putting millions of TKs to their death against their will, or even asking for that many volunteers. My own death I have always accepted. And given that I have nearly exterminated an entire world recently, I am going to be hesitant to jump too quickly now.”

“It sounds like we have some time before we have to act.”

“Wrong. If we wait too long then a beat frequency could be set up that would destroy the universe.”

“Temporary arrhythmia does not kill you. Certainly one messed up beat doesn't.”

“The universe is not a self compensating life form. When was the last time you met a flexible 'thn. Now imagine the 'THN being flexible.”

“So how much time do we have?”

“The longer we wait the worse it will get. I am not even sure how much damage we have already caused by preventing the last one.”

“Still not going to kill millions of innocents.”

Pushy Paws, “I don't think that is necessary.”

“I don't even think the Bugs intended to kill anyone.”

Both Pushy Paws and I turn to Ed, “WHAT?”

“I think we killed the Bugs by limiting them. We are the ones guilty of murder and we may even be responsible for universe genocide. I really hope we are not too late. Push Paws is right. I don't think we need to kill anyone else. In fact I am willing to bet that the machinery is ready to go.”

“Then why all the TKs?”

Pushy answers, “Honor. Who would not want to participate in the heart beat of the universe. That would explain why we were ejected as being sour.”

“And why we are anathema now. We killed innocent sentients, we prevented the froth event and we dismissed the froth honor guard.”

“We were not invited. Instead we interfered because we thought our moral understanding was greater than the million TKs who chose to participate. Shit. We really suck.” If I did not feel bad about the PII sentients that I nearly killed I certainly feel bad about what we did do.

“Killing our TKs was revenge for our messing up?”

“They would not go after the recent TKs if that were true. They would come after us.”

“Our TKs are still alive, just changed. And they would go after Rooi and Silver not us. They were the ones who put it all into motion and both looked fine a few months ago.”

“We need to find them then. I certainly have no clue how to start a froth.” I have no idea where those two are either. They just appear when they feel like it.

“I am going to suggest we go to Paradise and do what we can until they are found.”

Pushy adds, “I have a feeling we will find them waiting.”

“What about the rest of our sentients?”

“Leave a message on the board and let them make up their own minds.”

“I was hoping you two would come to that conclusion. I have already placed a message. We can leave whenever you are ready.”

“What about Garfield?”

“He is taking care of the Cats we have collected. Whenever he is frightened by something he goes back to them.”

“In other words he rarely leaves them.” Ed shrugs and we all laugh.

Paradise

We have blown it in so many ways. These cults of Guardian worship are just wrong. We are not gods. Look at what nearly happened on Mars and Luna, not to mention Di. We are mortal, fallible and everything else that goes with it. Seems to be aligning along species lines, with each species claiming the Guardian of the same species as superior to all others. We spent all that time trying to be discrete and this is what happens. The stories that are told are phenomenal, amplified way beyond reason.

As to how I got the short straw. Ah, well, it was bound to happen sooner or later. One split second of inattention and here I am. My Hu mother warned me not to trust them, to always be on guard. Oh well, it is not forever.

These ants are certainly industrious. Never rest, always active. Maybe because they run partly on psiotics. Just like us, they never sleep. Almost wished I did. Once mom got me addicted to those infernal machines what could I do? I thought they would give it up once Hu Eden was flipped. No, just went underground, literally. Have to DS into and out of my 'home' now.

Maybe it is good that I got this duty. Out of the cave complex into the sun again. Gold collar itches. Not used to wearing a collar like a house cat. I miss Snuffles. Everyone laughs at the names I give them, but after growing up with ones that became Cats I find I miss their company. A cat though, not a Cat. The small ones are trouble enough.

Maybe after this I could go back to recruiting. That was fun. We need to replenish our stocks. Losing ones you have brought up the TKs hurt though. The ants just keep working at it. I wonder why? The door opens every day, yet they keep building. What could they be making now? Guess that is why I am here. Not crazy about the idea of being here alone though. Weren't we always supposed to be in pairs at least?

I admit I am having fun morphing to different life forms to see if they know about them. From our federation they know about Hu, Ba, Dia. They know about Ceph and Cat in form, but not in speech. They try to com with the Ceph, but never having put a grub in one I guess they can't stretch that far. They are actually afraid of Cats. If they only knew.

I have been to the Center dozens of times and have quite a repertoire now. They only knew of a few. We are quite a ways from my Center, so that could explain it. Back to Di now. They don't know my type and go

away when they see it is just me. They set up the other side to look like Paradise now. I guess enough stuff has gotten through to make a good start. Watching closely I have seen them examine new Paradise forms as I shove them through with TK persuasion. They don't bother any more. Guess they have had enough. Oh, their simulation gets slightly better each day and the plants are doing well. I wonder how they do that? The soil chemistry is totally foreign to their world or to mine.

The reports say that they did the same for the Hu Eden sentients. But I thought that was because of what the sens brought with them. The entrance being in a cave pretty much ruled out accidental passage like here. Also explains why only small animals and fish got through.

The next day they appear concerned. If that is possible?

“The remaining ones will die soon. We can no longer maintain this ecosystem.”

“Bring them here and let them come through this gate. I will take care of them.”

“This gate is too far away. We have no means to bring them here in time.”

“I will tell the others. This is not my decision.”

“We understand.”

We wait, staring at each other until the gate closes.

I am not allowed to leave the area unless someone else arrives to spell me, so I be sure not to be visible when it opens the next couple of days.

On the third day just before the gate is due to open a group arrives. I know Pushy Paws, but have forgotten the other two's names.

“Simone, glad you are here. Anything happen?” Pushy addresses me.

“They are adamant that we need to rescue the ones remaining. There is not much time left they say.”

“I don't trust them.” Says the female Hu I don't recognize.

“They are not the problem. If anything they are victims just like us, if not more.” The male says.

You don't remember them? Pushy TPs me privately. *They are Mei and Ed.*

Thanks. I remember from the classes now. I must have seen both as a run around, but all Hu looked alike at the time, except Aimee of course. You never forget the one you imprint on.

Mei looks concerned. She paces back and forth as Hu tend to do when they are trying to make a decision they don't want to make.

“How much do any of you know about thirteen to the thirteenth math?”

!I can navigate it fine, as most of us can now, but I leave the heavy stuff to the Blu and Rooi. Give me access to my computers and I can probably make an attempt at most anything.!

Ed asks, “We need to restart the froth from here.”

!Way beyond me.!

Mei is impatient, “I want to check on the Bugs.” A psiotic parasite gets close to her and it goes up in smoke. She does not even blink.

“I will go with her. I was the last one to check on them.” Pushy and Mei pop out.

The Gate pops open and startles Ed. One is waiting.

Ed says to the bug waiting, “We will come through on the next gate cycle. Do what you need to do to prepare.” It gets up and leaves immediately. We wait until the gate closes. Nothing comes through. I have been zapping anything that tries, after the gate closes. Don't want to offend them.

!We?! I finally ask.

“Makes sense doesn't it? Mei and Pushy Paws will do what they can to get ready for the froth attempt. That leaves us to go.”

!You are serious? I thought you were just talking. Why would we want to do that? Didn't we spend all this effort to stop it and then prevent them from trying again?!

“Yeah, well that was a huge mistake. Turns out the froth is a very important part of maintaining sentience. Without it and we all revert.”

