



The Guardians of Br'thn

Deep Cover

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Among the Rocks

There are predators about. Always are during nesting. From time before time predators follow and wait until nesting. That is when we are at our most vulnerable. The fems cannot fight while laying. For three small moons we watch and wait. It does not always happen. Maybe this time our clan will be lucky. Maybe this time they will gorge on the other troupe and leave us alone. Maybe this time.

“All clear! They come!” The fems stay in hiding until it is pronounced safe. No point in being eaten for no reason. Dropping your eggs is a sad loss, but less of a loss than an adult fem. Many hatchlings die each large moon turn. Can't be helped.

I come to attention. It is forbidden to look upon the fem themselves. Doing so is instant death by a fore watch. Our eyes are to be to the outside. To watch for the leapers, sneaks and crafters. The fore watch is of the inner circle. If we fail they take up arms to protect as the fems retreat to shelter. If we fail an entire clutch will be food for others. We will not fail. It is better to die than to fail, for failure will mean our own deaths anyway. Better to die protecting than for being a coward. Faster anyway. Much faster.

We have not had a coward in five large moons. I was a follower then and immune to death punishment. It was still scary. Something you never forget. The screams could be heard for lines and lines. We were all required to watch. We were all required to take the flesh into our mouths to taste what a coward tastes like. We then spit it out for the cleaners. It is said even they will not eat the flesh of cowards. We did not stay to find out. The cleaners are on the dark side of a band. They follow us, not we them.

I hear the sounds of eggs being laid. They do not call out, but there are still sounds of the eggs being pushed out and carefully laid to rest on the warm rocks. We are at the very edge of the band. Close to the sun edge. Too hot beyond the sun edge for life. It provides the best wall against predators. We guard the cool side of the nest. In three small moons though the sun edge will be far away and we will have to cover all sides.

The eggs will have hatched by then and that's when it gets tricky. The hatchlings are hard to control and the predators know that. They wait until then to attack. Different species and yet they work together for the good of them all. They breed much faster than we do and no matter how many we kill for the cleaners or eat they still come.

I handle my weapon. Sun forged and very sharp. I use it to idly sharpen my own spikes. The weapon is stronger by far, but many an aftwatcher has survived by using them. Five parts are aftwatchers. Four parts are fore watchers and three parts are fem. The holy numbers are preserved.

The low light gatherers are opening. They have cooled off enough to expose themselves. Open too early and they dry out before the rains comes.

“They come!” Burns! Each time I fear. Each time they come. Just once I wish they would not. The High Fem says it is the way of things. All must eat to survive. As we are predators, so we are prey. The only exception are the low light gatherers. They run the extremes, the cold and the hot. They grow and reproduce during the bands. On this band they spawn when the light goes low enough. On the other band they encyst as the light grows high. The low predators prey on the low light gatherers, the young of all eat the low predators. And so it goes.

The sneaks come first. They hide behind rocks and wait for the fighting to start. They hope to get past when we are distracted. One sees me seeing it. Instead of hiding it comes into the open and pretends to be injured. If I were to go after it I would leave a gap in the guard and others would get past. As soon as it realized that I am not going to be fooled it quickly hides again.

Crafters! They fashion disguises that look very much like the rocks with low lights growing on them. They move very slowly. Some are likely even in place in the nest itself. The ones I see are the losers, the ones who chose the wrong spot to catch one of us. Very hard to spot.

I pass it along, “Crafters spotted. Check your rocks.” In the nest is where the winners will be. I hear the message repeated. We don't always see crafters. If this was a previous killing field they would not be here. Most clans will avoid a killing field and so they know to avoid them too. Bad luck. That means this has not been a killing field for some time.

I hear the aftwatcher next to me shout, “Leapers!” Burns! I pull all four weapons. One jumps off a crafter rock and nearly slips when the rock moves unexpectedly under it. I reach out as far as I can and slice it in two. I immediately re-assume my stance. More come and I slice as many as I can reach. Time is a blur as I kill more and more. A sneak trying to run past and I catch it between a leg knife and a leg spike. The corpses pile up around me. Already scavengers are gorging themselves on them. I ignore them and pay attention to what is in front of me.

Burns! One gets past me. I don't dare turn to pursue it. I can only hope

a fore watcher catches it. Or, shudder, a fem. They get really nasty if they have to dispatch a predator. Maybe I will be lucky and die today.

A lull in the onslaught. I look up and around me. Holy Fem in the North! I am in the middle of a field of death. Blood covers everything. Why are so many trying? They are dumb, but not stupid. When they see a lost cause they search out easier prey. This time they kept coming.

We are fewer in number. Noticeably. We lose our kind every day somewhere on this world. Best not to make associations. I dare not look behind me of course and do not use rear sight either. Any other time and I would hesitate, but during a laying it is forbidden. I have to remind myself. I have never seen loses such as this before of either prey or predator. I admit I am afraid.

Then I make the mistake of looking up over the ridge in front of me. What I see is an endless streaming of sneaks, crafters and finally leapers chasing them all. The leapers are jumping on the sneaks and killing them. The crafters trap and kill anyone that comes within reach. Sometimes there is a struggle and no clear winner. We have set down in the middle of a predator route! This is a horrible mistake. I dare not even think it. Our High Fem will be taken down for this. We will be given to other clans as aftwatcher slaves. If we survive this pass.

I ready myself as they come up the from the gully below us. We are on the high ground at least. A small advantage. No more time to think. I react.

I awake to wind, cold and a soft drizzle. Has so much time passed that I am now at the middle of the band? I remember little of the events of the last few little moons. Just the constant and exhausting slashing. The blur of faces of death haunts me. I have collapsed over a rock. Enough of those. Soon there will be a torrent if I don't get closer to the sun edge.

I must get up. When I try I find I am shaking from exhaustion. I have fought too long and hard. I need food. I rise higher to search the ground around me. Maybe the scavengers have left some scraps. I must have been protected by my personal spikes as I sense no hurt from wounds. Most will think twice before attacking a watcher, even one asleep. It is the young they relish.

That is when I notice that I am astride an egg. I back off in a hurry and then stop to look around me. Two fore watchers lay dead next to me. Three aftwatchers further out. Hundreds of predators in a vast circle around us. No fems, thank the High Fem. She at least got them out.

I look back at the egg. I place a forehead on it. It is still warm. It may still live. If I don't move it, it will soon die, even though the rocks

themselves still retain some heat from the sun. It may still hatch here, but with only me it could never survive. Do I leave it for the predators and try to find my clan?

No, I must rescue what may be the only member of my clan I will ever see again. First I feast on the remains of those around me. Starvation will hinder our safety more than revulsion. Too many dead for the scavengers who are about. Easy to find untouched meat.

Carrying an egg is not the easiest task for an aftwatcher. We are not designed for such a task. It will be many moons before my form adjusts. And I will not have the benefit of a teacher nor examples. I dare not drop it. Why did the High Fem choose such a nesting ground off the travel trails? My only hope is to get to the trails. I will have to worry about passing clans, but they are easier to deal with than another horde of predators.

I slip several times crossing crevices and cracks in the ground. I am still very tired and not used to the egg. I do the best I can holding it against my underside. The spikes there have not yet softened to receive it, but are also unlikely to puncture the egg at least.

My only thought now is to walk towards the sun. I must have come this way before, though I do not remember it. Perhaps I was still in training or asleep on the back of a fem or I am now on a new line.

The sun tries to recede as I try to catch it. To fail now is certain death, for unlike the low light gatherers I cannot weather the dark side and live. Walk or die. Walk or die. Sleep is only for those too old or too injured to go on. I am neither. Just with egg. Some would count that worse.

I cannot hold a weapon in my forehand and the egg at the same time. To be without a weapon would be suicidal. I have not come to that. I sling it on my back. Keeping a careful eye out for what follows I make slow progress. I fear it is not enough. It appears as if the sun grows lower in the sky and the wind and now rain worse.

I see a trail! I see the trail! In my excitement I hurry as fast as I can only to trip at the last moment to watch the egg fly from my hands. In slow motion I watch it fall on the trail itself. It bounces once and lays still. I rush to it to examine it thoroughly.

There is a crack! I have failed! I squat on the trail in despair. Now I am totally alone in the world. No clan. Nothing but cruel death awaits me.

When I become aware again I notice the egg wobbling. The wind of course. It would be best now that I smash the egg to put whatever life inside out of pain.

The rain becomes more intense, but I do not move. There is a lull in the wind. The egg wobbles again. How long was I out after the battle? I go over to the egg. I hear sound from the inside. It might be alive? I tap the egg and the sound becomes more intense. I tap next to the crack and it widens. I reach in with a minor spike and widen it further. I finally get to the point where I can reach in with a finger tip. I pry a piece of a shell off and look closer. The light is getting low and we are in the shadow of a larger rock.

I decide it is time whether or not the one inside is ready. To remain here is death for both of us. I would rather at least one of us survives. I don't particularly care which one of us. I rip off whole sections of the shell and a new person rolls out onto the path and rights itself. Better than I was from what I have been told.

“We need to move little buddy.” I pick it up and place it on my back between the spikes on my lower back and over my forelegs. It nestles in instinctively. I start to run. Not a sprint, as I would not last long going that fast and no one is chasing me at the moment.

It would not hurt to be on the lookout for food. He must be hungry. I am now that I am feeling I have purpose again. The trail is wide and easy to see even in the rain and failing light. At this pace it will take me three little moons to make it to safety. I should be able to do that without resting. Food is the main concern now.

One moon passes before I notice anything close by. Not surprising. You would have to be desperate to be near a people's trail. Just a small leaper. I shoot and the arrow goes clean through, but the leaper falls into a crevice too small for me to reach into. I retrieve the arrow. Those are harder to replace than prey. When I pass the crevice again, the little one is coming out with the prey in his arms.

I look on in shock, “When did you get off my back? I felt nothing. And how did you know what to do without directions?” Some hatchlings are amazingly able to do things, but it has only been a moon. Far too soon even for the best of them. He offers the leaper to me. Well, we need the meat. I rip it open and chew on most tender parts and hand them back to him. Once he has them I scoop him up and place him back on my back. I start running again as I eat my portion.

As I find good portions I pass them up to him. Soon he is taking no more. I suspect he may be asleep exhausted from the hatching and run. I quickly finish the rest and suck on the bones to extract everything edible I can. I could use more food if I am going to keep up this pace. Not enough time for grazing the slower but less nutritious forms. I need concentrated.

Wait, that rock, not a rock. An arrow will not work on a crafter, just bounce off. I scare three sneaks as I move towards the crafter. It may have noticed the commotion, but does not move. Hoping I will go after the sneaks. If was a large leaper I would have. Instead I figure out where the head joint is, looks like a crack in the rock, and strike with my sword. Clean cut. It takes more fast cuts to separate the rock cover plates from the rest of the creature. Given enough time I would scrape the underside of the hard plates. I will leave those to the others. I take the main body with me and I am back on the trail working on my next meal.

Not a lot of meat in a crafter. They expend too much energy on making those plates. I can't wait for the perfect meal. Don't have time to cook anything either. Not close enough to the sun to use a concentrator either. Raw old crafter is not as good as well fire roasted young crafter.

Where is everyone else?

I thought that too soon. I see a camp just off the trail to the north. Do I check them out or pass them by? What happened to the rest of my clan? They would have run for sometime as well to get as far away from the slaughter as they could. Back luck to wait around. But how much of a lead did they have? Did they even take this trail or one further to the north or south?

It is likely a scout has already seen me. If this is my clan they will accept me as I am. If not, I need a good gift to avoid being a meal myself. An old partial crafter is unlikely to do. I take the chance.

When I get closer I see the clan banner. It is lower than it should be. I slowly come in. My clan, our clan, or what is left of it. I see only a few around a meager fire.

“Razzel! What? How? We left you for dead.”

“Askeri, Pesslet, Oofik, what happened? Where are the fems? The High Fem?”

“Can you believe him? Half dead he walks in here and he is still worried about them?”

“We don't know Razzel. We fought until we couldn't any longer and when the vermin finally stopped we waited. We did not hear a sound. Finally one of us, none of us will say who, looked with a rear eye. There was no one there. All the eggs were missing. All the fem and fore watchers were gone.”

“And you were dead face down. No movement.”

“None of us wanted to wait till the next wave and we needed to find the others. I can't believe they abandoned us.”

“We were expendable. Just like Razzel here. Right?”

“Right, as we all know. I don't know what happened either. I woke laying on top of an egg.” A large suck of air from the others.

“Broken or they would not have abandoned it.”

“No, intact.” I reach around and pull off the little guy, “Meet our newest clan member.”

“Coldest Razzel, the thing has imprinted on you by now. We are all dead for sure.”

“How so? He is alive and doing well. Better than dead in my story line.”

“Oofik, you would think that. How are you going to feel when Razzel becomes fem or worse yet, High Fem?”

“Never mind that. What's that in your other hand Razzel?”

“Of I forgot.” I hand it over to them. “Just an old crafter. Got a leaper earlier. Fed most of it to the little one.” They descend on it like it is the best slanik eggs. It only takes them a moment.

“Haven't you guys hunted at all?”

“We are too few. We would be found out for sure and end up a meal instead of getting one.”

“That's silly. You are the first I have seen in three moons. Let's hunt!”

“How did he get elected fem?” But they all get up. I place the young one back on my back. He clings fast but seems very curious about the others.

As we run I give more details about my last few moons. They all look at the little one with awe.

“Do you think he is the One?”

“There has not been a One in hundreds of cycles.”

“A thousand more like it. Also means we are in trouble if he is. You remember the story line of the last One? None of the early 'helpers' survived to see the ascension.”

“That would be glorious.” Askeri dances a twirl.

“We will catch nothing making this much noise. Spread out and stay quite. Hunting mode.” They look at me like I used to look at the fems. I sigh. Can't help it if I was chosen. Certainly did not seek it.

The question is, is this a viable hatchling? A defective one would be left behind on purpose. Better to expose a defective than suffer the consequences of it hatching. I could be a simple grunt again in a moment.

A moon and three leapers later we are not full, but strong enough to continue with some hope.

“We must be too far south. We are not gaining on the sun and have met no one else on the path.” The others all look at me to see what I will

say. I don't want the responsibility. It was easier when I just did what was told.

“I am no different from any of you. We all should be dead and I know it. Therefore until we reach our clan or are killed, all decisions are made by all of us.”

“Ah, how exactly does that work Razzel?” Burns, I don't know. I am beginning to regret saving the egg.

I snap back, “Ask the young one. He's the one who got me into this mess.”

Oofik mockingly comes up to me bends over my back and says, “Oh wise one on our friends back, what should we do?”

The others laugh at the attempt, but I hear in my mind, *Take the next path going north, quickly.*

The look on my spikes must have told the others, or they heard as well. I point to the next diagonal trail angling north. No one questions it. Does this happen with all the young ones? Is this how the fem rule? Is this why our High Fem made such a mistake and why they were in a hurry to have more young ones? We have not had any in at least four large moons, nearly a circuit.

I comment, “We will have to go faster if we are to keep up with the sun now. Eventually this will result in less need of speed, but for now we run.” They have all been trained in the paths and I really did not need to say anything. I even feel guilty now. Burns, this is difficult.

No one thinks to hunt now, we just run. He said quickly, so we run. Having clear orders does make it easier. Even the sneaks run from us startled by our sudden appearance.

We slow down some as time passes, but we don't stop until we are nearly exhausted.

Hunt.

They look at me.

“He said to hunt now.”

“Which direction?”

Southwest.

I point. We quietly, slowly move. Attack pattern.

Within moments we come upon nest of leapers with young. They notice us too late.

We build a small fire and quickly roast more than we can eat.

“Save everything we have not eaten. Once we rest we move again. Maybe we won't have to hunt again so soon.” A young one can point out the correct direction and find prey they can't possibly see. How?

We take turns in the front and rear.

An entire large moon passes before we see anything but leapers and sneaks. We don't bother with the crafters.

“Wouldn't it be great to find a bansig?”

“We are too few to run down a bansig. It would taste good though.”

“We lack even the right tools. My sword is so nicked it needs time at a forge.”

“Others ahead, slow up.” I raise my eye stalk spikes as warning.

“They are not flying our clan flag nor any that I recognize.” The rest signify that we have not seen them before either.

“Askeri, you are the oldest of us.” An insult to still be an aftwatcher, but our survival is at stake. “The clan flags have a pattern to them. Have you learned the pattern?”

He bows to me, “Perceptive of you Rezzel. Yes, there is a code. The clan flag ahead of us says they are normally this far north. We are at least three moons run north of where we started.”

“It took us much longer than that to get here.”

“Three moons if you just ran north, not at the angle we ran.”

“That means somehow we were also south of our own line.”

“Yes. Two moons maybe.”

No one says anything. Why would the High Fem put us at such risk? No wonder we saw no one. We were already at the southern edge of what a normal clan would travel and expect to survive. No one but outcasts would be so far south and they don't live long.

“If we are to be considered a new clan, then we need to get further north soon. We are too small to be this far south and survive long.”

“Going north is hazardous too. Less game and more clans to fight.”

I turn around and the others look at our small one as well.

This clan will help. Offer the rest of our food.

“We are to give them all of our food. Hold nothing back.” This is a sign we are requesting asylum at whatever cost they dictate. We have no say in the outcome. A very risky thing to do. They could decide to eat us one at a time and we would do nothing to stop it.

They each nod to me that they understand. We set about making sure we check all pouches and pockets. Not even a crumb or smear remains of our food. We pile it all into the Pesslet's pack, the largest of us, along with all of our weapons. He carries it. Not a lite load. Oofik takes lead. He will be the first killed if they decide to attack. Askeri goes next with our flag held upside down. He would be tortured. Next is Pesslet with the food offering. He would be eaten along with the food. I am last with the small

one. I have never seen what they do to a carrier. I am sure it is not enjoyable. Any clan willing to sacrifice a surviving small one is indeed desperate. I am not convinced we are there yet, but I trust the advice of the small one. Not been wrong yet. We have the fat reserves to prove it. Hope they don't notice that.