!To what?!

“Lichens would be my guess. Or something plantimal in most cases. Crustose forms mostly.”

!Not my idea of a good time.!

“I study them, but I never want to be one.”

!You worked this out?!

“I have been studying the simpler forms for millions of years. I KNOW what they should look like and behave like. On over fifty worlds that I have good baselines for there to be change much faster than is possible.”

!Shouldn't this be a gradual process? Why the sudden jump in activity when the froth does not happen? Shouldn't it take thirty five million years or something like that at least?! I run through the equations in my head.

“It is exponential. Think of it being like a vacuum flask with hole that appears at regular intervals. If you are not there to plug it the entire system reverts very quickly at first, then gradually slows down.”

!What? Hole? What hole?!

“It is predicted by one hundred and sixty nine dimensional math. You have to align everything at each of the thirteenth dimensions to see it. Rooi should have seen it. Granted it took a special request of the Blu for me to figure it out. Took them less than an eighth. Funny creatures. They take longer with simpler calculations, but are great with the most complex.”

!Probably related to something they were working on. They already knew.!

He is shows no emotion about my comment, “Possible. They have been working on the equations since Rooi instructed them. If you want a dangerous species, they would be my bet.”

!They don't act, they just like figuring it out. I would be more worried about whom they told. They have been TK for far longer than any of the other species in the collective. If they wanted to do something they would have done it.!

“Well the important thing is they solved the problem of the rapid progress.”

!So, it is accelerating or decelerating?!

“Unfortunately accelerating at the moment. It has just opened as far as the universe is concerned. If we do not act soon it will be to strong to resist.”

The two pop back and Mei announces, “Come with us. We need a second opinion.” It was not a question. I am plunged into darkness.

A glow ball appears. We are in the chambers below ground. I know this place. I was here for the attempt Rooi and Silver stopped. The ball moves and we follow.

“Now examine these Bugs carefully. Memorize them to the extent you can.”

!To what level? We could dup them if you want.!

“Perfect. Each of us will dup one of them. Pick out your bug.”

“Mostly silichiton and dust.”

“They need to be exact matches, down to the quantum level.”

!We are not making 'thn are we?!

That startles her, “Ah no. Atomic level will be fine.”

It is strange without them, even though we don't need them any longer to raise someone to nine.

I pick out the most colorful one and get to work. Does not take long. We have been duping our own bodies for so long, not to mention transformations, that it is routine. But, because of Mei's strange request I spend extra time on it and double check everything. A masterpiece if I say

so. Hey, Di have art too.

I am neither the first or the last. Ed is the last. Guess being alone with a Cat does not give much opportunity for practice.

“Okay, grab your Bug and pop to the surface.”

We do so. About an eighth past mid day now. They look even worse in the sun. The intricacy of the surface patterns is amazing though.

“Now what?” Ed asks.

Pushy says, “Ed pick a direction and Simone, tell us when to stop. We need this to be random and unknown to Mei and I.” Okay, strange request.

Ed chooses and we go some time before calling us to a halt. I scan caves below us. Bugs present all right.

Down we go. A glow ball starts. Different number of them anyway. More in this one.

“Perfect” Mei announces, “Now find your matching Bug. Be sure.”

Turns out the surface patterns are an easy way to match them. Like scale prints, only more obvious. We each match our Bug quickly.

Ed is concerned. “I don't get it.”

!They are colonials. Each is a different caste member or colony member. Many species are this way.!

“Look closer. As close as you can.” We each turn to our pair and do the best we can. Except for the dust they are identical, even down to accidental damage. Dents, scratches, that sort of thing. The DNA, strange as it is, is identical too. I look around to see if I can find another one like mine. I find one two chambers down. I now have three.

!They have been duped. There are only a few dozen individuals.!

“One theory about how they reproduced could account for that.”

“Riding the froth edge. Except it does not explain the random accidental damage. If they were froth dupes they would have experienced different lives and events. Some of the scars might match, but not all of them as we have here.”

“And it has been duped on all of them too.”

!I found a third one matching mine. There must be thousands and thousands of them the same.!

“Anyone know a species that can dupe themselves, including their souls?”

“You would have to ask Jesus or Jesan that one. I don't know any.”

None of us do and we have met a lot of species.

!Pushy and I are second level and Mei was on a long trip. None of us has that much experience. We need to bring in some of the other old

timers for confirmation.!

“There isn't any listed at the Library either. One of the first things I wondered about when the theory of the froth duping was proposed. No one even believes that is possible. TKs do not dupe at the froth edge. Notice how none of the first levels were able to meet their second levels on the second Hu Eden? No, I think this was deliberate and it was done to corpses, not to living beings. It goes even further if you pay attention. They are arranged in a simple pattern with random transpositions to try and mix it up.” She is right. I can see it now.

“That would suggest they are still alive and were not killed when the world limiter went into effect.”

“Yeah about that. You would expect them to live out normal lives or at least show distress at starving to death. None. It is like they just stopped and died in place when we left. Not likely.”

“Yeah, so if they are loose why do you think they are not responsible for all that has happened.” Mei is going to be so pissed if this reverses again.

“They would have gone after Rooi and Silver, no one else. We were rejected by them and left to die on the surface. We were no threat. As to the celestial objects. Who knows. Di Eden Zero was not hit. If they were really after us they would have gone after Silver before we came back in time to these froths.”

!What about all the level fours then? How come they are all gone?!

Ed sighs, “They are not gone. Garfield is with them. We just don't know how to bring them out of it. As to the comets and meteors, as any of the long timers can tell you, earth and every other planet gets hit all the time. We were just lucky during our formative time on earth. If you spend time at the Center asking or visiting the Library on the subject you will learn that everyone's had to go through this. Silver, who spent all of his time on earth said it was hit dozens of times in twenty five million years.”

“What did earth look like after all that, a cinder?”

Ed smiles, “Only after the last one. Silver thinks we should keep it a secret, but Disaster is earth from our froth. Older of course.”

!Rooi said something to that effect some time ago. You are saying a meteor hit it, not the Bugs trying to prevent our interference?!

“We can't be sure. It is possible or it could be random. We never saw it coming.”

!Just like Di Eden!!

Mei, “We were wandering so much, through time and froths. It is surprising that it took so long before we were hit actually.”

!What about the magmotics?!

“They are a communal organism. Our separateness is what upset them about us. When part of them was destroyed by the meteor, it hurt them, but it did not kill them. Like a hologram, the resolution is less, but the whole is there. They will be fine in a couple of million years, give or take.”

I ask Mei, !What was it like being with them?! I have read the reports, but first hand experience is better.

“To me it was a horror. Worst eternity of my life. They kept trying to assimilate me. I am not as strong as Silver. I could not hold out without effort like he did.”

Ed adds, “Who said he did? In my own case I gave in quickly and remember nothing until awakening. It was not bad, just disorienting.”

Pushy shrugs, “We need to get on with this. What does everyone want to do? Do we rescue the others or work on the froth?”

“I want to get out of here. I will go to PII and get them. I owe everyone that much.” Two more bugs go poof in rapid succession.

Oh well, !I will go with you. I am tired of this place. I assume nothing about the froth attempt will be done that quickly.! She nods to me and we pop back to the gate in one jump. I thought she was the cautious one.

!The gate will not open for another three eighths.!