We are surrounded quickly. I lower my spikes as far as I can. Less threatening. They remove the food first. Must be hungry. I try not to look, but try to see what I can. They have a few one or two moons and three one circuits. They have not been reproducing any more than we have. Only two fems and not obvious if any of them are High Fem.

They separate us. I am the last they come to. They notice the small one on my back. I have also femmed quite a bit, but not complete. They pinch my stomach area. They know we fed well then. That has to confuse them. We really did not need them. Why offer everything to them then?

Finally one of the fems comes up to me and very carefully starts to remove the small one from my back. A very loud painful scream comes out of the small one. She immediately lets go and he snuggles back into my back. That makes me so happy. I was not sure he would still want to be with me. Now I am confirmed.

“You are not fem enough to have laid the egg.” Not a question. I say nothing.

Pesslet comes up to each of us and hands each of us our weapons back. The food is missing from his pack, but we are still alive. When he tries to hand me my weapons a fore watcher reaches over and indicates no. I am led away towards the two fems.

I am told by one of them, “We do not carry weapons. At least not that they know of. We will instruct you in the ways. You will not associate with them again.”

The other one adds, “You see the fore watcher with the blue top spikes?” I nod. “If you need anything ask one of us or him. Only him. He is the only we converse with. Do not ask questions of him.”

“Only tell him what you need. Do not wait for a response.”

Fem

“We do not use names. Talk to the one you want to tell something to or ask something of. Never use another to ask a question or tell something to another Fem. Never talk with an aftwatcher again. To do so is an offense against all Fem. All offenses against all Fem are dealt with swiftly and permanently. Do you understand?”

“Death.” She nods. No names and talk to no one but another Fem or the lead fore watcher. I liked it better as an aftwatcher.

“If an aftwatcher tries to talk to you ignore them. They no longer exist. If he persists, kill him as you would a farset. We will show you how.” Burns!

“We only mate with the lead fore watcher. No one else, ever, even during a non fertile time.” I raise my spikes. Never knew that. What is mating? Fertile?

“You will have to train your grabber to allow others to handle him, meaning other Fem. Important that he not be attached and obey only one Fem. He must obey them all. This training should have already begun. But, it is understandable why this happened.”

“Does he have a name?”

“Not that he has told me.” They raise spikes all over.

“Have I offended again?”

“What do you mean he has not told you? Please show us your grabber.”

I gently remove him from my back and he curls up in my hands and looks out at them curious.

“Expose his underside please.”

“He does not like that.” They glare at me. I sigh and gently unfold him as he tries to slowly refold himself. I try this several times before I notice everyone has dropped to the ground and has their faces covered, even my friends and all of the new clan.

“Now what?” They do not answer. I place him back on my back and address him, “Do you know what is going on little one?”

They fear me and because of that, they fear you. Burns.

“So, what do I do now?”

Rule. As in High Fem? Is that what it means to be a High Fem? I hatch a special egg and ice, I am a High Fem? This does not make sense. *It is the way it is. Acceptance is required for now.*

You see thoughts? What are they thinking? No response. Limits I

guess.

“We need food and we need to keep going north.” Instantly everyone gets up, organizes the packs and weapons and waits again. This time standing at least.

“If we come across a forge we need to repair our weapons.” What will I use for barter?

You will not need it. This is scaring me too you know. No response.

The lead fore watcher looks to me and waits. I make a move to start forward and everyone moves. They keep me surrounded. At least I am still allowed to run. I could not survive without being able to run. Not that I know of any way to run without, ah, running. Our High Fem certainly ran, though I only ever saw her except from a distance. Our new clan is too small for everyone to spread out that much.

I would certainly feel better with a weapon.

You do not need one. You have me.

Why would ah, grabber, be a threat to anyone? They are one step from being a snack for any one of tens of creatures. Normally we protect them.

Food to left of trail, thirty strides. Crafters with fresh plates.

“Soft crafters on the left.” Lead signals and two of their afts and one of mine take off after them. We continue forward. They catch up a few moments later.

We run for several moons before resting to eat our kill. Grabber and I are given the choice pieces by the other Fem. This feels so strange to me. No one asks me anything. There is no attempt now to train him to be friendly with others.

“Look, I have no idea what is wrong with all of you. I do not know what you know. Please tell me.” Everyone is silent, but obviously scared. I am guessing they are not allowed to talk with us. This is going from bad to worse.

“I am the leader. I order that everyone is allowed to talk with us at any time for any reason.” They look at each other and then to the Lead. He nods and one of their afts comes forward.

He looks down and says, “It is forbidden.” The others immediately descend on him and chop him to bits. He sacrificed himself to tell me this. The bits are scattered among the rocks.

“We run.” I can think of nothing else to do. If I don't run I may kill myself. I imagine that is some high offense too. Probably desecrate my body afterwards in very painful ways. No way into paradise.

We are actually making good time and getting close to the sun edge. I see a forge up ahead. It is set up and waiting. Others are there. A clan

larger than we are.

Order everyone to put their defensive weapons into the forge. They will not need them. Keep only food tools.

“Say nothing to anyone. Place your hacklers into the forge and then catch up with us.” Nasty weapons anyway. Can't be used for hunting. Their only use is to inflict pain on an enemy you want to think twice before attacking again. Of course, they have them too. No one wins in a clan fight. If I am leader and I can ask no questions of them at least I can make this one small change in routine.

The ones already present prepare to defend themselves, then they notice everyone has their hackler in the submissive position. It would harm the attacker more than the one in front of them. Using my rear eye I watch as they quickly add their hacklers to the fire and walk past saying nothing.

A few moments later we are all back together running. This time I direct them to a trail that leads straight north. We are close enough to the sun edge now we can afford it. Besides, there may not be another trail straight north for sometime. They are rare. I can only remember using one going south once before in my life and then only for a short period of time to avoid a large clan. They did not think we were worth going south for. I have to wonder what they would think now.

I check my rear sight and notice the clan at the forge is now behind us. No hacklers drawn, nor are they flying their clan flag. This is strange. I motion for us to halt. When they catch up, they fall on their faces to us. My group remains standing. Honor in being the first ones to recognize whatever this means. Burns, I wish someone would tell me. A moment later their Fems merge with ours. The fore watchers merge and then the aftwatchers. I signal to more forward again. No one says anything. We are no longer a small clan.

I am guessing you do not have a name that I am allowed to know.

Sali.

I am stunned. I have never heard that name. What does it mean? If I learn what the name means will that tell me anything?

An identifier. Nothing more.

“I am guessing I should not say your name out loud.” No response.

I have not been paying attention. We are about to run everyone off a cliff into a crevice.

“HALT!” Everyone stops at once, but not before Lead falls into the crevice silently. Burns!

“Are we all leapers here? If you sense danger let me know somehow.

Raise your hands into the air or do something. No more deaths because of your fear of letting me know. I may be High Fem, but we need to be a team. We are still small compared to the clans we will meet further on. We need all of us to survive.” They all fall to their faces. Oh please stop this. It has been less than one large moon since this change. I am going to jump into the crevice next. I march up to the edge to see what I am up against.

I look over to see Lead stranded on a small outcropping, but not moving.

Go down yourself. Do not let anyone else do this.

“I need rope. He might still be alive.”

A rope is brought up quickly, but the one who has it does not hand it over. I hold out my hand. He looks bewildered.

“Please hand me the rope.” He does so slowly. When I have it he withdraws quickly as if I will bite him.

I hand one end to him, “You are heavier than me, please take this end and assist me. I am going down after him. He ties the rope around his middle and immediately several others grab hold of the rope as well. That should be enough.

I have certainly had enough practice getting into and out of crevices, though this one is rather large. When you are an aft, you do all kinds of unpleasant things. I slowly lower myself down until I reach the outcrop. My body has changed more than I thought. Not as easy as I thought it would be, as it would have been before.

There is just enough room for both of us. I take the rope off of myself and tie it to Lead in such a way as it will be easier and safer for him to be lifted. He does not react, which is probably a good thing. I don't need him struggling or worse, jumping into the depths to avoid my touching him.

I shout up, “Haul him up carefully.” With a sudden jerk and tension I help guide him up as far as I can reach. While I am waiting for them to finish and the rope to return I look around more carefully. There is an amazing amount of life down here. There are burrows into the sides of the walls. Water runs at the bottom. It is cooler down here, but there is plenty of light. A lot of light gatherers on almost every surface. If anything, there is more life down here than above. Movement comes from every type of creature, many I have never seen before.

The way down looks easy. I decide I need to know what else is down there. I slowly make my way lower and fairly easily find my way to the edge of the stream. The water is cold, having come from the cold edge I am guessing, but it tastes good.

I nibble on some of the light gatherers and they taste great too. I catch some young crafters, not even shelled yet. Their flesh is sweet. Everyone above is thin and hungry from the constant running. It might be time for a rest. We are close enough to the sun edge and can even follow the stream down as the sun goes lower. Might also avoid patrols of other clans.

I hear movement and am surprised to see Lead behind me, standing tall and looking around. I nod to him.

“Good to see you up. Call the others to come down. A little moon down here won't hurt us and may save us.” He shows approval and turns to the others.

A short time later I can hear the Fems complaining. They complain the entire way down. Do them good. Once they see all the life they stop complaining and start going for whatever is within reach.

“Lead, let's set up a fire, if enough dead material can be found.” He nods and goes to it. I continue to investigate my surroundings.

I pull grabber off my back, “It might be a good time for you to stretch your legs. Time you started running short distances.”

May you fall into a deep pit!

“Oh quit your complaining. You expect to be carried your entire life? Like that will happen when you serve your term as aft.”

I will never be aft.

“That I have never heard of before.” It is then that I finally notice what everyone else must know by now. I pick him up again and try to find his genitals. On a young one they would not be large and I just assumed that I had not looked carefully enough. Now I do spend the time, but I can't find any.

I go to set him down and in the process see myself. My male parts are gone. I am Fem now. And he, I mean she, is Fem. That is not possible. All hatchlings are hems.

Some hatchlings are always destroyed. It is said they are defective and would be a burden to the others. Is she a defective?

I am fine. This is the way I am.

I am not so sure. All the others certainly have reacted to him, I mean her. Maybe I did not look well enough.

You looked fine. I am fine. Leave me alone.

“Sensitive aren't you?” I laugh. Still I can't be mad. She has helped us too much to be upset. I could see where a normal Fem might be worried about any Fem hatchling if this is typical of them. Does not bother me. I am no High Fem and I know it. I would be totally lost without her. For the time we make a good team.

Sali pokes around in the gatherers taller than she is picking off choice getums off of under surfaces. This does seem like paradise to me. I know it won't last. We will be on the run again soon. I just want to enjoy it as long as I can.

An alarm goes up. A high shriek followed by three thumps. Streakers! Frantically I look around for Sali and finally find him on top of a rock out in the open. I run to grab him, but an almost invisible streak of color goes past me and grabs him off the rock into the air. He is gone! I wail at the top of my lungs. He is gone. She, she is gone! I crumble and faint.

When I awaken everyone is frantic. More streakers appear and harass us. The one with Sali is flying around in circles above us. Several are aiming with arrows.

I yell, "She can't fly! Don't shoot!" They freeze. I have said it out loud. No hiding it now. Maybe it is best. Maybe she really is defective. One of the other Fems can take over and I will go on alone, too ashamed to face anyone, to die eaten by a horde of leapers.

I hear a gasp and can't help but look up. A streaker flies up close to me and lands next to me. Sali is on top as if this is a natural way to travel. As the streaker calms down, Sali climbs off and pats the streaker on the neck in thanks. Immediately arrows are pointed at the streaker.

"Don't. Let the streaker be. No harm was done." The other streakers don't think this though and are still raising a ruckus.

I needed a better way to see at a distance. He will be useful.

I look at her, "You mean you asked to be caught? You could have been killed!"

Everyone falls to the ground again.

"What do we call him?"

Roger.

"Roger? Another strange name. First you want to be called Sali and now this mortal enemy wants to be called Roger." It shrieks in response, but makes no threats to any of us.

Feed him.

Now I am feeding my mortal enemies.

That is how they become your friends. You fed me remember.

I motion for some of the cooked food. Some is handed to me. The shrieker watches all of this carefully. I don't want to get that close to the extremely sharp beak, so I throw some up in the air in front of it and it leaps and grabs it to swallow it whole. Disgusting, but I continue to throw meat up into the air until it starts to slow.

"I think we have a new kind of watcher, a sky watcher." Approval

goes though the group. I wonder if more can be brought to service. Others have thought of this before me and are attempting to persuade a brave one closer to them. For too long we have been enemies. It is very cautious and does not get within sword reach.

I turn to Sali, "Talk to him please. Better if we have several sky watchers in our service. Other clans are likely to try and shoot Roger out of the sky, especially if he is the only one."

I am fine?

"You are perfect. You are wonderful. You are the most important person in the entire world."

She pauses before saying, *Good enough for now. For now?*

Their first choice flies away too cautious to try it, but two more thinner hungry streakers come forward cautiously and accept meat from the hands of two aftwatchers.

"Roger will stay with us. You two aftwatchers are promoted to skywatcher wardens. You are responsible for their feeding and training." They turn to face me and I see that it is Oofik and Pesslet. Good for them. I smile and nod to them. It would be better if I don't find a task for Askeri just yet. Better to spread the tasks among everyone.

"You are still answerable to the fore watchers and Fems." They get serious and bow. That will cool some of the enthusiasm. I have to remember that I am accountable to everyone.

It would appear I have chosen the right High Fem to serve me.

Thanks.

It gets much more difficult further north.

"Why do we have to go north? How far does this crevice go? I am very happy here."

It does not go all the way around. Yeah, I figured that would be the way. Well I can enjoy it for the moment. I'm just happy Sali did not get eaten.

So am I.

How did you get the streaker to let you go?

I talked to him. They really are interesting creatures. Good story tellers.

Oh, what did they say about the area around us?

They avoid the flat lands and prefer to travel the wind inside the crevices. Fewer six legs, that is us, that try to kill them.

Then why did they try to eat you?

They don't try to eat us. Too many spikes. They catch the little ones and then drop them from high in the sky.

Reduces the numbers of us.

We spend the next two little moons slowly making our way towards the sun edge at the bottom of the crevice. It was a wonderful time. Lots of food for very little effort. The Streakers proved to be wonderful helpers and adapted to us easily. Maybe too easily. There were always several near us trying to get adopted. They also had a tendency to drop waste on us if we did not come through with food. We took to making shelters for our eating areas out of what low gatherers we could spare along with leaper skins cured over a fire. Portable enough to carry with us. Several aftwatchers took to doing this as their task.

What was really interesting were the crafters, sneaks and leapers. I had always assumed that they somehow followed the band as we did. Why I never thought of the fact that the crafters and sneaks could not possibly have run fast enough never occurred to me. Now I know the answer. They don't try. They dig deep borrows into the sides of the crevices and hide their until the band comes through again. It is not just the non movers that have a way to survive without running.

Lead comes up to me, "We have trouble. We have to turn around and go back." He is talking to me at least. Big improvement.

"But the sun has moved away from us far enough that the place we came into the crevice is likely under ice by now." He nods his understanding.

"Why can't we get out further along?"

"No path along the edge. Water comes up to steep cliffs on both sides."

"Is there no way? Can anyone get up the cliff to lower a rope?"

"The rope would be too heavy to cover that height."

Send one up without a rope and then have Roger carry a thin rope up to the one on top. Attach the thin rope to the thicker rope. The one on top then pulls up the thinner rope and eventually the thicker rope.

I look at Sali in amazement.

"What are you?"

I explain to Lead what needs to be done. He too is amazed. He looks carefully at the two of us. He then turns and runs to the people who will make this happen.

We had fifteen people total to bring up. The smallest ones rode on the backs of others. The strongest went up first under their own power. They then helped haul the last up, including Sali and me.

We lost too much time getting up the cliff. We are two thirds into the band. On top we can see the lake clearly. It is huge and we are on the

south side. I wanted to be on the north side, but the cliff was not climbable on the north side. We can't go back to the narrow section. I can see the storm clouds and white snow on the plains from here. By the time we got there we would all be frozen. We have no choice, we have to go south to get around the lake.

I am sure that it is an empty basin on the sun side and frozen solid on the cold side. Both would have made it possible to cross, but neither one we could live in. We have to go south because the this much water is presently liquid.

Everyone is clearly despondent over the move. I try keeping my optimism up by remembering that we are all now well rounded from the food we had. I believe it was worth it for the rest we got. Life is hard. I must never forget that.

Sali is getting bigger. I make her run along with me more time each moon. She is also getting stronger. She has lots of helpful ideas, for which I am thankful, but we need to be strong as well. Even she admits that she thinks more clearly after a good run, but also complains each time. Food is hard to find this far back of the edge. Others are likely to have gotten it or scared the game away. We are getting thinner fast.

Roger and the others report the end of the lake. There is a trail across with a bridge. Six legs are there as well.

“Burns. That means they expect to extract a trade for passage.” We can always wait until it is too cold for the blockers, but that will put us even further behind and likely kill us. They know this of course. They will be fat from the food extracted from others and will not suffer as we would.

I tell Lead what is coming, “I am open to ideas from anyone. We need to get across soon. We can't wait long. I don't know everything, neither does Sali. All of our survival is at stake.”

Confrontation

“They outnumber us five to one. I am guessing they are this large because most clans are much larger than we are and this is the size that they needed to keep here to hold the location. From larger clans they probably ask very little. Neither side would see a battle as worth it. From us however, this close to the cold edge, they can ask for the entire band and we could do nothing about it. They could even wait until we die and eat our bones.”

“Time is running out. Send a small group, a few aftwatchers, to find out what they want in return for passage. In the meantime we need to work on an alternative.”

I go to the other Fems. They are the ones with the most experience.

“You have seen many circuits as Fems. Teach me what you know or we all perish. It is time to put aside your feelings about me and Sali.”

“You don't know the stories. She is The One.”

“You mean this is the first time a Fem has hatched? Even I know mistakes sometimes happen and usually they are dealt with immediately. Had I known of this I would have done the deed myself. It is the keeping of secrets that caused this situation. I never wanted to be Fem, never aspired to the position. Maybe the fore watchers eventually, but never the Fem. If there was a way to reverse the situation and make all this go away I would take it.”