She sneers, “We do not need a gate. Believe me if there is any place in the universe I know well now it that place. And this time I won't be dragging a ship of cowards and lazy TKs with me. Bubble up, we ride.” I almost show amusement.

We don't bubble immediately though. She very carefully and methodically assembles a large array of gear. From survival gear to weapons. I make a few choice Di weapons and add a 'thn shield matrix to everything except my tail. For survival gear I make concentrated ration bars and water purifiers to stow in my suit matrix.

Mei notices that I have finished and comments, “How come the tail is exposed?”

!Cultural. There is no shame in losing your tail in battle, in fact it is considered bad to not suffer wounds. It proves you were in the 'thick' as you say.!

“Not as I say. I come from the Chinese culture. I understand though. We are ready then.” Never understood all those Hu cultures. Why?

She makes a bubble around us. No seats or other comforts. All business. We pop to well away from Paradise. A moment's pause and three rapid jumps and we are in orbit around another world. Not earth. No

large seas, just large lakes all over the surface. I am guessing that there is no land space as vast as on earth. I think of Australia and Siberia.

Two ships come into view. The Enterprise looks funny.

“We had to cannibalize it to make it small enough to be pushed by the few we had left at the end. We never relied on any one method. It has psiotic engines as well as an antimatter slipstream. The rest of the systems are redundant as well.”

!And the other ship?!

“Rachael and James. Pure weapon, based on fantasy vids of the twentieth century. Looks worse than it really is. The Enterprise could easily take it in a fair fight.”

!So what are we doing here? Are we going to the surface in them?!

We pop inside one of them. It takes me a moment to realize it is the Enterprise. She carefully checks a number of locations and instruments. Many of the instruments are disguised and hidden. Not obvious and I am wondering why one would hide them on an obviously useful craft.

“All clear. No one has been on board since I left.” We pop back to the bubble.

!What about the other one?!

“No way of knowing. I did not build it. I have scanned it and can find no tattletales to check. They did not intend to leave it in orbit. I take no chances.”

!So if they knew this they could have visited the other one and you would not know.!

“They left no DNA evidence anyway. There are Bug limiters on both, but I don't believe they are effective now. At least we cannot assume they are.”

!If they are high level TKs then they could have scanned from the other side of the planet and we would not know.!

“Possible. They have been TKs much longer than we if they were present at the last successful froth event.”

!Thirty five million as opposed to twenty five and they had to be sufficiently advanced to pull it off, so more likely much older. In that amount of time they could have learned almost anything. We are unlikely to be able to catch them or even be aware of them if they don't want to be seen.!

She nods.

“However we have no indication at all that those below us are related in anyway to the Bugs.”

!Except the ants.!

“Yeah, except for them. The TK level, tech level, DNA composition, almost everything is different.”

!They are both bug like parasites.!

“Not really. The Bugs were able to make their psiotic hosts like we make a bowl to eat out of. They did not kill existing beings. Those below do not parasitise for food so much as for knowledge. It might have been an adaptation to the ants depositing beings from all over the universe on them. They have to finish their growth and maturation in their own environment.”

!What I scan below suggests a colonial organism. There seem to be center points from which settlements spread from. Except for the small weird enclaves spread randomly through out.!

“Those are the ant created alien outposts.”

!It is like the ants took advantage of the bugs ability to read and learn from other totally different species. Nothing on our earths could have done that.!

“There is one who could. The Pinks.”

!I had forgotten about them.!

“Don't. They are the ones likely to rule us all if we are not careful.” I sense some xenophobia there. None of us likes all the species we have met. The Blu sort of bother me. Never been that fond of water worlds. And I don't even want to think about the Pink habits, maybe that's why I had forgotten about them. Just too different to want to try and understand.

We pop to the surface. I see Hu at ground level, including an impressive castle made of local stone and Ba structures higher up the hill. Some of the rooms in the castle appear to have been adapted for them as well.

A bug appears. Definitely different from our Bugs. I am tempted to remove my gold collar, not sensing any psiotic parasites, but change my mind, just in case.

“The gate has not opened yet. Are you the ones seen at the last gate opening?” They obviously have some means of communication over distance. I sense no etech though. Some other means.

Mei TPs me, *The patch that matches Paradise is only about thirty kilometers from here. They could not move these sens that far in time?*

I find the patch and TP back, *A lot of poisonous jungle between here and there. No tech either. Would have taken weeks at best.* She nods.

“We prefer our own means of transport. It would be helpful to gather everyone who is going with us to this location.”

“It will be so.” It does not move, but remains watching us. Absolutely

motionless. Conserving energy or habit? DNA is not the same as the Bugs. Just checking.

They start arriving. Unlike the Luna victims, these do not appear to be infected. Wait, there is one. An area scan finds three more.

“Some have your kind in them. What do you want done with them?” I say in Hu.

Our bug says nothing, but a moment later another one arrives and addresses us.

“You may study them if you wish. We have what we need from those present and wish to cause no further disturbance.”

The first then says, “Our life is reclaiming this intersect. Soon it will remove all traces. It is why we must act quickly to gather knowledge and observe behaviors.”

“Your sample size is too small to form an accurate knowledge lock.”

The two remain motionless and a third one arrives.

“This is true, but it is all that has been offered to us.”

“From the ants.” Mei sneers. She looks like a Cat ready to pounce.

Dangerous.

“The Bringers of Knowledge.” All three raise arms and cross them in front of themselves and then slowly unfold them. That suggests a culture for sure. It would be fun to study them more thoroughly. Mei sneers again.

We need to leave as soon as possible. She TPs me. You mean before you go berserk.

The Hu and Ba are not just bringing themselves, but each carried belongings. Classic refugees.

“You will not need your food animals or plants. Food will be provided.”

They stare at us for a moment and then slowly let the creatures go and shoo them away. Some of the younger ones looked worried. We can't take everything with us though. It is going to be hard enough dealing with the sentients. Bugs come and gather the livestock and lead them away. They appear to know about us enough to know we don't like watching things die, especially ones we have become attached to.

“Do all of your kind set up cultural control structures?”

Mei is surprised by the question, but remains silent. She is daring me to speak, but I am not as afraid of these curious creatures.

I give an ambiguous answer instead, “Some do, some don't. Variety is common.”

“They are all present.” More bugs gather at the edges. Soon there are

hundreds of them in a circle around us. Mei does not like this at all.

“Pop small groups to the available rooms on board either ship and lock the doors. I don't want them wandering around touching things they don't understand.”

“It will be crowded.”

“I don't care. We can sort this out once we are gone from here.”

It only takes us a moment to do the deed. We remain motionless during the procedure.

“There is much we must learn.” The three turn and go. Once they reach the outer ring, the ring itself breaks up and disappears from sight. I am beginning to wonder why we are staying. We pop.

Ah, the Paradise patch. Glad I kept my collar on. They immediately descend on us. Must have been especially hungry without many of their normal hosts around. Mei, as predicted, zapped any that come near her.

“There is no gate at this end. Just like the one in the castle dungeon. These are only one way.”

!I am told that they were two way, but could only be opened on one side.!

“Then why haven't any of the locals shown up on the other worlds?”

!Fear? Or someone told them not to at one point. We would need to talk to them or review their historical records, if they keep any.!

“After we get the others in quarantine I never intend to come back here.”

!I second that motion! Only include Paradise as well please.!

She nods.

We pop up to the Enterprise.