“You are close to what will be asked.” They say nothing more.

Two of the three aftwatchers come back. Lead talks to them and then comes to me.

“They ate the third in front of the two they let come back. I'm sorry. It was Askeri. They ate him raw, as he was dying.”

“I was hoping he would play an important role, but this is not that I had in mind. Tell me the rest. What do they want?”

“Forgive me High Fem. I do not wish to die this day.”

“Have I behaved as normal High Fem acts?”

“No, definitely not.”

“Then tell me. I won't wield the sword on you.”

“They have asked for you and you alone. You are the price they ask for passage.”

“Ah, the other Fem hinted at this. Doesn't this strike you as a strange request?”

“They know we have nothing of value. Their scouts no doubt told

them. They wish to humiliate us instead. We are all opposed. To lose your High Fem in such a way is a disgrace beyond ability to survive. We will die together in honor, but we will not give you up to them.” He stands firm, but I can also sense he is scared.

Accept the offer. Send all the others ahead. Once they have passed we will come out and offer ourselves to them.

“What did she say?” Lead is worried.

“She has a plan. Get everyone together. We will stay in the rear. It is important to get everyone across before Sali and I arrive at the bridge. I don't trust them. Once on the other side, I need you to wait for us. We will come. Never doubt that.”

“It would be better if you tell no one else of this. We will not act properly if everyone knows.”

“I had not thought of that. See, that is why I need you so much. Do not die today Lead. We need you. I need you.” I am not ready to do this mating thing yet. Cold, I hope I can do at least that right.

“How will you find us?” He is suspicious.

“Roger of course. Or one of the two of you will have to find us.”

Once we are alone I ask Sali, “What is the plan?”

There are a number of possibilities. I have not decided on which would work the best yet.

“Tell me your current favorite then. When are you going to talk like a normal person anyway. Most hatchlings are talking by now.”

I prefer this method. More accurate. Besides, do you really want to be trying to explain things in the words of a two or three large moon?

“I guess not.”

Here is the idea. Hold back the skywatchers. Roger and the others can bring twine and then rope across the gap. We do not need their bridge.

“Right and we are immune from their arrows too I suppose.”

Maybe the water at the bridge is not deep. We would swim under the water.

“Hold it. What is swim? If the water is not deep, we can walk across as we do streams all the time, but the arrows will still sting.”

I could bring a horde of leapers to our defense.

“And how long would it take for them to get here? We would all be frozen by then. You do not have a good idea do you?”

Maybe.

Great. At least this nightmare will be over. Now all that remains is the exact manner of our death. We both should have died at the nest, we just didn't realize it and now it is time to fulfill our destiny.

I move to a position where I can see the bridge easily, but outside of arrow shot. Killing us before the others get across would waste our lives.

“I wonder if showing them exactly who you are might have an effect.”
A swift death? I intend to live through this.

“The first clan we came across revered you. Why should they not behave the same?”

The first clan was from the south, as we are, and know only stories. These are different. They are from further north. They are here to prey on anyone from the south.

“So you are saying that the stories are not true? And somehow they know this to be the real truth?”

No response. She looks away. It is not easy to believe that everything that you have been taught from awakening is untrue. I am not convinced they are wrong. If I did not believe that somehow Sali was the One I would not be going along with all of this. I would have run away and hoped to meet up with some clan who did not know of her.

“Then you are not the One?”

I have not heard the stories, so I don't know.

I am not sure this is enough of an answer.

The other clan is not being good natured about this. Bad enough they want us as payment, they are being sure to extract as much humiliation as possible.

“No, don't resist them!” I am too far away. They hack to death a young aftwatcher who stands up to them. The others back away in shame and continue on. Now we have lost two. Our numbers get smaller. Oh burns, they make everyone else walk over his remains to get past. These are evil people.

You finally figured this out huh?

“You knew?”

Remember my ability? I can hear their thoughts from here. They are very amused by the ignorant nature of our clan. They would have gladly paid the price they demand. Better to lose one Fem than an entire clan.

“They know you are the One?”

They know our clan below believes that.

“Then they have something really special intended for us. They intend to break those beliefs.”

No doubt.

“They are through. They will expect us next. Probably come after us if we don't appear.”

I think about this more. How to make the best entrance. I will die with

dignity no matter what they do. Pain is part of life. The important thing is not not fear death. It helps that I know I am already dead. I feel sorry for Sali most. Barely begun.

I have an idea. We go now. As much dignity as you can walk up the bridge and over it. They will not impede us. Walk as if they are not there. I will take care of the rest. Walk at a normal even pace, not too fast, not too slow. Ignore what every they say or do.

I don't understand but I have come to trust her ideas. I have also learned to follow them without question. Those who question usually make it worse. Sometimes in fun ways. Not fun now though.

With Sali on my back we come out of the rocks and walk toward the bridge. They wait in amusement. Before we get there a large flock of streakers attacks. I see Roger and the other two in the lead. They had been flying low to the water barely visible with all eyes on us. They come up right into the faces of the others and shriek very loud, flutter their wings in the same face and then fly off before the person can react. They then circle around for another pass. Roger comes to us and perches on my shoulder. He has done this before, but especially now he is welcome.

They don't bother us at all. I dare not show amusement, but keep up the normal, even pace, over and across the bridge. They are so busy with the Streakers that they ignore us. Roger shrieks at the flock each time it passes. We are well past them before the assault lets up and all the Streakers disappear suddenly, Roger included.

It helps that I put an idea in their minds that if they follow us worse will happen.

“No doubt. No doubt.”

I also told them that if they try to impede anyone else we will return to seek vengeance.

Using rear sight I see many of them following us.

“Burns, they are following us.”

Give them low positions for some time. They have evil to account for. Accept only aftwatchers. We don't need more who wish to lead others.

“It will be good for the Fem and fore watchers to have to work for survival again. Aft never give commands, the fore and Fem are the evil ones.”

North

“Couldn't you have just told them with your mind talking?”

That would have made me the same as them. They control by controlling other's thoughts. Not by the same method, but the result is the same. They set this all up to have workers broken of their beliefs.

“So you are not controlling me then? I always assumed you were.”

I would not, but then I do not need to. We think very much alike, given different experiences and age differences.

“What about the streakers? Weren't you controlling them.”

Not a possibility. They really enjoyed the idea once explained to them. This clan has killed them for generations.

“Hmm, to help maintain our growing story we need to make it taboo to ever kill a streaker from now on. You don't kill your friends.”

Good idea. Just don't extend this idea to all life forms or we will starve.

“That would be a problem. Glad you did not choose leapers to attack them with.”

Too tasty and they lack the necessary intelligence to be useful.

“They do not run the bands as we do.”

Very good that you understand. Only the streakers and the people run the bands. All else find other means.

“Deep underground. How does that work though? Doesn't it still get too hot and too cold?”

The amount of stone and rock above them tempers the temperature so that it changes very little. The low gatherers cannot live without light though.

“Then how do they survive? Everything must eat to survive.”

They gather the seeds and dried material to their borrows to feed on during the hard times.

“That explains why they are forever stuffing material into those pouches on their faces. They aren't eating it, they are gathering it.”

Then it occurs to me.

“Could we not also gather seeds and non rotting materials to save for hard times?”

Most of the seeds are where?

“At the cold side of the band, just before everything freezes. With all the leapers present, there will more competition than from even other clans though.”

What is at the sun side that can be gathered before anyone else can acquire them?

“The sun side is different. There are pods with hard husks, but as soon as they cool and get wet from the first rains they quickly become soft and rot if not in rock cracks. Only good to eat for a moment if not on the ground where they quickly spread over the rock to gather light and moisture.”

Then keep them dry. Cold should not matter as much as keeping them dry.

“How do you do that? Everything gets wet when the rains come. Only the living do not rot, or not as quickly.”

We have a puzzle then.

“What's a puzzle?”

An unknown idea that is possible to know, if one is clever enough.

“How do you know so much?”

I can see everyone's mind. I gather ideas from many.

“But you must also be clever to put them together. We all tell stories at fireside, but not everyone can be clever.”

Roger comes up suddenly and perches on my shoulder again.

“I hope you had a good time Roger. Glad to see you again.”

He thanks you for the permission to smite his enemies. It was glorious and will be told of for the rest of time. All clans who fly the red banner with the streaker on it will be friends.

“I also suspect that soon every streaker clan will learn of this tactic.”

Sali laughs out loud. I look to the emblem I am required to wear. The same on our flag. It does look sort of like a streaker. Never thought of that before.

“So be it. We are the streaker clan from this point on.”

We are close. Roger sees them. They are on high ground looking for us. Roger takes off towards them and is met by the two other streakers in mid air. They circle around each other in joy. No doubt Roger is telling them of the battle. Not much of a battle where no one is killed or hurt.

Their pride was hurt. Far more effective.

When we get to the others everyone is excited.

Lead tells us, “We all watched from up here. Amazing. You really are the High Fem.” He bows to us but does not reveal that it is really Sali. Our secret. I am strong enough to fend off a minor assailant. I am not sure Sali is.

“From now on we are the streaker clan. All Streakers will honor us and they will never hurt us. We will do our part to protect and honor them

in return.”

Chants of “Streaker, streaker,” goes though out our remaining remembers.

“They follow us to attack us!” Lead announces. Immediately everyone goes to battle positions around us.

I shout down to the followers, “Only the aftwatchers are welcome. All else must return to the bridge until we are out of sight. If we see you again we will attack with arms and Streakers. If you ever hurt another streaker they will attack you without mercy.” Most look to the skies again anticipating another attack. Some try to convince the aftwatchers to not come up to us and to return with to their own clan. Most keep coming. I have no doubt that they were abused under these leaders.

Lead comments, “They outnumber us three to one.” I am aware of this, but I don't know how to prevent it.

Make all of our people fore watchers and invite enough streakers for each of them and the Fem. We need to be sure they understand they are at a lower position to begin with.

“Otherwise they will try and take over our clan and rule us.” Roger takes off and circles around crying. Soon a huge cloud of streakers arrive chattering so loud it is hard to think.

“Tell Roger we only need ten.”

Which ones?

“I don't know. The young will adapt the easiest, but the older will have more experience and knowledge.”

Two young ones to teach the older and eight experienced. We need them the most.

Roger goes into the center of the cloud and after a time most fly off. The selection has been made. A streaker settles to the ground next to each of our people.

“Go ahead. Give them something from your pack. Anything edible will do at this point. Pick up low gatherers if you have to. You are the only one allowed to offer your streaker food. Decide on a name and repeat it often when giving food.”

We need more food fast. There is almost nothing in their packs.

“Or on the ground. The others have stripped the surfaces bare. We need to run. I want the new ones to have to work to catch up. Fortunately it is downhill for us and uphill for them.”

I like your thinking.

Lead announces, “We run!”

They form up around us. The two Fem rush to get into their positions.

We run proud, even if on empty stomachs.

We are far from the sun edge. Get as close as you can. We need to see if we can do something about the seeds there. We need to stay as close to the sun edge as we can. Gather as much water as we can hold in our skins as well. It will be dry at the edge.

I pass the information on to Lead and he takes the front. It is nearly a little moon before the others catch up. We finish up our rest and start running as soon as they arrive. They don't dare rest now.

You torture them too much and they will turn on us.

"It does not help that all of our Streakers squawk at them when they get close."

It was their leaders who did the evil. You were an aft. Have you forgotten already what it was like? Did you ever even think of disobeying an order?

"It is also very rude to demand entrance into another clan, no matter how small. You petition and make an offering, even if only a token."

And you have given this opportunity when?

"How old are you?" They killed one of ours and fully intended to kill me. I am not too happy with them at the moment.

All the same I relax a bit and slow down the pace. They catch up but maintain a respectful distance. We lost a lot of time going around the lake and waiting to get across the bridge. I blame them for that as well. However, we will do better working together than apart.

I call a rest a little before it is needed. They stop a safe distance from the us and the Streakers.

"Tell Roger to pass the word not to attack them unless they try to harm us." I turn to Lead just as he comes up to us, "We need to meet with them."

The three of us, without anyone else, walk over to their circle. They rise to attention. I can see their nervousness.

We wait.

They are confused. They don't know what to do. They are only afts. Normally negotiations are handled through the fores.

That explains much and I should have realized it. From my rear sight I notice that our own are at full attention ready to come in if needed.

"Lead you will handle negotiations for them as they lack a fore watcher."

"You understand that in doing so I am honor bound to get the best I can for them?" Excellent. I nod approval and try not to smile. This will help a lot. I can always feign ignorance, never having been at a

negotiation myself. I know I wanted them to suffer, but Sali is right, it would only bring hate and pain to us all.

I turn to Lead, "What do you offer us to join our clan?" Lead nods and turns to them and discusses with them out of my hearing.

No, I will not tell you what they are discussing. However, never accept the first offering. That would be an insult.

Lead comes back to us with several of them next to him.

"We do not have food. That was left with the bridge clan."

I raise concern and show disappointment.

"We have strong backs and are willing to maintain in subservient positions for two large moons."

"We are also strong and have done well by ourselves as you have seen. What need to we have for more backs?"

More discussion.

"You do not know the north. We do. You will need our experience. There are many dangers here for the, ah, uninformed." I am guessing they used a different word when they told this to Lead. Never mind.

"I think it is time you all understand who you will be serving.

Don't do it.

I turn to Sali, who is at my side for a change, "They have a right to know. Anyone who joins us has that right. Once they are committed it is a very worst offense to leave us. They commit for life and death. This is not a game."

Good, now they also understand what is at stake. I thought you did not manipulate me?

I guessed, I did not force. It's just so embarrassing.

"I was an aft a short time ago." That gets a response of surprise.

"All those around me were killed in a massive leaper attack. When I awoke I was covering an egg. I did my duty and tried everything to save the egg. While crossing a crevice I slipped and the egg dropped on the ground and cracked." Another gasp.

"Thinking I had killed the egg I went into despair. But a miracle happened. The egg was not dead. I had cracked it just at the time of hatching. I helped the young one to emerge. We have been on many adventures since, including reuniting with three of those I served with. Two of whom are still alive and with us now."

Lead asks, "Then why did you end up High Fem of us all, much less Fem? Why didn't you return to your aft position?"

"This is why." I turn to Sali who reluctantly exposes herself. Strange that she is so sensitive about that. No one else would be that I know of or

had met.

“This is the state she was in when born. She has not changed except in size since.”

“The stories that we were told were silly old southerner fantasies are actually true?” Lead turns to the new ones when he says this. They nearly shake out of their skins and drop to the ground.

“We accept your admittance to our clan. You will serve one circuit as aft. After that those who have proven themselves will advance. Others are likely to join us. Their joining will not affect this arrangement. You followed orders as I have done when I was aft. I understand this. But, you have to accept some responsibility for your actions. I would rather you ran away from this clan than follow an order that was wrong in your heart.”

Lead tells them, “Rise. All who accept service in the Streaker Clan come with us. Any who wish to return to the bridge clan or take their chances alone may do so. We do not force others.” Lead comes back to us and we proceed to the others waiting.

“Let's show our new recruits what it means to be part of Streaker Clan. We run!” He sets a good pace. Pride does that. Promotion to fore watcher helps too. The real Streakers take off and fly in formation. That is something I have never seen before.

They are actually quite intelligent. A creature I can work with.

“Until they find something that feeds them better or amuses them more. I have definitely noticed Roger watching everything we do.”

They are curious.

We are in a hilly area. A lot of up the hill, then down the hill. A nice variation, but it gets old quickly. At first some of the new fore watchers are behind us until Lead pushes them to the front where their new position demands. This encourages the new afts to fulfill their role properly instead of worrying about what we will do to them next. The Streakers are good for the fore watchers. They extend their range by a huge margin.

“What have you been getting from the new ones?”

A lot of ideas that don't make sense to me yet. There are creatures before us we probably don't want to meet and clans that are even worse.

“Burns. A nice thing about the south. A lot fewer clans to run in to.” Usually we run away. Lots of space and not worth dying for pride.

Things are much different in the north.

Lead announces, “Clan seen!”

“I am guessing that your ah condition will not mean as much to

them.”

True. I am surprised that our new members reacted actually.

“Might have something to do with the nature of the attack at the bridge. They know we are different.”

I move up to Lead, “I want more information on the clan before us. Send out two Streakers. More will draw attention. Let the handlers get in front a ways too. Relay the streaker report to Roger and the fore watcher report to you.” He nods and runs ahead.

The Fems come up to me, “We will need to lay eggs soon.”

“Burns, I had not thought of that. You did the mating thing?”

“Of course. It is our duty to bring new members into the clan.”

“This is not a good time.”

“We had no way of knowing that. We were the lead Fems before you arrived. It was a good time then. Our numbers were dangerously small.”

“I remember and you were right. We would have done the same if we could. I was not yet changed.”

“Nothing stopping you now. You should mate.”

“I have never been instructed.”

“The Lead has had enough experience.”

“Maybe after Sali gets a little bigger. I wish he trusted you two more.”

They shrug. She adjusts herself on my back and digs in a spike. I remove her from my back without thinking and let her walk.

I go up to Lead, “Change in plans. The Fems are ready to lay. We need to get to the sun edge as soon as possible.”

“They are just now telling you this? Should have told you several small moons ago.” He grumbles. Ah, they are playing nasty. Not that it would have mattered. We were in mid band. A horrible place to have a nest. Probably would have changed the outcome at the bridge.

“Watching and planning everything is painful to my mind.”

Lead sends a fore watcher to the afts and another out to meet the two who went to look at the new clan. We change direction and go straight into the sun. We will go no further north until hatching.

As soon as we reach the edge Lead looks for a good nesting location and chooses a shallow crevice without water at the bottom. It is a little deeper than we are tall. That will help hide our numbers at least. A streaker circles high overhead. I am guessing it is not one of ours. Roger takes off to meet it. The two circle each other, but then Roger attacks the other and drives it off. Several other of our Streakers take off as Roger comes back. They will keep watch from above and just by their presence discourage other streakers from getting close.

The two Fems choose nest sites and go about piling small rocks into patterns they think will be lucky to bring about a good hatching. I have seen these patterns after the fact. This is the first time I have been able to witness the actual construction. A lot of ritual and special prayers involved. I swoon thinking about how much I have to learn yet.

The afts do their part without comment. They assume positions around the nest, but below the level of the crevice. Two of our fore watchers assume positions above the crevice pretending to be playing the bones. They will keep watch along with the Streakers who come and go. The Streaker's behavior makes it look like a lot of death has occurred here and makes the Fems nervous, but I actually think it is a great idea. No one will come near a death zone, not even a larger clan.

I hear the usual grunts and sounds I have heard many times, but now I see exactly what is happening. Even Lead turns away as do all the others. Maybe I should too, but no one tells me otherwise.

Fascinating isn't it?

Looks painful is what I think. Burns! A Fem lets out a squawk or scream and the eggs comes out. It is huge compared to the size of her behind. How could I not notice something so huge in someone without noticing.

Leaper eggs are actually larger in proportion to body size. I don't care. I'm not doing that. No way.

I don't think it is optional.

I whisper not knowing if I am allowed to talk, even though I know she can read me, "What about you? Are you sure you want to do this?"

Mating is fun. Hard to pass that up. What happens next is normal. Besides, I am not normal. Maybe it won't be expected of me. I would not count on it. Maybe they will not allow you to do anything else. You are Fem. Maybe they will even start you early, maybe even by the fifth circuit.

You are depressing me.

The two Fems will now watch, test temperatures of the eggs and roll them regularly for the small moons until they hatch. Hatching time varies depending on a lot of variables, but we will stay until at least the fifth little moon.

Nothing ever hatches after five moons. Having a fifth moon egg is bad luck and often a Fem will leave the clan if this happens for fear of bringing even more bad luck to the clan. Some say that mating with a different Lead might help prevent a second occurrence of a late egg. Maybe the Fems will seek out a new clan. Most clans will take in a Fem

as long as they declare allegiance to the current High Fem.

I go up to Lead, "Send out two fore watchers in batches to look for seeds. Sali thinks we might be able to store them somehow and eat them later at need. Not too many, just enough to try the idea out." He nods and goes sun ward to the closest fore watcher. He will have to back up without using rearsight to get back to his position of honor.

Maybe I am trying too many ideas at once. Normally change takes generations. Well, Sali and I are different. This is our chance. Maybe it won't work, but if it does it will help us tremendously.

I hear movement and turn to see Roger pounce on a leaper who foolishly decided to see what we were doing. A nice snack for him. Three moons and we will be some distance from the sun edge.

"Sali, since we are the only two who are free to move, let's check out whatever is close by. Not too far. I need to learn by watching, but we have time."

She scurries ahead of me looking into every burrow and under every type of low gatherer that has opened up so far. They sure open fast. As soon as the temperature drops below some level they understand they move faster than I can see and suddenly there is a full light gathering surface collecting the sun to turn into food. I guess they have to work fast as they don't have much time before the leapers, sneaks and especially the crafters descend on them.

I don't think the crafters normally eat meat. Probably only fresh kill if they are lucky enough to happen on it. I watch a few small crafters slowly move towards the new gatherers and start to climb the vertical shafts towards the spread out portions. Soon they turn the color of the gatherers themselves as they eat their way to the outer edges and back again. Their path is easy to follow I wonder why they bother changing color to match.

Of course not every creature is smart enough to follow the trail left behind and seek out movement as a clue. Crafters move too slowly to be noticed by most creatures. A small gatherer accidentally runs in to a crafter and the crafter shuts up tight and stops moving. The small one pays no attention scurrying about like a smaller Sali looking for its favorite food. Not tasty enough to be bothered with.

Interesting. You have to come here to see this old crafter.

She projects images as well as thoughts, so I am able to find her looking at rock surface. She turns to look at me when I arrive.

Look at the scars on this rock surface. Notice the shape. Now come and look at this old crafter. Imagine the crafter resting in the spot on the rock I pointed out.

I look back and forth between the two. It takes me a moment. I have not done this before, but then it freezes in my mind.

“They match? But why?” I go up to the rock and feel the surface. The edges of the pattern are very smooth, but inside the patterns is even more interesting. It is a series of concentric copies of the pattern. These inner patterns are worn down and not as raised as the final edge. I look back to the crafter and see it too has these concentric patterns on its outer shield.

I can only find larger ones, never small ones. Even this one seems to start at a definite point and not before.

“The inner patterns are older apparently. Maybe the inner ones have worn away.”

The change is too abrupt.

“Fine, this crafter fits this pattern. It changes over time, but the patterns change to fit it. Wait, the pattern changes. Maybe the crafter, as it grows, forces itself to fit the next larger pattern. Hmm, but it looks to be at the end of the patterns. What will it do now?”

I suspect we would find out if we waited here until the cold edge.

“I hope to be long gone from here before that happens. It sure is munching everything it can reach.”

No one bothers it either.

“Too large. I wonder where it spends the cold time. Too big for any of the burrow . . . Oh, burn, that is what you wanted me to see. Are you saying that this thing stays out here during the cold? Nothing can handle the fire time, so where does it stay then?” I look around for an even larger burrow.

It stays at this spot during both times. It is a perfect fit. It seals itself in and waits it out.

“No water and no air?”

The low gatherers do it. Each creature uses a different method, but the goal is the same. We all try to gather enough food to reproduce before the cold or the fire gets us.

“Cold gets us. Never fire unless it is self-inflicted and that is hard to do. You have to keep up until your last breath. Not easy.”

They ride the far band too.

“Oh. Right. Of course. If they are glued down they would do that. I think I need to eat as well. I am becoming stupid.”

She hands me some seeds that have not opened.

“I wonder how come they did not open?”

These were on top of the rocks. If you keep it warm in your hand they do not open. If you let it cool, it will.

“So, if we were to try and keep these things until needed, we have to keep them warm? Not so easy.”

No. Wet wakes them up too. If I take one and sprinkle water on it, it opens too.

“But wet is also cold. May be the same reaction.” It means we need to find something else for long term food reserve.

“There is always the fire killed.”

That starts to rot as soon as it gets wet.

“Then we had better make sure it does not get wet.” We have to stay at the sun edge and eat horrible food only the desperate eat.

I look back to the nest. They are still caring for their eggs.

“I suppose we should watch them. I will have to do this at some point. Looks boring to me.”

Maybe you will get lucky and die first.

“It has suddenly become more interesting.” I go over and watch. There does seem to be a technique to it, though each of them is doing it differently. Touching, going around the egg, sniffing it, touching, touching themselves. Almost a dance. The afts dance to learn how to fight well. I want to ask questions but don't dare. The eggs are not perfect. There are lines and blotches. The same pattern comes around at regular intervals. I wonder why they have to turn them?

So the temperature stays even and the quickened one does not stick to one side of the inside.

“Thanks.” Nice having a mind seerer with me.

They will hatch soon.

“How can you tell that?”

I can see their thoughts.

“Will they be like you.”

They will serve as expected.

Every time I say something one of the Fems gives me a look. Best to just watch.

When I open my eyes and look around I feel definitely colder. I look up and see the two Fems are now sitting on their eggs. I remember waking up covering the egg I was on. I wonder if Sali is fem because I did not roll the egg?

It's time.

The Fems get off their eggs and face the sun. They chant something I remember from my aft time. I never knew they faced the sun during the chant. At the height of their chant they smack their eggs. They start their chant again and at the end they smack their eggs.

On one of the smacks the north side egg cracks with a sharp sound. She stops chanting and checks out the egg carefully. Suddenly a hand comes through. She immediately starts to peel back the rest of the egg. At the same time the south Fem has started chanting again. It takes her four more smacks before her egg cracks. This time a foot comes out first. She rolls the egg over and smacks the opposite side and starts to peel the egg back.

Two males. I sigh relief. If another fem had been born I am sure they would have blamed me.

Us. They would have blamed us.

“True.”

They examine the two carefully, then switch and examine each other's hatchlings. Sure that the two were normal and showed nothing of concern they raise a cheer. Everyone else turns around at that point and comes over to see the new members of our clan. It is bad luck to see a hatchling killed and they are not officially part of the clan until the cheer is raised. All that are still living that is.

We need to get moving, but it is normal to celebrate for a time before resuming normal needs. I don't know which was worse, waiting for them to hatch or waiting for the celebration to end. I can't help but get the feeling that my life is never going to be normal again.

And it is all my fault of course.

“Hey, I was the one who saved you. I think it makes it my fault.” I hope it was my idea.

I had stored some seeds in a pouch next to my chest. Nothing has opened yet. Come to think of it, it would not be pleasant for one to open inside my pouch. I pull them out quickly and scatter them on the ground. Within moments they all open. We are far from the edge now. These will not gain enough sun in time to be ready for the cold. I decide to taste them. Interesting. Just like fresh ones at the sun edge. Guess it takes a while for them to develop a harder more fibrous coat.

The seed husks are next to the new low gatherers and already a small one has latched onto one to carry it away. Two of them are fighting over another one. I watch the one who got one and it carries it some distance before disappearing down a hole. It emerges soon after and goes off in another direction to hunt for more food to store.

“We need to know about the other band. This band stores food in deep burrows for the cold time. How does the other band store food and can we find the caches?”

Meaning this band's caches are not full yet, so no point in searching

them out, but anyone who did not make it through the fire time would leave an empty cache because they ate most of it before they died.

“Chance says that not all made it back to their burrows before the sun killed them. Those are the ones I am looking for, not the ones who died later.”

We have both searched the burrows and banks near streams. I have seen nothing that looks like a full burrow.

“We need to think like they would. The cold time is over, but the sun has not warmed everything yet. The ice would probably last well into the band. The streams would be very cold almost up to the edge.”

A lot of fog from the moisture evaporating into the air.

“Huh?” What is fog?

Everything would be damp right up the sun edge and possibly a little into the sun. They could have been creatures of the sun rather than like us, creatures of the rain and cold.

“I don't like cold.”

But we hate the sun even more. We follow it, but stay well back. Cold pushes us forward and the sun warms our fronts. For them it would be the other way around. Sun would warm their backs and they would face the cold. Turned around and they would be nearly blind just as we are.

“But where would they hide the extra food?”

The water would be late in melting and disappearing. Therefore they hide things higher up away from the rotting nature of the water and the warmth.

“Whereas we would hide things in burrows of nearly empty streams.”

And most of their water would have frozen on the high ground from the snow and ice. It would not reach the stream bed until the sun edge returns.

“And that melting snow would awaken the low gatherers on that side unless they were carefully buried. We need to search higher up. Well away from the streams and crevices or even anything that looks like water would flow in.”

Everyone else is still celebrating. We escape with little notice. We are strange anyway. We stay within sight so no one worries.

It does not take long once we understand where to look.

The low gatherers would want their seeds to be in places where they would get water as soon as possible so they can live as long as possible before the cold.

“And the cold facing ones would gather and hide them up here.” I gather the seeds we find buried in the high burrow to take back to the

others.

There is a cold side to this. What happens when they come back to this place and find burrows emptied?

“Other creatures must hunt them out as well. We don't need to nor are likely to find every one. Who knows how long they have been doing this. Maybe we should bury cold seeds to return the favor?”

Maybe that is what northern sun facing people do naturally. These seeds look different than the ones I found on the surface.

I look at them more closely. They are different. Lots of wrinkles. I try biting one. “Too hard.”

May need to be soaked first. Also means they are likely to keep until they do.

“Then we take them back to others and show them.”

They have quieted down and all look up at us when we arrive.

Lead asks, “Where have you been?”

“We found buried caches of cold seeds. We think the northern people do this to have food when they can't find any other.” I open my pouch and show them.

“I believe if we place these in water they will open up and then they should be soft enough to eat. In this state though, they will keep as long as they are dry. Light weight enough to carry quite a few of them.”

A fore watcher brings over an eating cup with water in it. I hand over a seed which he places into it. We all bend over to watch. Nothing.

They have been very dry for half a circuit. It will take time.

“They are very dry. It will take some time.”

I was wrong. It pops, literally. A flower petal low gatherer. The fore watcher goes to grab it, then hesitates looking up at me.

“Go ahead. I have more and Sali and I know where to find them now.”

He likes it.

“Gather up. We run. The sun recedes.” It feels good to run again. Sali runs along side me now. I don't think she wants to be associated with the two little ones clinging to their Fems. She is about a half circuit old now and far ahead of a normal half circuit new one. She need not have worried, but I am not going to complain. It is nice to lose the weight.

We stop at random locations spaced well apart to gather seeds. We don't always find them, but do enough times to prove our thoughts are valid. At the two Fem's suggestion we declare this to be a Fem secret and taboo for everyone else. We don't want to strip the path clean or they may decide to poison the caches the next circuit in hopes of killing the thieves. A sort of ritual ensues using leaper paws and disguising our own tracks.

Sali is taking a more active role in clan life. She still does not talk, but does help out with Fem chores without being asked. She picks up new skills very quickly.

We occasionally see other clans at a distance, but they apparently do not want to meet us and quickly disappear without effort on our part. This concerns me. It means that most clans are afraid of confrontation. That suggests a lot of loss for both sides when this happens. And we are not a large clan. Burns.

It could be the Streakers that scare them.

“Could be. But streakers are really only a threat to the young. Any full sized person would not be hurt by them, just scared.”

We are not seeing any but ours now. Must be exclusive to the southern regions.

“Might be. Have you noticed that we don't have to run as fast or as far to keep up with the sun?”

And how would I know that? I have just barely begun to run.

“You are unusually observant for one so young. Just thought you might have noticed.”

It will become more dramatic as we go further north.

“Yeah. I want to know where everyone is? We should be seeing lots of clans this far north. We have always been told that the north is easy running, but crowded.”

And therefore dangerous.

“Right.”

Idea

Roger lands on me screeching loudly.

He says big water ahead.

“Not again.”

Worse. I don't think we are going to get around this one.

When we come up to the shoreline I see why. I cannot see the other side. The other Streakers arrive with their handlers.

It narrows south sun ward of here, but the water is fast. Not passable.

“I have an idea. All of our sacks are full of seeds. We go to the narrows.”

It takes only a few small moons to reach the narrows. The water is very cold. Excellent. If it had been running in the other direction we would be in trouble and my plan would not have had a chance.

Lead comments, “Too fast to wade across even if it was shallow. Not sure it is.”

“Time to work. I want everyone to gather food. We need to get as fat as possible in as short of time as possible. Save every skin too. Oh and especially the bladders.”

Bladders?

“How long do we have?”

I point to the water, “Until that freezes.”

“The band will have passed before that happens.”

“Yes, but not by much. If we are lucky we will survive. It won't be easy, but with some thinking we will win this battle.”

“Battle?”

“Where are the rest of the clans? What do they know we don't?”

“That you can't get across alive?”

“I am guessing that they have never tried. Or if they have, no one bothers coming back to get them. Think about it. If paradise is on the other side, why come back?”

“So you believe the stories?”

“Does not matter. Sali says we need to go north.”

“Might be an easier way further along the circuit. Maybe that is what everyone else knows.”

“Maybe, but then we will be there to receive them when they come north won't we?”

Roger and the others are not so excited about this idea.

“I know they can't carry food. We will gather enough for them as

well. Or they can fly ahead of us and meet up later.”

You are letting them go?

“They have always been free to go. How would we stop them?”

We collect food, eat food, store water in the bladders and sew skins together to protect against the cold. We can feel it coming. It gets colder each small moon. The stream grows colder, weaker and narrower. The rains become more intense. Then it begins to snow. We keep food in shade hallows where the snow collects and does not melt. Soon it is frozen solid.

All clans know about cold travel, we just don't like it and do everything we can to avoid it. Hence we follow the sun.

“It's starting to freeze. Too thin to cross yet and not frozen in the middle yet.”

We continue working to get ready. Afts go further out on the ice each moon. We post flags to mark the path. It is getting darker as well as colder. I am worried that the snow will make it impossible to cross. White out is nearly always lethal.

Roger and the others have not left yet, but are clearly not happy about it. They spend most of their time next to the fires we have started in hallows.

You know if we covered the top of a hallow the heat would stay inside.

“And the cover would catch fire and kill us all.”

Not if it was high enough and there was a hole at the top for the smoke to escape. She is looking up at the smoke path.

“The river is frozen!” I hear shouts outside the hallow.

“We go. Fast as we can. Single file, spaced out, tied together with ropes.” Sali rides on top for this in spite of her protesting. It is colder up there she says, but remind her it is far colder in the water if we break through.

When we get out of the hallow I see the sky is clear. Finally a blessing. Even the stars are visible. It really is dark though. Every other person is handed a torch. We become a string of lights in a long line. I order strict silence. We need to be able to listen for and hear any cracking. It is a long way over soft snow before we hit the ice and then even further before I hear it. The water is still running underneath us and it is not a trickle either.

It is cold.

“It will get colder.” Much colder. There is a Fem in front of me several people up. The little one on top of her is not visible. Just a huge bundle of leaper furs. I suspect that Sali looks the same. She chose the

best furs for herself. Spoiled.

Am not.

Slippery. Not wet, maybe the wind. I can remember only once before I faced the snow and wind this bad. We lost two on that run. Some clan really must have hated us to chase us that far cold side. Of course I will never know what the dispute was about. I wonder where they are now? Are any still alive?

I hear a loud snap and everyone freezes to brace for a fall. You hope you are not the one, but if you are, everyone else will do their best to pull you out so you don't die in the water. Likely still a death, but at least it will not be a drowning too. Nothing happens though. It could be a crack further up or down stream. Down stream judging from the wind direction. We begin again.

It seemed like forever until we reach the other side, but I remember we could see the other side when we still had light. Besides the stars and the moons the only light we see is a dull deep red purple glow on the horizon. I don't know if I have ever been this far cold edge before. Everything is covered in snow. Nothing moves except us.

The torches go out before we all get across, but the rope ensures everyone makes it. Some of the younger one are dangerously cold.

“Lead, we need a fire. We have to get warm and rest before we move on.”

“Not much wood to be found.”

“Burn what is left of the torch handles.” He accepts this and moves quickly. It is a small fire and I insist the coldest ones get closest. All of the Fems are well covered and are old enough to have been through this themselves. We will be fine.

Speak for yourself. I can't feel my hands any more.

“We are all cold. Hold on, we run.”