“Now that there are two of us to keep them in control, we need move everyone to here. I can't run both ships at once. There is not enough room in the smaller rooms, so fill the hallways, service tubes, whatever, just not this room. The waste scrubbers are going to be working overtime. We may need to assist.”

!How about we put them to sleep. Less oxygen needs and less trouble.!

She thinks about it, “Good idea. I am not used to dealing with norms.”

!How long will it take?!

“Depends on where we are going. I don't think the ones on Luna want to see these sens again.”

!I would imagine not. Where then?!

She looks upset, “We left too quick to find out.”

!They would not have had the authority anyway. Maybe we just make

another settlement for these new ones on Luna down range. It is not like they will be walking over for a visit.!

“I am not convinced that either group should be on Luna. One sixth G is not right for those born at one. We will have to move all of them at some point.”

!A lot of sens were lost on Di Eden. Maybe they could go there to help with reconstruction. From what we just saw the tech is at about the same level.!

“Could work. How many centers did they set up?”

!Only one in the south, but four in the north.!

“That should be enough separation. We will go to the south. Do you know where it is?”

!I am sure I can find it. It is my home world, even if I was hatched in the north. Not Paradise at least.!

She smiles and sits at the captains chair. The ship starts to move. I sense psiotic engines. Weird vibration in the psiotic fields. How do did they get used to it? I see Mei gritting her teeth. Guess you don't.

Once we enter dimensional space the feeling goes away, thank goodness. We shift again to higher dimensional space.

!Are we in a hurry?! A ship this size moving this fast is scary and not altogether safe. It is possible to hit something out here. None of us would survive. As single TKs we have more lei way and can push aside most risks or slide past the larger ones. She says nothing, just concentrates on the view screen. It is full of readings and diagrams. Since I was not in on the design I can only speculate.

I scan our passengers. Everyone is resting well. Interestingly the four with passengers inside are asleep, but the parasites are not. They are conscious! Well sort of. Still embryos technically. About the level of rap. Scary. Wonder what they are learning about what is happening now? We need to keep an eye on them. Better yet, they should go to Luna to be with the others. Who said everyone was sorted properly?

“We still need to go through standard decom.”

!How do we do that without killing the bugs?!

No response. I guess that is an answer.

Once we are in orbit around Di Eden the fun begins. Fortunately this is the smaller of the two portions and I have had lots of practice. We formed a site just outside the City and raised what we needed literally from the mud. When we finish it looks like a natural extension of the City itself. Next we start on the sentients. While they are still asleep we make a duplicate below in one of the new sleeping areas and transfer their souls

to the new bodies. It does not take long before we have a ship full of corpses.

“Only the four remain. These we will take to Luna and let them sort it out.” I nod, relieved that I am not going to be asked to kill a sentient form, even if it is a parasite. I am still concerned about what they may have learned from being with us.

Paradise

And then there were two.

More will arrive soon.

They are not needed. Nor are the ones who are here.

Better if they were gone as well.

It is their choice.

But not an informed one.

Then you do understand now.

Yes.

Brown

What are we doing here? One moment we were on Paradise and next we are here.

And why are we in Cat form?

I smell Silver in this, but why? At least I look good.

Pushy, you will always look good.

Why thank you Ed. You don't look so bad yourself. Meow!

There is something wrong. We should not be feeling this. Try to transform.

Nada. We are limited as well. They didn't want any interference.

Guess we might as well meet the others.

The fun part was when we saw Garfield. He is asleep of course.

Pretend to be one of the inside Cats.

Got it.

We walk up to him and sniff him, both ends. Nothing happens.

I sit right next to his face and “yeowl” in his face. That does it.

He freaks and stares at the two of us. Arched back, very scared.

He looks towards the chamber and then back at us. He can't figure out how we got out. Cats don't count very willingly, very fast, or very accurately. A cultural handicap that took Owa a long time to grow out of, according to the legends. I don't know. I always wanted to be a Cat. I may keep this form when it is all over.

You're Pushy Paws! Garfield TPs. He turns to Ed and acknowledges him as well. Cats to not ask permission to read other sentients minds. Too afraid of being caught unawares.

Does this mean you are taking care of them now?

We can't. We are level twos now.

Was that wise to tell him? Last thing I need is for Garfield to go all Napoleon on us.

Instead he decides to be helpful.

I can show you all the best places to take a nap. If you smell my scent, move over to one side please. A Cat said please? *Oh, and of course the litter box. You will have to clean that yourself.* He shows the outside door with a view of mostly sand. Cat humor. Cats don't do clean, well, except for their own bodies. Oh god, I hope I don't have to lick my butt.

What about all waste from the three hundred? We enter and I can smell it. Been awhile since they were cleaned. Smells like a back alley. *Piss, poo and blood. Not much blood. They seem to be getting along. I*

see a few scars, though they look long healed.

Where is Garfield? I am next to Ed, but when I turn around I can't see Garfield. Though I do hear the door close. Not a problem. I know how to do latches. I look at my paws. Okay, it will a bit harder, but understanding something goes a long way. Interesting that Ed ended up a nice tuxedo cat and I am a brown and black calico. Very nice.

We sniff noses with nearly everyone as we make the circuit and return back to where we started. I do not sense any more than when I walked through as a Hu. I go up to the door and try to turn the latch with a claw. It turns fine, but that's all that it does.

Ed, you know this lock. What am I doing wrong?

He comes up and tries it several times.

Must be broken. Maybe we can DS. We can obviously TP fine.

I try and immediately pop to the other side. At least they did not leave us completely defenseless. Ed comes after me.

Now what?

Those two do not do anything without a reason.

Oh? Playing games is a reason. Though usually Silver leaves me alone. Has he ever played games with you?

No, mostly Owa and a few others who know it is a game. I won't tolerate it.

Then, why are we here? We are the only two who really believe the three hundred are our missing TKs. Figuring that out would be my guess.

Where is Garfield. He has been with them the longest. We need to talk with him. He has to know something.

He is an eight with full access to the froth. He could be on any of a billion or more worlds. Better to wait until he returns.

We could narrow the search some. He will go someplace where there is food.

Ed laughs, it does not sound right coming from a Cat body.

Please do not do that again. Just stick your nose up in the air like a normal Cat. He laughs again. I do the same. It sounds even worse coming from me.

We are alone with the Cats. Maybe that is what is intended. Time to get serious about this. We don't come out again until we know what is going on.

I try to PS through the door this time. Nothing but a sore nose. I backup a few inches and DS in. Wish I could do a portal like a Ceph. Wasn't great at that one even as a nine. The strange thing is that I feel like I should be able to PS. It feels right in my mind, but does not work. This

is not what it felt like when I practiced with a limiter.

Split up or go together? Ed asks.

Split up. I don't want to remain here any longer than necessary. DS to the door if anything goes wrong. I look at the distance from one end to the other. *Okay, make that the nearest outside wall.* Sand and wind, but I would take that over a Cat fight.

As I go through this time I try to imagine who is who. It that Jake and Bernice? Swven and her partner, name escapes me? I can't exactly access the list right now. Or can I? I might be able to operate a term if I am careful enough. Identifying is not the concern. I know it is them. Boy am I getting tired. Even Cat nines sleep. I always thought it was cultural. Now I am not sure. Nearly everyone else is asleep.

Without even being aware of it, I find a bare spot near a sunny window and curl up. I am out before I hit the ground.

That's when it gets really weird.

Dream Time

I am in a dark space. It seems infinite in all directions. I have no idea how long I float in this space. It is neither hot nor cold. It reminds me of dimensional space except there is nothing here. In DS space I know where I am. There are marks of a sort. Can't explain it in language. Here there is nothing.

Patience.

Who said that? Great I hear voices in my dreams.

I do through several wake sleep cycles. Food is brought in at intervals and Ed and I pop out at fewer intervals to take care of business. The others use a box in the corner which Garfield sometimes remember to clean out. I can see now why the smaller cats will not use a dirty litter box. Not that anyone has seen one of those in a millennium or more.

In spite of this mess and the plague running through the Hu Eden plains, I still think this is better than it was. Not perfect. We have not achieved paradise and it may not even hold. Hu Eden is tech two at best in the center and of course four or five in the Ceph settlements. Thank goodness they keep their tech to themselves and do not share until other sentients are ready. They are very harsh judges of when they are ready. Can Cats smile? The muscles are not really there.

Time for another nap. I curl up in my favorite place to catch the afternoon sun and am quickly under. This time is different though.

Give her time. Hu have a hard time adapting to Dream Time. It does not come natural to them. Their biggest handicap.

Then all is quiet.

Time passes, but how how do you judge the passage of time in your dreams.

I sense light and shadows. Soon I sense trees, but not like any trees I have ever seen before. Above me, in the trees, are strange creatures. At my level are smaller creatures, scurrying about as if in a panic. Then suddenly they all scatter and are running as fast as they can. I run with them. Whatever scarred so many must be a threat. It feels so good to run. I am faster than the ones before me and I find myself starting to think of them as prey not fellow victims. When I try to pounce on one, it just manages to avoid my foot pad. Amazingly beautiful movement.

I spend hours chasing and pouncing, not even trying to actually get one, just come as close as possible. A game or The Game I don't know.

I wake to find the sun has moved and only touches the tip of my tail.

No one else is awake. I move over to be in the sun again and immediately fall asleep.

I am back in the infinite space. I imagine I am looking down on myself sleeping. I see myself asleep next to the window. I find Ed in another corner alone. Introverts. I look back at myself. Another Cat has moved closer and is touching me.

Pushy Paws, is that you?

Huh? Who is that?

I am hurt you don't recognize my scent.

How can I smell in a dream? Dreams don't have . . . oh! They do. I smell the desert, eucalyptus, sand, sun, wind. I smell roasted rat over an open fire. My mouth waters. Who do I know with those scents?

Pu! You are Pu!

Yes, I am so glad you have joined us! Come meet the others.

What about Ed?

He has not awakened to us yet. I blame Garfield for that.

Garfield answers though, *Not my fault. He refused to sleep. Even now he is barely under. Not all the way to dream time yet.* I smell Garfield. He smells like chicken and tuna, giblets and gravy, beef and cheese. I have to smile.

We are what is most important to us. How logical.

We think so. I forget Cats do not observe reading manners.

No separation Paws. In dream time, we are all one. We await the coming.

What is the coming?

When the One comes we will be free.

But not until the One comes to free us. We mustn't leave early. Very dangerous.

Why is it dangerous?

The balance is upset. All exposed to the imbalance will become evil. They will become deformed.

Why is the balance upset?

We did it. We upset the balance. All of us who stopped the heartbeat of the universe. The heartbeat?

Bring in Ed. It is vital that you bring Ed into this understanding. Please make every effort.

We will try. Everything goes quiet again.

Oh, that hurts! You don't need to bite my tail. My lovely, lovely tail.

Ed?

Pushy? How can I hear you in my dream? I must be dreaming you are

here.

You are not dreaming Ed. We are Cats. It is somehow different for them, for us now. They link their minds in dream time. Open your mind. They are all here. All of the lost ones are here! Open your mind. Can Cats cry? It is so beautiful.

Oz rubs against my mind. Hi Pushy Paws. Glad you made it.

We are both glad all of you made it. Everyone else had given you up for dead. What happened? We could not sense you here, just empty minds.

First we need to know why you are here. You were not brought by the One.

Who is the One you keep referring to?

Silence.

Ed answers, We made a mistake preventing the froth event. It is vital to the sentience of the universe. We need to start it again, but we don't know how. We were waiting on Paradise for Rooi and Silver to arrive. They are the only ones who can figure this out.

They are the ones who prevented it. Too bad all of the ones who really know were killed.

I speak up, They were not killed. They are alive, though I don't know where. The corpses we found on Paradise are fake. Mei figured that one out.

Fortunately Mei has changed her mind. She and Simone rescued the last Hu Eden refugees from Paradise II.

Paradise II?

Oh, sorry, the Blu figured out where the next froth event had to happen and Mei went there to prevent it. The sentients there are victims as well. Foreign sentients are being brought to them by a species of ants that build long distance portals from any psiotic tech they can find, especially if it has 'thn shield material in it.

They even built one from the Bug shield on Hu Eden.

And one from a temp shield Simone made on Paradise. Both portals went to Paradise II.

The 'Bugs' that were on Paradise are good or evil?

No way of knowing. They were there to fulfill a purpose. We lack enough information to know if the method they were about to use was moral or not. We don't even know what the method was.

If we were wrong about the purpose of the froth, then we were likely wrong about the process and its outcome as well.

What would you do if a 'Bug' were to appear?

This is a test? Ed is getting suspicious. I am too, but was willing to play along.

You are being evaluated. It is the Cat way. I keep forgetting there is no privacy of thought among the Cat.

How many times have we seen a confrontation while they size up each other: We are the intruders here. I answer the question, *We would ask questions.*

And if no answers came?

Ed again, *If you mean, would we attack them? No way. I think we have proven that by leaving Paradise II alone when we could have easily destroyed it. There are others who might know or help us understand. Jesus was spending a lot of time in the hidden areas of the Library. There might be an answer there. We are running out of time, but there is still a year or two before it is too late. I tend to be overly cautious.*

There is no answer there. It has not been written. There is no longer any time.

We all wake up at once and every Cat around me bows to towards the door way. I try to scan, but can't of course.

The One has come, bow if you want to live.

If we failed the evaluation, then maybe we should die. We have far too much power to be left loose and untrained. Otherwise let us greet this One and ask our questions. Ed ever defiant.

The need to know is strong in this froth world. That is not always a good trait. A mistake on our part to center this cycle here. Interesting that s/he attributed it to the entire group of us, not just the Hu. Still, I hate bullies, but of course I am in no position to complain.

You could not have known thirty five million years ago what we would have become. The fault is not yours. Do you know who brought us here?

The Time has Come.

What Happened?

~We got an urgent call to come to Brown 2794. What's going on?
Where is everyone?~

*We are early. Takes even Hu TKs awhile to untangle their messes
before getting here.*

~Here comes Spider and Ravi. They came from far enough.~

“Hi Sussi. Hi Owa!” He runs up to me on those huge spider legs and gives me a hug and rubbing. Someone respects me at least.

Ravi looks around, “Where is the lab?”

~What lab?~ Sussi looks around.

“Last time I was here, Ed's lab was right here. You can even see the depression where it was. It's where all the Cats showed up. Must have been close to three hundred of them.”

That's a lot of Cats in one place.