Lead hears me and gives the signal. We leave the fire. Nothing else will burn on the snow and rock and it will soon go out.

This time, no pretense of going north. We go sun ward as fast as we can. Just running soon warms us and people are soon starting to push aside furs to stop from overheating. The younger ones want to shed them, but are soon admonished not to by the more experienced ones. As soon as we call a rest stop we will get cold again.

Sooner than I thought though we are called to a halt and signaled to go south instead of sun ward. Several make wards with their hands as we pass the fore watcher pointing out the new way.

Roger is curious though and comes out from his wrapping on my back

and takes off. He soon comes back and burrows in as I and Sali adjust the furs to cover him.

Death. Looks like an entire clan in the burrow. Some of the bodies were partially eaten.

“By each other no doubt. So, we were not the only ones to have tried this. But how did they get so far ahead of us?”

They didn't. Last turn. Only bones now. With gnaw marks on some of them.

“Might not have been such a good idea.”

It is a good idea. Believe in yourself.

“And you.”

If you must, but you are making most of the decisions now. I am just along for the ride.

“Speaking of which, with both of you on my back, it is heavy.” I ate as much as everyone else though and I am already beginning to be glad that I did.

Roger takes off when the sweat on my back gets to be too much for him. He comes back later to get warm again, but gradually spends less and less time with us. At rests even Sali gets off and walks around.

We have been walking along the side of the ice which is now water all this time so we have no lack of fresh water to cook our seeds in. Scouts find burrows in crevices and manage to catch a few leapers and sneaks. The crafters are stuck to the rocks just like Sali predicted. There is no way to remove them. How come no one noticed this before?

“We have a problem.” Lead tells me. “The water continues to veer north. We are not making much sun ward progress. It will get cold enough to freeze again soon.”

Lead has his back to the sun. I stand facing the water whose edges are freezing in intricate crystals. A fresh storm approaches. I look north and the water extends further than I can see.

I turn to Sali, “What does Roger say? Does this end?”

There is land on the other side. They have not gone north to see where the water ends.

“So we have a choice of waiting for the water to freeze again or go north as fast as we can in hopes of getting around it.”

“Or do . . .” With a huge roar an enormous creature rises out of the water, breaking the thin ice and opens a huge mouth to engulf Lead in one bite! I am stunned when the fore watchers shoot the creature with arrows to no effect. They just bounce off. The afts push me back from the edge of the water.

I regain my wits and order, “We run north. Don't get too close to the edge.” The fore watchers are hesitating.

“What's wrong. You want to be monster food next? You think there is only one?”

A fore comes forth, “I have been chosen Lead.” He turns and everyone follows him, with us Fem in the center again.

“It would have been nice to have known about those things.”

I did not sense it. Either it is mindless or has some method of hiding from my sense. I am as shocked as you are.

“Definitely different in the north. Nothing like this in the south.”

It gets colder as we go north. We are losing the sun again, along with our food supply. There is no time now to hunt or gather. We run continuously. Even Sali gets off as much as she can to run along side of me. I would not have made it otherwise, even though I know I am given more food than the others.

We are losing speed as the wind and cold take their toll. Snow flurries make it hard to see and numerous injuries result. It is getting harder and harder for me to keep my feet warm even though they are covered with hardened, now frozen crafter plates. During a brief rest period I try wrapping more leaper pelts around them and my legs. Sali always climbs back on my back during rest periods and I feel cold feet against my spikes and skin.

Lead comes to me, “Food is low. Soon we will need to eat each other in hopes that some survive.” The Lead is always the first to offer himself. This seems dangerous to me, to lose the most experienced ones first and end up with the least in control if we survive. But, it is felt the oldest must die so the young can live.

“No one dies yet.” But I am wrong. Someone finally falls into a crevice and smashes their tired mind case against a stone in just the wrong place. Neither young nor old, the flesh goes into the pot. What little there is. I am failing as a leader as I sip my portion. No one talks now.

Roger reports the end of the water! The other streakers have long ago abandoned us. They easily flew over the water to the other side.

We reach the end of the water less than a half small moon later. We still don't have food or strength, but it feels so much better to be running towards the sun that we don't care.

Either because we are delirious from starvation or we are lucky the time seems to go by quickly. Very soon we find a very good sun ward trail. Very smooth. Smoother than I thought was even possible. Strange

tracks are seen and we keep vigilance, but so far have not seen anything or anyone.

We are soon shedding leaper skins after licking them for any possible sustenance. All of us have been chewing on them during this ordeal.

Take the next trail north, quickly!

“We can't go north. We are too hungry and cold.”

Go north now!

“Lead, go north now!” I shout, but I don't know if I am heard.

Within moments of the fore watchers turning I hear a shout and the sounds of swords and weapons. When I get there I see a massacre with blood everywhere. The fore watchers are covered in blood, but no one seems hurt.

“What happened? Is any one hurt?”

They all smile and hold up leapers by the dozens. We don't wait. As we eat our fill of the raw meat the rest are cooked and dried. We are losing time, but the trail is good now and we need the strength. Apparently we caught up with the leapers just as they were doing their final scavenging before burying themselves in their burrows. Some of the burrows are dug up by afts and their contents emptied into our waiting pouches as well. Never mind the food is not the highest quality. Something I will never complain about again.

We lost two so far because of my decision to keep going north. How many more? Losses are part of life. Usually we lose one or two per circuit, but we are less than one circuit since I awoke at the nest. I was hoping to be better than my own High Fem, though I am certainly not prepared to lead, even with Sali's help.

We will need more members soon. We have lost at least five by my count.

“Five? I only remember two. Lead and the one who fell.”

Those were fore watchers. We also lost at least three afts. No idea what happened. They were in the rear and never caught up.

“Burns.” I am sickened. “I need to run sun ward. I need to gain some safety.”

The new Lead awaits my orders. The two Fems look worried now as well. North will have to wait.

“Sun ward. Back to the good trail. We go north again once we reach the sun edge and not before.” A cheer goes up and everyone rises.

As we warm up and shed the rest of our extra furs I see the extent of the damage. Nearly everyone has suffered frostbite, myself included. Salves are prepared and rotten body parts are shed. They will grow back

eventually, but the loss is still felt, especially by those who have lost an entire foot or hand. They do their best to run, but are slowing down the entire clan.

“Sali, we need something to help those who have lost a foot.”

Working on it. We don't have much to work with.

“A forge would be helpful, but we have not seen one since before the water. I would have thought a trail this good would have many of them.”

It is a large moon before we do come across a forge.

Lead comments, “It does not look like it has been used in many, many circuits. First thing is we need to find black rock.” He signals several afts to start the search. He then calls over a couple of the more experienced fores and they get to work repairing the forge.

As he finishes an astonishing thing happens. Sali has been watching the entire process, getting more and more anxious. Finally she steps in and gently guides Lead's efforts by pantomime and example. What emerges is a forge like none I have ever seen before.

Afts starts piling black rock pieces in a pile nearby. Sali goes over to them and indicates she wants them to smash the rock into smaller pieces. Much smaller pieces. She then goes over to the two Fems and gets them to stitch leaper skins together tightly into some pattern only she knows.

I get some hot food in a cup and bring it over to her.

“You have to eat. You are going to end up exhausted and start making mistakes. You are still young and growing. You have no reserves.”

She pauses to look at me, confused.

“See, it is already happening.” She nods and accepts the cup. Slowly at first, then with increasing speed she eats and eats. I signal for more food to be brought. After the third bowl she refuses any more.

I don't want to fall asleep. She goes back to observing and directing.

Lead, no longer being directed comes to me, “Any idea what this is about?”

“I was complaining that the ones who have lost feet are having the hardest time keeping up.”

“So, that's what she is doing. I wish she just told me!” He goes back to the forge and soon a hand waving discussion ensues. Sali gets frustrated finally and comes over to me.

I need your help. You can tell him what I want.

“Or you can see what he already knows and work from there. It is easier to adapt what is already known, understood and accepted by others than to introduce something entirely unknown.”

She looks at me shocked. *Of course. You are right.* She goes back, but

this time to watch, not criticize.

A lot of activity which I can only glimpse. The two Fems are exercising their young ones. They got dangerously weak during a critical period on their lives. If anything happens to them I will be blamed for sure. The choicest treats are given to them, but I don't protest. Everyone dotes on them. This is how Sali should have been treated, if she had allowed it.

Finally Lead comes to me with an injured aft in tow wearing a new shiny artificial foot. It only vaguely looks like a foot.

He notices my concern, "We have to leave enough room for the new foot to grow inside. We also don't really have the right tools to do the best job. We lost some time getting it set up again."

"Will you be able to finish for everyone soon? I want to lose as little sun as possible."

"None of us wants a repeat of the last two moons." He came very close to having to die to save us all. Responsibility goes along with the honor of being called Lead. I nod and he returns to the forge.

Sali comes up to me, *No one thanked me for improving the processes.*

"No one ever thanks the High Fem for anything. Get used to it." If anything goes wrong though, the looks they don't give you could kill. I don't want to know how close I got to being served up for a meal myself. It has been known to happen, though no one admits to having been part of one.

"Let them feel they have some control over their lives. We have been through a lot."

I go over to see what there is to eat and am served by a happy aft. I look down and see a leg spur done in shiny metal. Essential in combat. I am sure he is happy to have the substitute.

Fed and repaired as best we can, we begin packing to leave.

Lead comes up to me, "Sali did improve the forge. Most of the changes are portable enough to bring with us."

"If these changes are removed how will it affect the use of the forge for anyone who comes after us?"

"It will be in much better condition than when we found it. We can leave the larger black rocks as well. The ones we did not have time to crush. I would like to keep the smaller stuff. It burns faster and hotter and is easy to carry in sacks. It will save a lot of time at the next forge if we can get started as soon as we arrive."

"Can it be used to cook with as well, if necessary?"

"Yes, I believe it can. Good idea."

“Pack it then. We run.”

A moment later Lead announces, “We run!”

Trader

“I wonder where the Streakers are?”

Roger does not see them yet. They will return once we get far enough sun ward. They are probably hunting like they used to. Good to keep up their skills and not depend on us too much.

“True. Roger will a hero when they return.”

Does not work that way in streaker society. He will be an outcast. Reckless behavior is not appreciated.

“Not with us either I think. At least we are warm again. I thought we would see more people though.”

I don't think many make the crossing. With those creatures in the water I suspect the locals will be further north.

“We will reach the sun edge soon and can decide from there if now is a good time to find out. I would like to see some of our number healed a little more first.”

The low gatherers are different here. Those last leapers had different patterns on their fur and their teeth were sharper.

“I did not notice. I am not sure I even chewed.” I need to notice things like this if I am to lead this clan better, but I was hungry.

We gain the front easily. We really must be further north now. Roger immediately takes off to try to find his clan.

“So, Sali, do we stay and recover, or do we go further north?”

I would like to know more about the life here. We are at a very large disadvantage not knowing.

I smile. It was important for her to see this too.

“Lead, send out scouting parties. Bring back anything that might be edible or useful. No more than one person eats anything new and never alone. I don't want to lose anyone, but I certainly don't want to lose two at once.”

“How many remain?” To guard the Fems he means.

“We don't have many. Six. Two for each of us.”

“Eight then.” He turns and goes. I could punish him, but I don't. Everyone counts Sali as one even though she is definitely not of age.

I turn to her, “This means you do not wander off either. We don't have the resources to come hunting for you.”

Why? I can just tell you where I am.

“Oh, unconscious even?” No response. “I thought not.” She will stretch it though. Young ones can be painful. Sure enough she takes off

and disappears into a crevice. Close by, but still out of sight. I let it go and start my own search. Soon I am deep into a crevice of my own. Lots of hard shelled ones. More than I remember from the south.

“Cold, look at this one.” I hold it up and Sali raises her eye stalk over her own crevice. It has yellow strips and red eyes. It breaks free from me and runs at an amazing speed and darts down into Sali's crevice by accident I am sure. Sali catches it and holds it up, then lets it go. Again it speeds off.

Smells bad too. Good defense. Check out these worms. She throws a couple up on the flat area between us. They wriggle like worms, but when I reach out to pick one up it puffs up and shrieks at me and puffs up again for another go. I instinctively pull back and it expels the air suddenly and forcefully enough to propel it off the flat this time into another crevice.

“I am going to try something that does not fight so hard to get away.” I move to a group of low gatherers and they move out of the way. “Burns! Even the low gatherers are wary. It is going to be harder than I thought to eat here. I wonder how we were able to catch so many leapers all in one place?”

I am beginning to wonder that as well.

Roger lands on the ground near me. Sali pops up to talk with him. He has some low gatherers in his claws. They squirm. Strange. He pecks at them anyway. Even the smallest pieces move.

He has not found his clan yet, but says others are coming. The description does not make sense. A box that moves over the ground following some people.

“That does not make sense. The only box I have ever seen was a small metal one. There can't be enough metal to make a larger one and how would you move it? It would weigh too much.”

I don't think Roger knows what it was made of. They are on the same trail we used to get here though.

“It would probably be wise to get a little further away. We are only twelve and not ready for a fight.” I don't count the smallest two. Our afts look nervous hearing our talk, or my side of it anyway. They are relieved when I motion them to move us north of the trail. We find a suitable crevice quickly and wait. Roger keeps wanting to fly, but Sali says to wait. I wish the others would come back.

What appears is the strangest thing I have ever seen. The box is huge and has so many colors on it I can't even begin to describe it. Every color I have ever seen on one place. It is at least as tall as a person and twice as long. There are round circles on the side that move. They go round and

round, but don't appear to be connected to the box, as the box does not go round. And the box does not touch the ground. How can it stay above the ground without support? Very confusing. There are six very large afts with ropes attached to the box. They appear to be pulling it, but I don't understand how this is possible.

I hear a voice, but can't understand what it says. The people in front obey it though and stop. A strange male comes out of the back of the box and steps to the ground. He is as colorful as the box and wears something even stranger on his eye stalk. The weirdest thing is the fact he has no spikes! None at all! Who would do such a thing? It is horrifying!

“Youse kin kum oust. Iss knows yud der.”

He says he knows we are here and we should come out. Both the strange male and the six afts appear to be unarmed, but everything is so strange I don't trust my sight any more. The afts look to me for orders. The Fems hide even further into the crevice.

I whisper to Sali, “Send Roger out. Maybe he will think that is all there is and Roger can tell us if anyone else is nearby.”

Good idea. Roger is eager to take off anyway and does us the favor of screeching during takeoff.

One of the afts aims a stick at Roger, but the strange male shouts, “Dun br'thr. Tust b'd.” The aft lowers his stick. Not like any spear I have seen and who would hold one like that?

It is a weapon, but I am not getting anything else. He does not think about the weapon, just uses it. Must be well practiced with it.

I watch Roger circle around a few times and then fly away.

I told him not to return here until the strangers leave. He does not see anyone else near by.

“Iss dun haves ull dais.”

He was not fooled but Roger.

“We could make him come in after us.”

He would have the height advantage and each of those afts has one of those strange weapons. If it really could have killed Roger from that distance, then it is far superior to our arrows.

I motion to the afts we are going to emerge and go to the road. Took me awhile to learn how to give hand signals. I was so used to receiving them.

We come out of the crevice slowly. The afts surround us in front. They are not used to the fore position, but know enough that we are to be protected. The Fems are in the rear with their young on their backs.

“Mi, mi. So audtenic. Tell, gib youse snvn kreds e fur fits.”

He wants to trade for our belongings.

“Why?”

Apparently he will trade our belongings to others for resources he needs.

“Why not just hunt? Why not make his own? Why so complicated?”

“Spk us. Tkl weed. Bry gud. Bry audtenic.”

“I can't understand anything he says. Frustrating. Why does he talk so strange?”

Apparently the north people have not been talking with the south people for some time.

“So?”

She sighs, *We start to talk different over time and don't ask why. It just happens. I am going to teach your mind how to understand him so I don't have to translate everything. It will hurt.*

It does. I have a horrible mind ache for a moment and then it is gone.

“Look. You have done a great job making yourselves up like abs. I appreciate that fact. I can give you top cred for your work. You will be able to live it up for circuits in any enclave in these parts.”

I don't think Sali's trick helped much.

I respond, “No thanks. Just leave us alone and we will go our own way.”

He looks shocked, “Trying to relive the old times huh? Not my cupa, but then I like living easy.” He pats his behind. It is then that I notice just how big and fat he is.

“Running would help.” How did he survive this long?

“Me run? No way. I worked too long to go back to that shit. Hey, you wouldn't know about a raid on a lep farm?”

What's a lep farm?

A place where leps are purposely kept so as to provide a steady food supply without the need to hunt.

“That's a great idea. How do they deal with the time it is not in the band? Other's could take advantage of your work.”

“Yeah, that's what I have been saying. Weren't you listening? Wait, you're talking to that wee one? Holy shit! That's the smallest fem I've ever seen. Come to think of it all of you are small, but that one is impossibly small.”

He almost has it figured out. I have called Roger back in.

“All of you.” He waves his hand over us. How rude. “All of you are abs. That's it. You are all abs. How the shit did you get here? There is an entire ocean between us. No abs can cross that. Not possible.” He backs

away from us.

Just then Roger comes in at full speed and attacks the strange one. The others are slow to react, but he is quick and ducks just in time. Does not bother Roger a bit and he comes back for another run. I hand signal him to roost on me and he calmly and carefully lands on his place on my back.

“Wait, you know that flying excuse for a mouth? Well I'll be.”

Roger says the others are coming.

“It looks like you are talking to each other, but I don't hear her at all.”

“Discrete hand signals.” I offer as an excuse.

We need to leave with him. Do not offend him too much. I am shocked. Why, what could this creature offer us? He would only slow us down. He clearly can't run and how fast can this box be with only six pulling it? Granted they are larger than any of us except maybe Oofik, but even thirty of us could not outrun the cold pulling it.

“You are of course a Fem, which in ab culture means you do not use a name. How quaint. Surprised you are talking to me. Thought you could only talk through a fore.”

“High Fem.” I leave it at that.

“Of only two other Fem and eight afts and fores?” He pauses looking at Roger, “And a flying sphincter.”

“His name is Roger.”

“Oh and he told you that?”

“Yes.”

Roger then does an amazing thing and says, “R'gr!”

The look of surprise is amazing.

“Well met Roger. Pleased to have met you. My name is Joss.”

“J'sr!”

Joss then folds his upper body down. Roger tries to mimic the move. It makes it look like each is acknowledging the other. I think I like this very much.

Sali in the mean time is looking carefully at the box and the afts set to pull it. They are relaxing watching our exchange and Sali. Sali suddenly looks towards the sun and comes back around to us.

They come. She takes up position near me.

“She is a small one.”

“That's because she is less than a circuit.” I say matter of fact. I too look towards the sun. I see them being stealthy and going around us. Joss' afts are not noticing.

“How can that be? I thought you killed all fems that hatch?”

The rest of our clan emerges all at once fully armed and ready to hack everyone to pieces. This gets the attention of the afts who start to raise their sticks.

Joss notices and motions to calm them.

“I have a question. What happened to your spikes?”

“Those uncomfortable things? Most of us have them removed as young ones.” I am horrified.

“How do you protect yourself?”

Lead comes up to me, “What are you two saying? Sounds like new hatchling babble.”

“Sali taught me. It is the way the northern people talk.”

“It makes my role confusing.”

“You will learn. We are in a new place with people who are different than us. We need them to learn from them if we are to survive. Tell the others. Do not judge before understanding. Remember that. His name is Joss.”

Lead looks at Joss but says nothing.

“We have a report.”

“Go ahead.”

“If I may interrupt.” Joss says.

“I am about to receive a report from my Lead. He outranks you. I suggest you wait your turn.”

Joss sighs and says, “See that lep skin left on the rock ten strides from here?” I nod. He raises a hand and three of his afts raise their sticks and the ends explode with a loud noise. I am looking at the sticks, but they appear to be unharmed.

Lead says, “You had better look at the rock.” I do and the leaper skin is gone. “Their weapons did that.”

“And we outnumber you five to one.” I say to Joss.

“I will hear your report now Lead.”

Lead motions to a group of afts. I recognize Oofik and his stalker. He is smiling a huge grin. Oofik motions his afts forward. They are carrying a huge skin of some kind. I have no idea what it is.

I turn to Joss, “You are local. What is it?”

There is a look of total shock and disbelief on his face.

“Who are you afts? Nobody survives a grumpf attack. No one. Why do you think the trail is so far away from the sea?” He goes forward to investigate the skin.

Oofik calls more afts forward. They are all carrying large mounds of meat. They proceed to make a fire from our black rock. We will eat very

well tonight.

I go up to Oofik, "Did you kill the grumpf?"

He looks to Lead before answering. Lead nods okay.

"An accident. I was kneeling while hanging onto my spear. It thought it had an easy meal. The spear went through its brain and killed it instantly."

"Didn't the death of Lead teach you anything?"

"I was well away from the edge. Guess they can get aways on land."

"Do you take credit for the kill?"

"Nah, I didn't do anything. Just dumb luck. Tastes great through. You should try it."

I nod and turn to Joss, "You trade for service." I hope I have figured that out correctly.

"I do."

"I am guessing that the skin from a grumpf has some value to you."

He raises surprise and cautiously says, "It does. What did you want in exchange?"

"We need to travel with you."

He looks surprised, "But you don't know me. You don't know where I intend to go. So many. I could not afford to feed all of you. I can barely afford the six helpers I have."

"I think we have proven we can provide for ourselves and all of you."

"So, all you want for the skin is to travel with us. I don't have to feed or protect you."

Be careful.

"We will keep the skin until we reach our destination. That way you won't be tempted to find us harm."

He smiles briefly, then shows concern, "Rain will destroy it. It would be better in the wagon." What's a wagon? He senses my confusion and points to the box. Ah, that's called a wagon.

"For a creature that lives in the water I doubt that additional water will harm it. In fact, broken up into pieces it would provide protection from rain and snow for many of us. The bones will make nice tools and the meat will feed us for many moons." The rest of the Streakers arrive and find their fores.

The six look to their leader.

"I don't suppose I could stop you from following me anyway." He sighs and gets into the wagon. The six shrug and assume their positions and start to pull the wagon. I am fascinated. The circles turn and yet they clearly support the wagon. The turning makes it relatively easy to pull the

wagon. Amazing.

“Lead, make sure everyone gets fed, even our new friends. We rest separately from them. I want watchers on them constantly. I don't want them trying to harm us, or leave us. Make sure not all those watching are seen.” He smiles and nods. We outnumber them, best to use that to our advantage.

I can't believe that Oofik killed one. Neither can I. I hope it was not the same one that got Lead. Meat is meat, but still don't like the idea of eating something that ate someone I knew.

We really can't take the skin in one piece. Too heavy while running.

“I know. I suspect he knows that as well.”

The question is, is the entire skin needed or some token part to prove size and method of death.

“Not to mention the skins are going to stink bad for some time. The jaw should do nicely though. I am sure they don't wash up on the shore often.” I grin. Even I know bones sink. The only time the sea could be dry is on the far sun side.

This is too easy. What is?

Joss is not pleased, but I don't know if it is because he is not getting the entire skin or because we figured out a solution to his trap. Be careful is good advice.

Everyone gets the soft shits from something we ate, thought the six and Joss do not seem to be affected. Sali says it is because we are adapting to the local unseen ones in our insides. I wish they would get used to us faster. Everything I eat goes through faster than I can eat more.

Because of this it takes us almost no time to finish the cooked grumpf meat even though we thought it would last at least a large moon. Granted, it was more stomach than muscle meat, most of which were around it's jaw. The jaw itself is magnificent. It will be hard to let go of when we leave Joss. I tell Oofik to save the spear he used as well. Together they make a fine gift or trade item.

“We may be southerners, but we do understand trade. Creds, whatever they are, are something different, but somehow related.”

They are an agreed upon intermediate trade item who material value is quite small, but are easy to carry.

“But would not everyone just make their own?”

The patterns are intricate and not easy to copy. Only one place can make these items, no others.

“You would still have to place a lot of trust in others.”

Not always deserved.

“Does Joss ever do anything but eat, sleep and shit?”

Does not appear so. There are many items he perceives as valuable in his wagon. He dares not leave it while we are around.

“Then he must hope of a change in conditions.”

Life is change. One can always hope.

Roger comes back from his oft flying times and lands on my back.

“Please ask Roger if he likes being with us.”

I don't have to ask that, neither do you. He goes where he wants. The fact that he chooses to be here says enough.

“He will always be welcome. I do admit I gain extra pleasure from the fact that Joss does not like the Streakers.”

You know the others that have bonded to a streaker are working out a common language.

“One that I don't know. If something happens to you I am in real trouble.”

Lead comes up to me, “The Streakers have reported ruins of stone rooms up ahead and north of here.” Stone rooms are found all over. They can provide temporary cover from particularly violent storms. One of the few places where clan fighting is forbidden. Not that it doesn't happen occasionally if the two clans are mortal enemies.

“The Streakers have said this to all of you?”

“Yes.” I am further behind in my learning than I thought.

I turn to Sali, “I don't suppose you want to teach me like you taught me the northern speak?”

Sali ignores me and looks to the wagon. The wagon has stopped and Joss emerges. I mumble under my breath. He is the most stubborn, demanding, rude person I have ever meant.

We need to go to the ruins, but just you and me, no one else. I nod that I have understood.

“We need to make fast time through this portion. Very dangerous area.”

I smile, “I need to visit the ruins up ahead and I am not asking your permission. All the others will go with you and we will catch up later.” The wagon is much slower than any runner. I am sure this will not be a problem.

“You are an even bigger fool than I thought. No one who visits these ruins comes out again. No one. Believe me, much stronger and braver entire clans larger than yours have tried.” Interesting that he is not upset with the fact that I know of them before we get near them. He must suspect that we actually use the Streakers knowledge as hard as I have

tried to keep that from him. It means he is watching us as well. Best to not make him think we care he knows.

“Sounds interesting then. Tell me, how many other clans have Streakers as friends and allies? How many kill grumfs without bang sticks?”

“Your clan will do much better when you are no longer its leader. That will be soon enough.” He turns to go back to the wagon.

Lead, who has already learned the northern speak, comments, “Tell me how many other High Fems have brought their entire clans through the sea to the north?” I smile, then get upset at another indication that I have grown lazy.

It is not your task to learn languages. It is the task of your fore watchers. They would be very upset with you if you did not depend on them for anything. Remember, you really should not be talking with Joss directly at all. Let your people do their jobs.

I look at Sali. Where did she get all this knowledge? Far beyond what even a ten circuit should know, much less a less than one circuit. Her ability to see thoughts notwithstanding.

Ruins

We turn off here. I have told Roger to watch from above. The trail is well marked if you count the bones stacked to block the trail start. The last thing I see is Joss looking out the wagon shaking his hand in disbelief that we are going there. I trust Sali, I don't trust Joss. For all I know there is a pot of infinite strength hidden up there that only he wants to exploit.

“Not all of these bones are from people.”

Remember, those who went there did not return, so how could this be their bones? Probably fear and old tales told around the fire pit have caused people to deposit the bones of those who have died to help continue the story.

“There are many ruins in the south. Usually because of poisoned water or crumbling weathered stones or some other explanation. We stack them up again as we can, but most are not safe.”

This one is different. It was from the time before time.

“You have been listening to too many tales. Did the Fems tell you this or was this some tale to frighten young afts?” She smiles but does not answer. I hate it when she does that. It usually means she really does know something.

We run at a good pace. We need to get there and get back before the others pass us on the other side of this trail, which supposedly comes back to the main trail. I am guessing the return trail is not as well maintained, if it even exists. If no one ever left, how could it? No one goes away from the sun if they don't have to.

“There are lots of leapers and other game.”

Since no one comes this way, it would be an ideal place to live for them. No matter how hungry you are, do not catch and eat anything. It is forbidden. If anyone offers you meat, do not eat it.

“At risk of offending them even? Trail is steep. I don't see anything yet. I wonder how people found it? The main trail is so much easier.”

There are always the curious.

“Usually the short lived.”

Unless ordered by a High Fem.

“Oops. I just did that recently, didn't I?”

The trail gets steep enough we put our energy into climbing, not talking. Wish I could mind talk. It would be quieter. Actually it would be worse. At least, even though I know she can see everything I think I am alone in my thoughts.

“We must be near the top. I don't see anything beyond.” I come up over the pass and stop. Before me is a huge field of ruins. Strange ruins. It would take several small moons to get across. Certainly not like any single structure ruins I have seen before.

This was the last city from the time before time. Not far now.

“There is smoke coming from the top of one of the smaller structures. Looks to be nearly intact as well. Not the same as the others. Maybe made more recently. Clearly occupied. I thought no one survived their trip here?”

No one returned. It never said that no one did not survive.

“That was the implication.”

A useful one. We have to go around this one, the way is blocked ahead.

“What? I don't see anything.” I am tired and getting sharp. Fortunately she ignores me and keeps going.

The structures are far taller than anything I have ever seen. I touch the surfaces as I pass. I do not recognize the material. Not stone, not metal. The size of the larger pieces is impossible. No one could have placed it. Where did they remove it from the ground? I look at the ground. It is covered in small pieces all identical, all six sided. How can that be? I have never seen such in my life. Could they have been made? How could so many be made that are the same?

We arrive at the structure. There is light within, but a wood surface blocks entrance. I have never seen a piece of wood this large, but at least it is something I recognize. I touch the surface to be sure. It feels right.

It is called a door. We will see many more before our time is done. She goes up to the door and knocks on it three times gently. My mind is at full alert and I watch carefully.

“Enter.” I hear. So, there is someone inside. A male judging from the sound of the voice.

Sali carefully opens the door. She is clearly expecting a trap of some kind.

“You are most welcome. Please come in and eat.”

When I enter I see a flat surface covered with many stone bowls all filled with food. I am hungry, but I am also cautious. I wait for Sali's lead. How did he know we were coming? There has not been enough time since we came over the pass for one person to prepare so much. There is much more than three can eat.

Sali sits and I sit next to her. She says nothing.

Finally I say, “I am pleased to have met you. Thank you for your

hospitality.” He is an impossibly old male wearing a strange white covering. There is light, but it is not light enough to see the surface clearly.

“Please eat. I can't possibly eat this much and it would be a shame to waste it.” It speaks the same way we normally do. I was expecting to hear sounds like from the trader.

“This is a sacred place to our people. We are forbidden to eat meat while here. Do you have food without meat so we may not break our rules?”

The food disappears. The flat surface is empty and dusty. I look around. The entire place is very dusty. No one has lived here in a long time. The male is gone as well, though the only footprints are the ones we made coming in. The only light is what is coming in through openings in the sides of the room.

Come, we go.

I stand up. I have no idea what happened. My guess is that I have been tested. I hope I passed.

We go back the way we came. I am still hungry, but don't dare but think about it. It is less steep up to the top from this side and we quickly reach it. At the top the stranger is waiting for us. I look more closely at the unusual covering in the brighter light. It is white, but not made of furs. When I get closer I see that it is woven. Cloth is rare as it requires equipment and much time. Only the largest clans have enough people to move the materials fast enough to keep up with the sun. Unlike forges, they would not survive the snow and ice during the cold times. He looks even older out here.

Looking at me he says, “You may call me Pasc. I am pleased to meet you Razzel. Don't worry, I will not say your name in front of the others.” I do the honor bow we learned from Joss. He returns the same. I am guessing the he too has the mind seeing ability or Sali told him without my knowing.

He turns to Sali, “This is your apprentice?”

Sali then does the strangest thing. She says, “The best I could do with the choices I had.” I have never heard her voice before. I just assumed that she was not able to speak because of her other ability.

I recover and smile, “I was the only survivor. If I had not been there covering her egg, she would not have survived either.”

To Sali he says, “Indeed. How interesting. You appear to have made a fine choice then.” He turns to me, “This would mean that you have experienced more circuits than, ah, Sali, has.” It is not a question. He

smiles at both of us and then leads the way down the slope. There is no trail, but he appears to know where he is going, judging from the surety of his pace.

I am very curious what they are saying to each other. How could they have known of each other without having met before?

Without turning around he announces, "You are aware that Joss knows of your ability to see his mind. It is the main reason he has not resisted and not tried his usual attempt to deceive and steal from you. All of the females born have this gift and it is the principal reason the southern people kill all females that hatch as soon as they are known. It keeps the males in control of your culture. In the north many females have hatched and now the eggs are closely guarded by the Fems to prevent premature death."

"It would also explain why the trader is out here, far south of the rest of the northern clans. He is attempting to be far away from their control."

He turns to Sali and bows. What was that about? Sali just smiles though and does not return the bow. Any pretense that I am High Fem is gone.

But Sali says to me anyway, "We still need you to play the role. I will not speak again when we reach the others. Only when we are alone is it safe. Hatched Fems don't normally talk. It helps perpetuate the fear."

"Ah, that it would." I am honored that I am allowed to share the secret. Being an aft most of my life I am used to being left out of decisions and knowledge.

"May I ask about the ruins?"

"Certainly. How silly of me not to tell you. I can tell you the tale as we descend to the others. Oh, when we get there, watch the expression on Joss's face when he sees me." Ah, so Joss knows of him or his kind at least. Has Joss been to the ruins and lived? Maybe he has gone through them looking for old items to trade.

"The ruins are from a people who lived here a very long time ago. It was from a time before the Ending of Time. In this time before time the world was not as you see it now. In this time the circuit lasted less than one small moon."

"That is impossible. No one could run that fast!"

"True, but there was no need. Though the world did get warmer when the sun rose to heat it and the world became colder when the sun was absent, the time was so short the world did not have time to get too hot or too cold. It was enough to retire into a structure at the time of darkness. The walls kept out the slight cold as well as the slight heat during the

height of the sun.”

“So there was no need to run at all? Everyone must have been fat like Joss.” They both laugh.

“People ran, but for the joy of it, or to trade with others. But even there, there were other means.”

“Like Joss's wagon.”

“Yes, but these were pulled by other creatures, not by people. The city grew as means were found to grow and raise food in the surrounding areas and bring it into the city for consumption.” I am guessing he means eating. This is hard for me.

You are doing fine.

“So what happened? Did the people do this to themselves?”

“You have experienced evil then. It was hoped that with the clans separated as much as they were that evil would happen but rarely. In this case however, it was from the outside. A large series of volcanic eruptions occurred all close to each other.”

When the high hills throw up red hot stone and airs. Ah, I know what that is.

“So much heat and bad air was brought forth that nearly all life was destroyed. The great seas boiled and rose to the skies. Since all of the volcanoes were on one side of the world near the center, the time of sun and dark changed. This took many circuits to happen, but when it was done, the time of circuit was the same as the time of the sky circuit, as it is today.”

“That is when we learned to run to live.”

“Not at first. Many attempts were made to try and find some other means. Further north it is possible even now to survive the hot and cold times in deep shelters.”

“Like the leapers and sneaks do now even in the south.”

He turns to look at me, “You know of this?”

“Sali found a deep crevice that gave us enough time to observe the smaller ones. We also found the answer of the slower crafters. How they make homes of their plates allowing them to survive by fitting a rock exactly and sealing themselves in. Not sure how the smaller ones survive though. They may find room in the shelters of others.”

“Many die because they do not figure this out. Some shelter within the shells of the larger crafters. Enough survive to keep them going. Before the end of time, there were many, many more types of life. Now the life cycles have very few kinds of life. Maybe too few. It is a dangerous time for this world.” He looks to Sali.

“How did the people learn to run?”

“It took some time for the events to happen. Time allows for change. Those who moved well were able to survive. Those who did not move, did not survive. Those who survived taught their young to do the same. Changes were made as the world slowed. At first wagons were enough in the south, but no longer and are only used in the north. It takes too long to maintain the necessary roads and keep ahead of the sun as well.”

“And there are not enough people. We are very few. We only rarely saw other clans on our trip here.”

“The south has less people. Few want to run as much as you had to, to survive. They still prefer the simpler life in the north.”

“Then why does anyone live in the south?”

“The north has its problems too, as you will see.”

“The Fems who see minds and control thought.”

He raises an eye, “That and other things. Normally males do not have the gift.”