~Ed and Pushy Paws were going on and on about the Cats being the lost ones. Maybe he took them somewhere.~

*Apparently without intending to come back. Ed was always good
about cleaning up.*

^Hey, over here!^

“Hey Jordon! Glad you could make it.”

^You mean you were worried there were no Ba TKs left. Still
gliding.^

We all walk over to where he is looking down at something. All of us have already scanned it of course, but go through the motions anyway. I am always cautious of a trick from you-know-who. If others were willing to go first that is fine with me. Wish there was another Cat here to cover me.

Coming down from above is Ehira. Amazing that a life form like that could evolve from essentially the same starting material as us.

#A data disk. Strange place for one. Hey, where's the lab?#

~Is it possible for TKs to get old timer's disease? How come I was the only one who did not remember?~

Stress? I volunteer.

Ehira pulls out a reader from a utility pouch. I am impressed.
Someone TKs her the disk which she inserts.

#Strange. All it says is Paradise. There is nothing else on the disk.#

“No explanation?”

#Nothing else.# I wonder why she did not anticipate this? It might not

have even been here a moment ago. Any one of us should have found it. Duh, she just arrived. Anticipation is location specific.

~Seems like we are to go to Paradise. Gold collars everyone.~ Looks more like a dome on Sussi. I hate collars. I hate bugs more though.

We all know where Paradise is by now, having taken turns checking it out.

We arrive at night. Two await.

“Why did all of you show up?” Mei asks. She glares at Ehira.

~We got an urgent to come to Brown and then a disk there said to come here.~

Ci'lan pops in. “Hi everyone.”

Okay, anyone seen the two clowns? Rooi and Silver. Starting to annoy me.

Four Cats I don't recognize pop in and walk towards us.

As they walk they transform. Rachael pops in off to one side and notices all of us watching the four. James and Q pop in next to her.

“Hey . . .”

“Shhh!”

One does not change. Three Hu and a Cat appear and stop before us.

We are all silent in disbelief.

Oz speaks as Pu pushes up against him, “Pushy and Ed wanted to come first, but we figured if we did not come no one would believe them. We are all fine. No one was lost.”

Pu TPs me, *Now the hard part.*

What do you mean?

Limit Mei. Two of us can stop her, barely. I concentrate without giving myself away.

“We need to form a half circle.” Ed indicates.

We do and nothing happens.

Patience.

Out of the village ruins comes something. I can't scan it. My scans keep being deflected. Finally it is clear enough to be recognized. I clamp down on Mei with all my might as soon as I know.

Mei looks over at the two of us.

“Please. I am over it. Let's hear what it has to say. I already know they escaped this world. If they wanted to kill us, it would have been done.”

It stops at the focal point of our half circle.

The others will not come. They do not believe you have repented.

Ci'lan steps forward, “We are honored that you do. It will be enough.”

At her initiative everyone does a Nauti bow towards the Bug.

Without the others the froth event will not happen. I just wanted to acknowledge personally that you came to this understanding on your own.

“Can you not call the others now that you have proof?”

Not enough time.

“There is always time if you know what you are doing.” I did not sense anyone coming in and jump a few inches. I hear a laugh. Shit. I turn and see both of them together.

I feel ships popping into orbit around us. A lot of them. A whole lot of them.

The Bug looks upwards, ***Not enough. Too late.***

I feel it then. Even the Bug looks nervous, I think.

No one speaks, but every Rooi sphere on the planet is glowing and giving off enormous amounts of psiotic energy in a precise pattern. The Magmotics below us start to move.

You do not understand. The innocents.

Rooi answers, ~We know of the chamber.~

I move forward to be with Rooi and Silver. Pu looks at me like I have just made friends with a dog.

I am going too. This life bores me. I only say this to the three.

We disappear below. There are miles of 'thn shield material above us and we are weightless. We are in the center of the world, all grouped together.

“Rooi, you do not need to be here. I know what to do.”

~A thousand years is longer than any Ceph has ever lived. There are many to take my place. I need to be here, to take responsibility for what I did.~ He nods.

“We are ready.” He looks towards the Bug. “Are you sure you want to be here? It is our fault you were not able to finish your task. Let us take the lead. No dishonor now that you have seen this mistake corrected.”

I will stay. I have planned for too long to cover this now. Quieter now.

“Ci'lan knows what to do above. She will coordinate the others.”

The frequency rises. Soon.

Caves

What will happen to them Ci'lan?

She looks at me, but does not answer.

Rachael announces, "We need to get everyone into the proper place. There is no danger to any TK in the caves. Others who left from the first attempt, the honor guard from countless worlds, are arranging themselves at Ci'lan's direction."

I remember the first time. I was very excited then. This time I feel at peace. Oz is next to me, as we have been together for several years as Cats. Nothing more intimate. Even in his Hu form, I will never see him as anything other than Cat. The highest form possible.

James teases me, "You Cats are so full of yourselves." He laughs fully. Stupid monkeys.

We pop to an underground chamber. The Bug corpses are gone thank goodness. I don't know why they left them there in the first place. But then no one ever listens to the Cat.

I do silly kitty. I purr and push against Oz. We read each other continually, the Cat way.

Jake and Bernice appear next to us. The others must be here too.

Attention everyone, this time don't fight it. There is nothing to fear. Just go with the flow. Won't even have to push this time. The adapted Rooi spheres will do all the work. We are just here for the ride. An honor guard as was explained earlier.

Strange that our relatively new species, especially Rooi, are able to do this with monkey tech instead of psiotic minds. Did the Bugs once have this ability or like George and Silver, they just like to do some things the older manual way. I can relate. I still dig a hole to do my business and cover it again. Had to teach Oz that one.

No you didn't. I watched you enough times. Still not used to licking my butt to clean it though.

I have been doing it since birth. I was not able to learn how to drive a Ba cart. You found it easier than I did.

True. That was funny. Oh, this feels so good. I have never felt this alive.

No wonder so many want to be here for this. Imagine having to wait thirty five million years each time though.

Silence. Just breathe.

Surface

^Whoa!^

I'll say. We come forth to totally barren rock. Nothing left alive. No sign that anything was ever alive here. I can feel that most sentients went straight to their ships, bubbles, or whatever they used to get here. It would appear we are the only ones who use direct portals to get between places.

“The air smells of sulfur and volcanism, but the surface is cool enough.”

~Is everyone accounted for?~

“I can't find Rooi or Silver.”

Just like you to leave the Cat out of it. Owa Moosa is missing too.

!Sorry, but Owa is always missing.! Amusement shown all around.

#Likely Silver and he got into it again over something. We need to leave. The weather is going to get worse soon.# I wish I had that capability. Oh well.

#!Feels good to be back in my birth form.!#

“Dear, I will love you no matter what form you are in.” I wink.

#!Thank you Jake.!# She does a partial bow.

“I suspect that our vacation is over for now.”

#!I would think so. Well, we had a good time.!#

“Definitely well rested.” I grin. I give a big yawn just for good measure.

So, where are you two off to? Pu asks.

#!We were on Mu Eden when brought to the enclave. I suppose we should go back there at first just to see how things are.!#

“And what about you and Ozzi?”

We were on Hu Eden near the coast, north of the starting place.

^I still can't believe you all fell into the same mind trap.^

Smells are very powerful Jordon. We can't believe it took so many years for the rest of you to figure it out.