“But you do. Is that why you wear the white cloth, so others will know you and avoid you?”

He turns to Sali, “Are you sure of this one? She knows so much. Could she be one of the thirteen?”

Sali shrugs, “No evidence so far. Just a good mind able to guess well. Ask a question she could not know the answer to and she will not be able to answer.”

“A good apprentice then. Excellent. She will be at a severe disadvantage when in the company of the northern Fem though.”

“Hopefully we will find the others quickly.”

“I have searched for a very long time. So far you are the only one.”

“I had some trouble with the injection process. Likely they did as well.”

He laughs, “Oh, that much is obvious. Though I would have expected the one to be on time.”

“He never even believed it was possible. So much for all that extra knowledge.”

I am totally confused and have no idea what they are talking about.

“To continue the story, it was finally obvious that a more active role needed to be taken to preserve anything of the knowledge of the past. Structures were made in the most north to secure the knowledge of the time before time. People such as I am, a male with the gift, who cannot mate by the way, are sent there to learn this knowledge. We are then sent to specific points on this world to observe. At regular intervals of ten by

ten circuits we are called back to report what we have seen. It is time for me to return, so I am happy that I do not have to travel alone.”

Ten by ten circuits?

“No, that is not possible. No one lives that long.”

“Actually many live that long. The problem is that most die of some accident or are killed by another clan long before then. By being isolated from most others I was not so subject to these events and so survived.”

“How did you do that? People are curious and would have found you in time.”

“They did, but to help maintain the secrecy of my location I convinced them not to tell of my existence and to tell others that the place was cursed and forbidden to all who wished to live.”

“So they placed the bones at the trail start.”

“At first. Soon others added to the pile. I even have to clear some of it away from time to time.”

“Wait, you stay here during the sun and cold times?”

“Ah, remember I have the knowledge of the time before time. That allows me to do many things.”

“Like the illusion of the food.”

“You liked that? I have tested many people with that old illusion. Too bad Sali told you ahead of time. It is much more fun to see what happens when I scare them nearly to death.”

“You would like that. Does nothing change?”

He laughs.

“How much knowledge did the old ones have?”

“Some say too much. If you have a choice, choose the simpler life. There is a seduction that knowledge uses to deceive you into believing in her.”

“Her? I thought that the Lead always seduced the Fems?”

“Ah, you don’t know. How old are you?”

“I was forced into being a Fem long before I should have been. Had I known that saving Sali would have resulted in this I would have chosen otherwise.”

“Sali can be a pain at times I agree.”

“Oh and Pasc is such a nice fellow.” They both laugh.

“No, Sali is great.” She rises higher when I say that and smiles at Pasc. “I don’t like being High Fem for the clan. I am so afraid of making a mistake. If it were not for Sali we would all be dead. Nothing I did made much difference other than listening to her. Whoever heard of a High Fem my age, much less one who gets her advice from a new

hatchling? When you meet the other two recent hatchlings we have you well see for yourself. Sali is very, very strange. Most hatchlings do not even begin to talk before their first five large moons. Sali was contributing almost from hatching.”

Pasc looks at Sali like she is very displeased. It is clear they are talking to each other, but not including me. Maybe they will tell me some time.

“Usually the Fem hatchlings just become annoying about what they want: food, warmth or cooling, that sort of thing.”

“She made those needs very clear.”

They both laugh. I think I may have calmed them down.

Then I have to ask, “How come you can't mate? Certainly someone your age would want to.”

“For the same reason I wear this covering. It frightens other males when they learn of my condition.” He looks around. “It is far enough away from the others to show you.” He removes the covering and reveals that he has been cut. “This is the fate of all males hatched with the gift. Worth it in my opinion.”

“They do this when you are still a hatchling then.”

“Oh, no. They wait until you are at least ten circuits old. Discourages others from envy.” That is very bad. Mine are gone, but they hurt at the thought.

Then it comes to me like an arrow, “Wait. If the north is like this, then the south must be the same. If we had gone south instead of north we would have missed you.”

“In principal you are correct, but you were slightly closer to the north than the south that would be useful for easier living is not a nice place. There is a slight tilt to the world that makes the north nice to live in and the south way, way too cold. It is a frozen waste land. Nothing lives there.”

“Then how come the north is not too hot? Oh wait. The curve of the world.” We all know the world is curved like a spickly seed. Spickly low gatherers are not edible, but we all played with them as young ones.

“She is good Sali. Will be hard to hide anything from her.” He laughs. Sali just looks annoyed.

Pasc stops us. He is looking down at the main trail. Where the others should be there is no one.

“Did we take too long? How fast can the wagon be pulled?”

“I should not have left the two Fem alone with him.” Sali looks very upset.

“You think?” Pasc says. Strange expression. “Come on. Let's find out what happened.”

Tracks

We reach the main trail quickly. The concern for the others is overriding any thoughts for our own safety. Sali trips several times but keeps going and soon leads the way. I think she sees this as her fault. She was the one who decided it was best to find Pasc.

“The tracks show the wagon came through here recently. We just need to move as quickly as we can.”

We start to run but I am not sure this is the best thing to do.

“Call Roger back. We need more information before going further. They would not have left us without a reason.”

I don't need to call Roger back. I am connected with him. They are up ahead some ways. Hail! Roger is being attacked by the other streakers! He is coming back this way. The others are right behind him.

“Ask him what's going on.”

Can't right now. He is too busy trying to stay alive. Here he comes!

“They can't be that far ahead then. Protect Roger with our bodies. They won't attack full sized people. Sali get behind me now!”

Roger flies right under our legs and stops a few lengths away. He rapidly comes back to hide in our legs next to Sali. The others swoop in, just barely avoiding me and Pasc. Pasc is emotionless and holds his place. They land on the other side of us and make repeated attempts to snap at Roger between our legs. They nip Sali several times.

“What's going on? Why are they so mad at us?”

Roger says they are convinced we are the evil ones. We are set to destroy all life on our world.

“What? How the sun would we do that?”

“Because we came back from the ruins alive. No one has done that before according to the lies that Joss has told them. He also told them because we have defeated the ruins we are powerful enough to kill everyone we don't need any more, including them.”

“Tell them Joss lied. We are no threat to anyone.”

I've been trying to. Joss said we would say that and not to listen to us.

“We may have no choice but to defend ourselves. With this constant pecking from so many they will eventually succeed.”

“Then we run! I am not going to attack friends even if they are mislead and attacking us. A moving target is harder to hit. Zag and keep moving!”

As we run towards the sun and the others, they continue their assault,

but are less effective. Mostly getting as close as possible but not too many times do they make contact. That is what all those spikes on our backs and heads are supposed to prevent and they seem to be doing it.

Two collide as Pasc and I cross paths in our zagging path. Everything stops. They are unconscious on the ground. Left here they would die for sure. We go up to them and the rest think we are about to eat them and intensify their screaming and flying close to us.

“Let me,” Pasc says calmly. My hearts are going crazy. How does he remain so calm? He places his hands on both of them and they revive. They look stunned, but fine. We back away slowly and give them room. The others seeing we are not going to eat them and that they are upright again stop their attack and set down near us.

We all wait to see what is going to happen next.

Roger goes up to the two with head held low. He makes funny sounds I have not heard them make before. The answer him the same way. Suddenly all three take to the air as do the others. They all fly around each other talking nearly as loud as a thunder storm. Deafening. Then they take off together sun ward above us.

“We can go now,” Pasc announces.

We run.

I shout, “Watch for traps. It is what I would do if an enemy was pursuing me.”

Pasc takes the lead and says, “Follow me exactly. Step where I step. I have some experience in this.” I wondered why we followed such a twisted route to the ruins. Probably all kinds of traps I didn't see. I can now longer watch the road and Sali climbs on my back. She is heavy, but it is better than both of us going down in a hidden hole. Easy to make with the right tool and hard to see when in a hurry.

I nearly fall into several. I am getting tired from all of the concentration, but we keep going.

They will not be able to travel as fast with the wagon and stopping to make the holes.

“As we get closer they will spread out and set up shooters hidden in crevices on each side. They will parallel us once we pass and hit us from behind as well.”

“Living in the south must be fun.”

“Not really.”

“Then it would be better if we don't use the main trail.” Pasc starts off the trail to the north, but only a little ways. It is harder going, but we only have the three of us and no large packs or other things to carry, nor a

wagon. We parallel the main trail at a safe distance. Now we will be behind any hidden forces, which could only be our own people. We can see the trail most of the time. Sometimes it is hidden behind small hills as our path goes up and down more frequently than theirs.

“Who made this trail and who maintains it?”

“Who made it is lost knowledge. The users maintain it. They are required to fill in any hole they find. Failure to do so is considered very bad luck.”

“Their making holes is not a good idea for them either.”

“Not at all. I suspect that the only reason it has been possible to do is because your clan does not know of the bad luck. I suspect that Joss is not doing any of the digging himself.” Sali smiles when he says this. Neither of us can imagine Joss working.

“And therefore does not bring any of the bad luck on himself, or so he thinks. We may have to change his mind.”

“I would like that very, very much.” I am mad that the clan has left without us. I have no doubt that Joss is responsible. Our clan would not know to make holes in the trail. In the south it was always more prudent to avoid a fight. In any fight both sides always lost some. In running at least your side loses no one.

Pasc motions to Sali to get down and be still.

“Sali, can you read them yet?”

“Yes!” She growls. We wait while she concentrates on those below.

Pasc reaches down and draws a line in the soft dirt next to us. He makes three marks at one point near the line he has drawn. Sali reaches over and makes additional marks with her Fem weapon. It leaves a distinctive mark very different from the shape of the marks that Pasc has made. I soon recognize the first three as us and the rest as the placement of the others. She keeps adding marks along both sides of the line, but very close to it. Finally she adds a box. I am guessing this is the wagon. She adds twelve additional marks in front of the box.

“What?”

“He is using some of the clan to speed the travel of the wagon. They are resting at the moment, but will start up again soon. They are worried that no one has seen any sign of us. Joss is feeling confident that we died in the ruins like everyone else.” Sali is clearly agitated.

Pasc says through the edges of his breath hole, “Joss has been to the ruins and lived. He knows what is really there. For that alone he must be humiliated.” I am not the only one upset with Joss.

“With madness goes lack of caution. We must calm down before

deciding or acting.”

Both Sali and Pasc look at me and laugh, but it works.

I start, “We are in no danger ourselves. Joss could not have forced them to this path. Therefore he has somehow tricked them to take it. We could leave them to their mistake and make our own way, suffering no loss.” This is our baseline.

They both acknowledge this as truth. We meditate on this truth and see what our other options are. What we don't worry about is losing them to the time it takes to work this out. No matter what we are assured of at least the baseline and can always fall back on this as a way to proceed.

“It would be good to know what was said to deceive so many. We may be presented with this tactic by others further on.” Pasc and I acknowledge.

“To gain this knowledge, we need to get closer so as to be able to see individual minds. We may need to capture an individual of rank to ask questions. Otherwise we are limited to what they are thinking about. Once deceived, most do not dwell on the mistake, but do whatever possible to convince themselves that it is the truth.”

I come back with, “The first part of the deception has to be the idea that we would not come back, in spite of all the previous times that Sali and I have succeeded where others have not.”

“Given our deaths as 'truth' then the next would be to convince them they could not possibly survive without Joss' help.” Yes, this makes sense.

“Finally, they would need to understand that this knowledge and help has a cost. They must place themselves completely under his rule in order to insure success.”

I am shocked, “Do you really think the two Fem, with young ones remember, would allow this?”

“True. So, how could the Fem remain in charge, but go along with the lies?” Pasc looks thoughtful.

“He allows them to remain in power, but he takes on the role of Lead. As he is not capable of mating, he is not a threat to the true Lead and may have even convinced them all that it was only temporary.” I look to Pasc who is also not capable of mating and has seen Joss before. What is the connection?

“Right, until they got past the bad lands. Only the danger will never completely disappear, or will come back repeatedly until they get so used to his being Lead that he is effectively running things. After some time he would only need to pretend to be allowing the Fem a say.” I growl this

time.

“If it was that easy, then all we would have to do is show ourselves and it would all collapse.”

“And he knows there was some possibility of surviving as he did. Therefore he convinces them that if we did survive we would be dangerous in thoughts and actions. Anyone who saw us, or least listened to us, would catch the sickness and become dangerous themselves.”

“We lose either way. If we never return, he is correct and if we show ourselves, we are seen as dangerous and therefore to be avoided or worse, killed.”

“Then we must not be seen before we convince them that Joss is wrong.”

I smile, “We need to make it obvious that Joss' decisions are worthless, that he is reckless, stupid and therefore dangerous himself.”

Sali grins, “I think the best place to start is the wagon. He would hardly seem so all knowing if he had to run like everyone else.”

Pasc laughs, “Excellent idea. Only how do we get to the wagon without being seen? He will have guards in all directions.”

I ask them, “You can see minds, but can you also send thoughts? I know of your abilities, but the rest of the clan does not. What would they think with no obvious source?”

Pasc says, “We would need to convince those near the wagon that they were in immediate danger of death if they stayed nearby.”

“Others would notice and therefore be watching the wagon and then would see us.”

Pasc points to the drawing, “Most everyone is behind them and expecting trouble from behind. Only the twelve in front are likely to see us. I am guessing these were chosen for this very hard exhausting work because they did not exactly like Joss' plans and are being punished as much as anything.”

“And therefore would welcome us back and more likely to be silent about our efforts.”

“Or might even help us. Maybe we need only get a message to them.”

Sali says, “If there was something wrong with the trail ahead of them and those pulling the wagon knew, but said nothing . . .”

“Then it is settled. We need only prepare a trap ahead of them and let the those pulling know.”

I can't get it out of my mind, “Pasc, what is your connection to Joss? Can we exploit that as well?”

He stares at me a moment, “Ah, I see what you mean. Yes, Joss was

once one such as I am. However he did not meet the truthfulness tests. Our work is worthless if not truthful. That is why he is missing his spikes and why he stays on this farthest of way trails. It was done to him to warn others.”

“Which means he preys on those lacking knowledge.”

“What would happen if Joss saw you?”

Pasc smiles the greatest grin I have ever seen, “It would be priceless.”

“Priceless? What does that mean?”

“It would be worth an entire circuit of good food to see that expression.”

Sali comes in, “But no one else must see you. This will help convince everyone he is not useful.”

Justice

We have to run as fast as we can to get ahead of them while they are still on a rest stop. Pasc picks a position that can be seen by Joss, high up on a hill over looking the trail just before it turns to avoid the hill. The trail wanders back and forth to keep it as level as possible. This makes me think that the trader is not the only one to use a wagon.

I tell Sali, "We need to get to them before the trader catches up with others of his own kind. They will not be far ahead judging from the angle of the sun."

"We saw no other tracks on the trail."

"That is assuming that it was the only trail and no others intersected this one. How many have we seen that go north from here? Three? Are you sure no others are ahead?"

"That would explain why the trail leading to the ruins needed to be marked. You would not want to accidentally take the wrong one north. Why would they come to the most southern trail though?"

"That creature that ate Lead can't depend on stupid people getting too close. There must be a lot of other creatures in the water. Where there is a concentration of food, people will also be interested."

"I will avoid the grumpfs all the same. On a solid surface is fine with me. Looks like Pasc is in place and here comes the wagon. Be ready to duck under the wheels when Joss freaks over seeing Pasc. You remember where we need to cut to damage it?" I nod. We will need to be very fast. We are just going to cut the lines to the pullers enough so that when they hit the hole, we will build further up, it will collapse the wheels.

"You remember what to say to them? I am going back to quiet."

"I remember. Don't you think this is silly?"

"Necessary. You will understand later. We go now!"

We scurry around the rock and get ready. Pasc jumps up to the top of the hill he is on. Joss is startled and pulls back on the reins controlling the twelve pulling. It takes a moment for them to respond and he pulls harder. Once the wagon stops and he goes back into the wagon, we run in and nick the lines.

I whisper to the two nearest the wagon, "Be ready further on. Leaper skin on the ground." The look of surprise on seeing the two of us is good. I wonder what Joss looked like? Was it good for Pasc? They nod slowly and we run back across the path into the rocks. I think several others see us too. I motion to be silent. They understand at least. I don't see the two

Fems or their young. I wonder where they are?

Once out of range we run again. I can hear the wagon squeak as it starts up again.

We see the marker that Pasc has left and cut back to the trail. He is already at work digging a hole big enough to damage the wheels. He is making use of an already existing cut in the trail that had been filled in previously. We set to work to widen it enough to just fit the wheels.

“How will we cover it?”

“Low gatherers. Notice how they are already on safer parts of the trail. Watch your placement. I want it to look random. Fortunately the trail already has enough smaller cracks with low gatherers in them. Our new ones don't look that much out of place here.”

I pull a leaper skin out of my pack and place it on the ground in front of the damaged area as if it has fallen out of someone's pack.

Pasc asks, “What's that for?”

“I told them to look for it. Two saw us cut the lines. I doubt they want to continue pulling the wagon.” I grin. Sali's stomach makes a very loud growl. We both look at her.

“I think it has been awhile since any of us has eaten anything.”

“Afterwards. Stay focused.”

“If this goes according to our plan, the wagon will be made unusable and Joss will have to start running.”

“What about all his stuff? Far more than he can carry.”

“I am guessing that the trusted six will take on that roll.”

“You think he will trust them?”

“Shh! Here they come.”

The wagon is going faster than I had seen it go before. I guess twelve makes a difference. I am also guessing the first two have told the rest or Joss is trying to make up for lost time. Sure enough, he strikes them with a corded rope and they go even faster.

They ignore the leaper skin, one even steps on it. When the wheels hit our trap it is exciting. The front of the wagon dips sharply and Joss actually come flying out of the wagon to take down the closest two pullers. The back end goes up into the air. The front wheels then shatter and the front of the wagon goes down to the ground nearly hitting Joss. This causes the back to sway to the north that causes both of the back wheels to come off when they finally hit the ground at an angle. They break apart as well. Meanwhile ten remaining pullers have kept going and the lines they were pulling snap. The front two fall on their faces. The ones behind collapse on top of them.

Joss comes up bloody, but alive. The others have only minor scratches and such.