^There is that. Thank goodness for Pushy Paws and Ed. You all might still be there.^

Pu looks very serious right at him, *We would still be here. I am not sure about all of you.*

“He is correct in that statement. You have no idea how close it was cut.” Oz comes into the conversation.

I add, “Ed was good at figuring it out, but was off a bit, Even Rooi's

spheres would have not closed the gap if they had waited even one more day.”

Sussi comes in, ~We will have to have a debriefing about all of this. We need to know whatever you know.~ I nod to her. Sounds like work has been decided for us for the moment.

A sphere pops in a few meters away. Strange. I look around. No one else has noticed yet. Then, more pop in. Hundreds. I scan, there are millions on the world. They noticed now?

They are back!

“Does this mean the anathema has been lifted?”

^It would appear to be so.^

Br'thn comes up to us, *Where is Yingui?*

“God, if they don't know where they are we are doomed.”

Daniel pops in, “Whoa, Hi Br'thn. Have you seen Silver?”

Yingui, Rooi, Owa Moosa and Froth Unit Tessera are no longer in this universe.

“You mean this froth. That I can understand. Maybe they were sling slotted somewhere or are playing another game.”

Br'thn becomes agitated, *The 'THN says they cannot be accounted for.*

“Dead?” Rachael asks. Getting crowded here.

No residue even at the subquantum level can be found.

“How does one leave this universe completely?”

Unknown.

“I may be able to answer that.” Said in unison by Jesus and Jesan.

We all wait for an answer. Several more 'thn have gathered around us.

“It has taken some time to tease this out. But it would appear that the First Ones are not of this universe.”

“Therefore the only way to reach them is to leave.”

Ed looks down to the ground, “And the only way to leave would be the froth event.”

Sussi, ~That makes sense. There was always one part of the equations that we could not figure out. Now it makes sense.~

“Br'thn, did we do the right thing? Are we okay with the others again?”

It will take time. One action is not forgiven by another so easily.

#!Didn't think so. Nice thought though.!#

#Sector head!# What is with these things? I sense her still in orbit coming in fast.

We all come to attention. Yes, we know they are not gods any more, but it is still wise to show respect for anything that can have you for

lunch.

I don't know who this one is. She weaves among us as if inspecting us. Hell, she can sense us from further out than the moon. No need to be among us except for intimidation.

Finally she speaks, ***This incident is to be forgotten. It never happened. No one is to even think about it.***

Sussi asks, I wouldn't of, ~How do we explain the missing ones.~ Good point though.

Myths. Never existed. Oh that is cold. It also sounds like they are not expected to return this time. Whoever heard of 'thn telling sentients to lie?

Forget them! I hate bullies. Probably figure with the two strongest TKs ever seen they can get away with being on top again. They may be wrong there. Together we still are pretty hot.

Froth Day

“Happy Froth Day Fa'lan!” Sam gives me a huge hug and tousles my head feathers.

+Happy Froth Day Sam.+ I am less enthusiastic. Sam has no hair at the moment. A passing fashion. So much work yet to do. It never ends. Sam goes on to accost other revelers. I find a more quiet corner that still has a view. All TKs have Froth Day duty. We can't be overt in our helping and we certainly don't catch everything, but maybe we help a little. Mostly we watch for thieves and hoarders, basically the same thing.

So much has changed in the last seven hundred and twenty one years since the froth flipped. Hard to believe it has been that long. I did not know them well, yet I still miss them. Their personalities permeated our culture. So where do I begin?

Tech: All cultures have been brought up to the same level, level four. Yes, I know, if left to themselves several would have gone higher and done a melt down by now. We are trying to avoid that. Everyone is at the same level because it was just too hard dealing with what was prescribed and what was open in each culture. It has taken us all this time to even things out. Resistance from the Ceph at going too fast and anger from everyone else for going too slow, especially those nearly at four when we started. I am inclined to agree with the Ceph. I would not have minded if it had taken eight times as long.

Correction: The Luna City and Mars colonies are level six or seven at least. They are the only cultures to know about us. Sort of hard to hide. The Hu museum is now on Mars. Scholars spend lifetimes there trying to find understanding. Their theories are then filtered down to us to help guide our guiding the League.

The Ku: Ah, we breed like tat flies, given the chance. Still the smallest minority, but no longer rare and gawked at all the time. For hundreds of years we were known mostly for our eateries. Barbara says that is not a problem. Most minorities start this way. Every local has a Ku Hutch, even if they are mostly run by Dia or Ba now. We are healers and advocates, learning facilitators, and my favorite, tech extenders. Ones that guess too much are transferred to Luna or Mars of course. As soon as I am done here I get to serve a stint on the Europa Station. Both the Ba and the Ku have adapted well to space travel. Flight school indeed.

TKs: We have followed the tradition of keeping hidden completely from the Eden bound. If you somehow learn of us, it means you will not

be staying here. We take longer than Ceph to make even the smallest decision. Frustrating. Rachael calls it being shell shocked, though I can't imagine why shells are part of the equation. She just laughed when I asked her. Must be a Hu thing. Most of us are eights or nines. Without the unmentionables we usually stop at eight. Few want to take on the responsibility of a 'thn. Being the first generation of Ku and the only one who did not brood, I could not resist. I know she is just a construct, but I truly love Qu'thn. Oh and they learned a lot in those twenty five million years. Ci'lan could start a 'thn now if she wanted to. Personal choice.

I suspect that the first gens could raise anyone to nine, but are holding back because we really need to learn to be more like the normal TKs in the universe. No one wants to stick out any more. At least not until the heat goes cold.

One thing that has really helped cement relations has been Mei's administration of Paradise II, now officially called by its real name, Fist. I know that means different things in different languages, but that is the name. Strangely it seems to be the one sound that most cultures can say correctly, or at least close enough to be understood.

Anyway Mei felt so bad about her nearly destroying their world that she took it on as a special project. She talked with the admins of Fist and they have slowly evolved an understanding and working method that benefits everyone.

Given that the giant ants were going to be bringing in other sentients to be observed and learned from, why not make it less random? TKs take the ants to willing worlds and two way travel is set up. Instead of placing grubs into sentients, compounds for the visitors are set up and any Fistian interested (or instructed) is free to observe and learn. They learn new languages very quickly. Though the adults are short lived they learn the language and their bodies are eaten by new grubs. These grubs grow up knowing what the adult knew. One adult can thus train dozens of new ones. Each grub feeds on the knowledge sources that the colony feels is needed.

The Fistians are sole proprietors for local supplies and transportation. They also run the convention centers. All of this provides ample learning possibilities. What it provides the sentients is someplace other than the Centers, which are almost exclusively TKs. And don't forget, the Centers are only galactic regional. Fist brings in sentients from the entire universe. Not everyone of course. The vast majority are outside our comfort zone.

There is probably enough variation in one galaxy to satisfy anyone.

So why bother? What it brings to us is the ability for TKs from all over the universe to observe us. We were the bad guys. Now we are the good guys. Maybe. Helps more than you can believe to be seen and interacted with. Rumors running through the Libraries can destroy a culture, much less an entire froth set. We don't intend to be a casualty.

I think what we really have to show is our froth multiculture. Very rare. Most TKs stick to their own froth and spread out from there. We have transports between all joined worlds. Anyone with business can go to any world they need to. The most remarkable thing is we get along. Each sentient is different, as each sentient species is different. We all have talents and weaknesses, but together we make happen what most sentient cultures can only dream of.

Oh the jokes still persist. Something along the line of worst and best. The best cooks are the Ku and the worst are the Ceph. The best admins are the Ceph, but the worst are the Hu. It goes on. Totally biased and speciest. Every species has good cooks, admins, etc. And every species has bad ones.

Venders pass by with chocolates, fish with wasabi, and rats and bugs on sticks, both real and candy. Supposed to represent the desires of the four. With time the Bug became a Ba, since no one knew anything about the Bugs, hence the bugs on sticks. Not too bad with the right sauce and roasted till crunchy. I motion for two bug sticks. The young Dia hands them over and goes on.

The old Hu TKs talk about this concept called money and how many problems it causes. At first we had problems with the closely related pattern of behavior called bartering. Most cultures were familiar with some form of barter. But it inevitably led to hoarding. So even barter was forbidden. If you had excess and someone asked for it you were obliged to give it and so on. During times of need, everyone shared and everyone suffered some.

Interestingly this made a lot of activities easier. No argument about transportation. Only the Ceph have personal transport because they have so much trouble getting around outside their carefully crafted water roads. Besides, everyone would be waiting for them to catch up. Simple solar powered electric carts. The point though is that projects are done with the best solution for the entire league at stake. Once the whole is taken care of the individual works out naturally.

Not always perfect. Some sens just can't be with too few or too many others around them. Outliers are tolerated as spiritual guides, but eventually lead very restrictive lives. If a real catastrophe occurs, caches

of food are mysteriously found when absolutely needed. We do it of course. We hold off until some suffering has occurred or everyone would think there was this magic safety net and would not be careful. Have not had to do it in several hundred years though. With cross world travel, very unlikely there is not enough when needed.

Only real problem is population control. How do you administer that over so many species and means of reproduction? I refuse to go with the Ceph proposal of eating defective offspring. Hu only produce one at a time and some amazing sentients have started life as defectives. On the other hand if every Ceph were allowed to reach naming, that would be a total disaster. Ku are still very much a minority, but it will be some time before the new Ku Eden replacement would be habitable, even if we decide to repopulate it, and not leave it fallow to give a new species a chance. I voted for the latter. I am curious to see if letting the comet hit was the right thing to do.

No one believes the Froth sens, we no longer call them Bugs, were responsible any longer. Just bad luck. We have sensor nets set up all over now. We will have to adjust as the tech level rises and they can begin to notice them of course.

So, do we let Fa reproduce with abandon? Or restrict them to some lower level just to be fair to the others. I voted for the latter again. We need to know restraint to grow. Even TKs cannot have everything we want when we want it, if ever. Hey, given a choice I would be on Europa right now and not here finishing a crunchy bug.

^Hey Fa, what are you doing? It is Froth Day! Live it up some.^

I offer Pok the other bug, which he accepts gladly, offering some wasabi fish in return.

+I miss them.+

^Who?^ He shows amusement.

^We will have our own adventures. Lots of them.^ He gives me a hug.

+Put on some weight I see.+

^Too many bugs on a stick. A new Ku restaurant with Hu Plains accents has opened. I have tickets for the opening. Silas, Sam and Xot will be there as well.^ There are still Plains Hu who live the old ways in spite of the fact that Pushy Paws has been in slow time since the Froth. She is determined to figure it out. I am amazed that a culture with little oversight can remain so well tech contained. Helps of course that they are off limits to the higher tech settlements on the coast and other continents.

+Old friends. That would be good. Remember that time in class when we got Xot to try and fillet a haslot fish?+

^That was good. Or the time . . . ^
Attention everyone! We need volunteers to check out a mystery on Pink. The resident sens are all gone.
+So much for Europa.+
^Aren't they a colonial organism?^
+Latest theory says that might be the case. No one knows how many actual lines there are though. They mix and recombine across clones. By the time we see one they are chimera all the way through.+
^And they are reluctant to be scanned or analyzed. A private matter. Hey, I thought as 'lan you had to stay on Ku inhabited worlds.^
+I can leave for short periods of time. All I have to do is touch a few to catch up. I am not Ci'lan.+
Would not help. Their DNA is far more complex than ours. Plantimals are a pain. Garfield.
+So are Cats, but we put up with you.+ I give him a back rub while I am saying this.
^Speaking of which, where is Pu and Nipper?^
They went with Oz on some mission to Fist. Something about a Cat like species from sector twelve dash five seven that has just arrived. Four of them. One of the randoms those ants brought in. I have had enough Cats after Brown.
I show amusement. That was a long time ago. You would think he would be over that by now. +And we are stuck here looking for lost Pinks. Great.+
We had a lot of trouble with the OMs at first. Well, all except on Pink. Nothing foreign grows there. Make an enclave and nothing leaves it. On every plant animal world the OMs were adamant on no foreign plant material. This made the eateries upset as well as many cultural traditions. They adapted though. On nearly every world there was some substitute. Granted it often took time to find it and learn to cultivate it. But we had seven hundred years.

No Where

The froth flip was uneventful. A big disappointment really. A lot of intensity, but I know all about that. Sort of like the flu that gave me TK in the first place, only a million times worse. Not fun, but its over, so no matter.

Where are we? I sense each of you, but cannot see you.

That is because we no longer have physical form. Nothing physical can cross the un-reality barrier.

You seem to know something of this place.

It is not a place. We only know what has been told in circle. We can't go back to where we came from. It no longer exists.

Ah, a challenge.

I would imagine that would make getting information back rather difficult.

We can't go back.

Why not?

Our previous reality no longer exists. We are outside of time and space. In no time, no space. All is now, nothing is now.

I laugh, well, it would be a laugh if I was corporal. I can hear everything that is thought. I assume they feel/see the same.

I can't remember my name. I still remember my life, but not my name. It seems somehow confusing.

We have lived many many lives in many forms, times and conditions.

I am beginning to remember. We are the first ones. Four of them anyway. There were Thirteen at the end, or the beginning, depending on how you reckon it.

Twelve apostles and one Jesus. Thirteen total. Jesus should be here with us. He wanted to be with the original First Ones again.

I sensed him while on Froth Point. He is here and not here. We can only sense each other because we came through together. He probably followed us in later.

We are not in sync with the others at the moment.

Must be near impossible for all Thirteen to be in sync.

I am beginning to sense surroundings. We are in a massive array of spheres, or what appear to be spheres.

Our essence does the best it can with past understandings. They are not spheres of course. Each 'sphere' is a Froth Universe, an essentially infinite number.

How come we don't see the differences in size? Shouldn't the ones who have gone through more froth events be larger.

Beyond our senses at the moment.

How long do we stay and what happens next?

The rest of us project amusement.

You were always the slowest on the wake up.

That's because I go in the deepest. Try it sometime. Somewhere, whatever.

If I remember now, then we need to make decisions about what to try next. All sentients are some combination of the Thirteen. Only the pure can be aware while not here. Soon we will remember everything from the beginning to the end. Then we will make the decision about what life we want to experience next.

This time we are together from the beginning and we maintain awareness of all that we are.

An orientation run. Good idea.

Could even be fun.

We can learn only so much during immersion. Need to see it from the observer level as well.

The Diversity Imperative Rules.

You don't think we will ever figure it out do you?

Nah, got anything else to do?

Nope.

The Gang of Four strikes again!