What happens next is totally unexpected.

I had thought that only Joss was in the wagon, but as soon as it comes to a rest, two people jump out on top of Joss. Shit! Fem! They have their honor knives out and kill Joss very quickly. He is gutted from top to bottom. He sees himself die watching his own insides scattered on the ground. I am shocked.

Pasc comes up to me and says quietly, "It is time for us to be seen by the rest."

Sali takes the front as usual. I follow and Pasc is in the rear. We come out of hiding and come up to the two Fem. They are cleaning their knives on Joss' covering.

I hear a commotion and see the six original pullers running away from our group. I signal Lead and he signals others. They may have strength from pulling the wagon for so long, but we are lighter and faster.

Lead comes back, "What do we do with the wagon?"

"Does everyone have their hardware?"

"He threatened to kill the Fems if we tried anything. He let us keep our weapons. Said it was not safe out here and we might be needed. When the wagon went down we threw their knives into the wagon, knowing they would want them. He did things to them." I gape and then nod.

"Do we need anything in the wagon?"

He shakes his eye stalk, "No, the young are dead. Said they would slow us down. He ate them and forced the Fem to eat some too." That explains their hate.

"Burn it then. Burn everything. Him included." He smiles and signals others. Soon we smell the smoke of wood and meat.

Pasc comments, "I am sorry. I never thought he would get that bad. I will report this to the others when I return. He brought shame on our entire clan. We will all do penance to realign our thoughts to prevent this from happening again." He then makes a tear in his covering. When he walks you can see what has happened to him. His shame is revealed.

The afts come back with the six. They are still alive, but have taken some abuse.

I ask Lead, "What is the story on them?"

"I am not sure. They did nothing to us, but neither did they help us."

"Then why did they run? Find out for me."

Sali comes up to me looking pathetic.

Lead has left us. Pasc sees her and laughs, "I will find some food." He goes to the group and makes himself known at the same time. People accept him because he came in with us.

Soon food is brought to Sali and I. I did not realize how hungry I was until I taste the first bite. It is not much. It means we need to find more soon. We were weakened by the change in the small ones inside of us and went through food much faster than we should of. I am guessing Joss did not allow for anyone's needs except his own. I would have liked to have seen the contents of the wagon. I am sure he was hiding much from us. How much of it could have helped us in the time ahead?

I find Lead and ask, "Where are the bang sticks?"

"The six took them when they ran. We did not find them when we caught up with them. Their packs are missing too."

I turn to Sali, "Help us please." She could see their minds and find out.

It does not work that way. They have to be thinking about the packs and their location for me to see it.

"It would not be that hard to get them to think about it." I grin.

"No need." Pasc comes up carrying the packs and the bang sticks.

He continues, "You were lucky the black powder was in the packs and not the wagon. If it had been many would have died when it was burned."

"Another mistake I should have thought of."

"You are too hard on yourself. You are not familiar with our knowledge and means. Chances are Joss was afraid of it as well."

"Then it is time we learned more. Can you teach our clan how to use the sticks? I don't want to be at a disadvantage when we meet the clans ahead of us." He nods, but does not look happy about it. He goes up to six of the clan and carefully hands them a stick and a pack. A lot of talking goes on with each.

Lead comes up to us, "We are ready."

"We run, but be careful. They can't be that far away."

Circle

We leave the burned scar on the road behind us. Our primary now is to find food. I signal Lead to send out runners in search of crevices with full loads. I am afraid though, with the local lines ahead of us, they will have already found everything there is to find. It would appear that they prefer to use those noisy bang sticks. One attempt and everything else is gone. We are too large for that game.

I make my way up to Pasc, “The six should not use the sticks except in defense of the clan.”

He sighs, “That is their only purpose. There is much risk in our having them. A clan with the 'sticks' is a target for others. We have rules we are required to follow. We are not allowed to use forward means against those with backward means.”

I look confused.

“Joss would have been in violation had he used them.”

“You really think he cared?”

He sighs again, “No. I could try and assure you that is was the exception, but I don't think you would believe me.”

“Experience will teach us, if we survive. We will play it your way until we have no choice. Tell the six not to use them under any circumstances unless I give the order. You did not have much time with them. Can they use them even?”

“They can each fire one shot. There was not time to teach them how to reload. They are unlikely to hit anything though. It takes practice.”

“As any weapon does. Good to know. False confidence can be fatal.”
He nods.

There is one place they will not have gone to search for food.

“I know. We may have no choice. Have you seen Oofik?”

He is not among us.

“Cold! How many will I lose? I should have died on the hatching field.” I just run for a time. I really don't want to think of anything. Every time I think, someone dies. Sali looks at me, but I shake my eye stalk no. I don't want calming. I don't want an explanation.

It is hot. We are very close to the sun edge limit. Eventually I am tired enough to burn out my bad feelings and I call for a rest. Our forward scouts come back and talk to Lead. Pasc goes to give more instruction to the chosen six. I see him insisting that the sticks be pointed down at all times. He strikes anyone who forgets. Not hard, but enough to get their

attention.

Lead comes up to me, “You were right. There is a large clan ahead. An aft scout says there are eight wagons all formed into a circle in a shallow shaded from direct sun.”

“How many people?” Six pullers and one Lead/fem/whatever. Fifty six at least.

“Over a hundred easy. He did not stay to be noticed.”

“Good idea. I don't need them coming after us.” I think. We know where they are. Sali looks at me like a long lost one starving to death. I doubt it, but I feel it too. You can't fight on an empty stomach.

“We go south. I want food, even if we have to go close to the water. We know where they are. Post observers to be sure we are not found. If what the trader said was true, they will not be expecting anyone but themselves on this line.” He smiles in a disgusted way. Yeah, no one believes the trader. I just remember his surprise when he figured out we were not from the north.

I wish Oofik was here to guide us. All I can hope is that he told his story enough times so that others know what he did.

It is a short distance to the water. I am guessing they placed the trail just far enough away to prevent being attacked. Even one grumpf would feed us for a small moon, now that we are over the distress of being in the north. Five afts spread themselves out along the shore and kneel down with their spears at the ready.

“Grumpfs are not the only thing in the sea.” Pasc offers.

“Do you know how to get the others? Do we have the necessary equipment or experience to get the others?”

“No.” He smiles. Another test? Sali and Pasc are going to make me cook in the sun. I have only seen that once. It is not an easy death to set up. Finding volunteers to take someone out far enough to die before the sun grows cold is not easy. Usually they are the ones most affected by the condemned one's bad actions. I was only two circuits old at the time. The condemned one had dishonored the clan by making a stupid trade that put the entire clan in danger. I was too young to understand all the details.

We sit and wait. Pasc works on something made of scraps of wood he has found. A moments lack of awareness when the grumpf strikes could mean death, yet we sit and wait. The rest of us stand guard to rush in if necessary. Meanwhile Pasc works on his sticks.

We would be better off looking for leaper burrows.

Pasc gets up and walks to the water, between two of the waiting afts.

What is he doing? He wades out into the water. This far sun ward it will still be warm. Isn't he afraid of being eaten? I know he has the talent that Sali has. I turn to her and she is watching intently. He is nearly up to his stomach. He just stands there with the raised stick, which now see is a spear of sorts, though very thin. Would not stop a small leaper.

We watch and wait. The afts with their spears and Pasc with his play stick.

Suddenly there is a commotion in the water and Pasc strikes. His spear is attached to a cord and he pulls on it. There is a struggle. The others are watching him now. I can't believe the size of the creature that breaks the surface. He is patient though and eventually the creature tires and he gently brings it to shore.

He looks at me, "Takes practice."

Sali suddenly screams! Everyone wakes up and comes to awareness. We all look to the shore where the five are stationed. The second from the sun bends down a fraction just as it strikes. He trusts up with his spear and we can see it come out of the top of its mind case. He is completely covered by the mouth of the creature.

"Fores, help him!"

They rush over and hack at the beast, but it becomes obvious that it is already dead. Pasc comes over and asks for a sword. A fore hands him his. He takes it and carefully makes a cut in just the right place. The skin comes off easily and then separates. The aft comes out smiling.

"Don't forget to save the jaws you sun baked fool!" I shout. The other fores look worried when I say this.

Lead runs up to me, "We need to be quiet. Their scouts will hear us. Loud noises carry a long ways."

"I'm sorry. Has anyone see the Streakers? I hope they have not abandoned us."

"We have had little food to offer them. They are probably searching for their own."

"Were we able to save any of the clan flags?"

"The trader burned them."

Pasc comes up to me, "The scent of blood from the one I caught brought the other one. Not as big as the one that Oofik, ah, caught."

"Enough to feed us. Thank you." I look around, "What did you do with the one you caught?"

"Threw it back. They taste very bad, but the grumpfs love them. I think it is what they usually eat when they can't catch something on the shore."

“Ah.”

Once the clan cuts up the beast and cleans the jaws I order us to leave. If they heard my shout or just random chance will eventually bring one of them. I would rather not be so out in the open.

We need to visit the others. Sooner or later we need to learn their ways and we can't do that from the outside.

“And if they are like the trader?”

We are not so foolish any more.

“Give me a quarter small moon. I want to meet them with full stomachs and strong muscles.”

I watch the others packing the meat and preparing to move. The two Fems are off to one side watching, but doing nothing to assist. I feel I am nearly the same. Three who live off the labor of others.

We move to a more northern location off the main trail and a little more sun ward. Scouts report back that the circle is still there. Apparently there is lots of noise and excitement. I wonder what they are doing?

We are well fed and rested and yet I hesitate. The others are wondering what we are going to do. The air grows colder and the rains will begin soon.

Once they are moving again they will not tolerate outsiders as well, if at all.

“Okay, first one thing.”

I find Lead and tell him, “Gather everyone.”

Everyone but the two Fems comes quickly.

I sigh, “Tell the Fems I need them as well.” Lead looks skeptical he will succeed.

He comes back in a moment and shrugs.

I go to them myself. Everyone watches as I do this. Very shameful to ask the High Fem to fetch someone.

When I get there they don't even look up, but continue to talk among themselves.

“You have a choice at this point. You can stay here and take care of yourselves, by yourselves or you can join us. I don't need people who do not help in anyway. The clan does not need people such as this. It would be better for the clan if you stayed here.”

I then walk back to the others.

They wait for me to speak to Lead. Lead waits for me to tell him what is to be done.

I signal him to back away. Even Sali is curious now. Pasc just smiles.

“I am resigning as High Fem. I am no longer your leader. I did not

want the position and I don't feel I am very good at it. How many have died because of me? Look where we are? A long ways from our home line and not much chance of getting back. Instead I have stranded all of you in a strange land where the people here deceive others instead of working themselves. When they depend on weapons that are only designed to kill others, not to hunt. Even the streakers have abandoned us.

Choose a new High Fem from among the other two if you wish. I would recommend against it, but I am not good at choosing directions, so you might best be served by one of them.

Sali, Pasc and I are freaks. We should not exist. We are abominations. If they will have me I will travel with them and serve them. I will not lead them. I am not foolish enough to even think I could.”

I stop talking and turn away from them. I pick up my pack and find it already has a portion of the grumpf inside. I am thankful for that at least. I walk alone for a bit. Soon Sali is at my side and Pasc soon after.

By the time I reach the main trail I hear even more footsteps.

Lead comes along side, “We are not following you. We just happen to be going the same way.”

“I understand. What about the Fem?”

“Last I noticed they were at the rear. They are not sure what to do. No one wants them as High Fem or any other purpose. They will have to fend for themselves.” He passes us. A few others do as well. Soon I notice that I am exactly in the middle of the clan as if nothing has happened. I don't want a return to the way it was.

I turn to the one next to me, “Sincerest greetings. My name is Razzel. May I have the honor of your name?”

He is somewhat shocked, but I don't turn away and wait.

“Ah, my name is Ahas. Pleased to have met you.”

“Ahas, that pack looks heavy. As long as we are traveling in the same direction, why not let me carry some of it. My pack is light.” That totally surprises him. He looks to Lead, but I tap him on the shoulder and he returns his attention to me.

“This is just between you and me. If Lead is your new leader and does not approve, I am sorry to have gotten you in trouble. I meant no offense.”

“I guess it would be okay. Are you sure you can handle it?”

“Ever notice that the biggest people are usually the Fems and yet they do the least amount of work?”

“We all know that. It is because of the egg they have to carry.”

“No one here has an egg. What about then? And isn't that most of the time? Has Lead mated the Fems?”

“He would not do that without permission.” He whispers, “And he would not do it willingly, if you understand. None of us approved of their being raised to Fem, but it was not our decision.”

“It would seem to me that a clan would do better if it used all the knowledge, abilities, and strength of everyone in the clan.”

Another person is listening to us and I ask him, “My name is Razzel. What do you think?”

“I am Gyfc. What about the experience of the High Fem? I mean, no offense, but usually the High Fem is the oldest, most experienced, most knowledgeable person in the clan.”

“No offense taken. I clearly do not fit that description. Lead should be High Fem by that criteria. I don't even know how that is done. How do you make someone a Fem?”

“All the fore watchers know. Part of their training. You would need at least two fores to make a new clan. One would become Fem and the other would mate her.”

“Learn something new every moon.” I smile.

Where are you going with this idea? I ignore her, but the two with me notice her nudging me.

“What about her? I mean Sali? She knows stuff no Fem, er, person can know.”

“Sali, go kill a grumpf for us?” She looks at me in shock. “No, then how about forging a knife. You know a lot about forges apparently.”

I lack the strength.

“She says she is not strong enough. Okay, how about preparing a crafter plate to make shoes out of.” She looks at me in disgust. It is a messy process.

“Well, gee, what good are you anyway?” I push her in play to let her know I am just teasing her.

“The idea I am presenting is that we are not just one served by many. We all serve each other. Sometimes Sali has good ideas and that is how she contributes.” I see a nearly round hole in the trail. Some leaper has decided to start a burrow in the wrong place, but it gives me an idea.

“We are an unbroken circle. Just like the clan ahead of us. They formed their wagons in a circle. Everyone is equal. Everyone we allow into the circle is important, and no less important than anyone else. The one who has an idea presents the idea to the circle. Everyone decides if the idea is good or not, if they want to follow it or not. Some will be

better at ideas, others at actions, but all give to the clan. All participate all the time. There is always work to be done. If you are not near the time of egg laying, then you can work. If you are good at ideas, you present them, even if you are an aft, as I was a circuit ago.”

Pasc smiles and nudges Sali who pouts and shakes her eye stalk. I don't care.

“We have a decision to make. The other clan is before us. That is one path. We can attempt to get back to the south. That is another. We could go north as Sali and Pasc want to do, before or after we meet the other clan. We could stay back and avoid them. Lots of possibilities. What do all of you say?”

One offers, “We think we should go with you wherever you go.”

“Oh, everyone thinks this? How do you know? Did you go around and ask everyone?” He looks surprised and confused.

I want to see the other clan.

I look at her, “Sorry I can't hear you. I know you can talk. If we are all to be equal we can't play this game any more Sali. If you want them to know something, then tell them.”

She gets upset and leaves the group. Pasc smiles and stays.

He says, “I would like to see this other clan. What the trader did was against all of our rules. I need to be sure this has not become the way things are down here.”

Lead asks, “Will you protect us from them if they are bad?”

“I am not allowed to interfere directly, but they know of my kind and what will happen to them if they do try anything. Joss knew this and that was why just the sight of me caused his downfall and ultimately his death.”

“Then what use are you?”

“Axy, shame on you. It was his hunting that gained us the last grumpf.”

“I am not allowed to act directly. Doesn't mean that I can't be, ah, sneaky about it. As you can see, simply being in the right place at the right time can change outcomes, though I do nothing physically to those around me.” He smiles and several laugh nervously. I can see Sali a little ways off watching us.

“I don't think we could get back without someone trained to lead us there. From what I have been able to understand, there is no one who can. At least not here. Going back to our home line is death to us all.”

Pasc nods, “Very likely.”

Another comes in, “And staying here without the knowledge of the

lines here is also likely to end us up dead, though maybe slower and one by one.”

“Also very likely.”

Lead says to the group, “What say you? Go to the clan up the trail to learn more or go north now before we are ready?” Some choice when you put it that way.

They all shout, “TRAIL!”

Pasc says, “Looks like we have traveling companions.” He turns to Sali, “Are you coming with us or are you going to sulk until you freeze?” Sali sticks her eye stalk in the air and pretends not to hear him. I have never seen anyone do that before, though the intent is easy to understand.

“She will come with us. Maybe she can keep the other Fem company.” He says this loud enough to be heard by her. I smile. The two are still just outside of the circle of the rest of us and on the cold side of the trail.

Three come up to me, “We are good at running point. We would like to do so now.”

They are still waiting for directions from me. I look to Lead, but he is looking away from me dealing with others.

Pasc offers to no one in particular, just talking to the wind, “People need to make up their own minds. It will be difficult at first for everyone to adjust.” They get it though and run off to the front of the line.

“Thanks”

“For what? Oh are you still here?” He smiles then whispers, “I am not without compassion.”

I get ready to run, but Pasc holds me back. I think for a moment.

“My primary responsibility is still to Sali.” He nods. “I will hold back and let the others go first. It will be a demonstration of their independence. I will assist the one remaining young one and the other Fem, who seem to be having trouble keeping up.” It is hard to remember she is still only a circuit old and not an adult yet. Two more circuits before then. Normally she would be training as an aft right now.

“How do I train someone to be a Fem when I don't know that is?”

“Does not look like that will be a problem. Experience will be her training, just like it will be for you. Everything will be different here. Follow the wind.” The wind always moves towards the sun. Even in the dark and cold of no sun we always know where the sun is.

As I pass people who look confused I tell them to “Follow the wind.” and they lighten up and quicken their pace.

Sali is already with the other Fems. I don't like that. She can be tricky

when she wants something.

Sure enough she looks horrified at me when I come up and hides behind the other two. They immediately open up at me, “What kind of a High Fem are you? Neglecting your own young one. Look at her? Did you hit her? You are a horrible leader.”

“You should be very happy then. I am no longer leader. And I have come back to take care of Sali.”

“She does wrong! She says the name of a Fem! No Fem who is no longer leader lives. It is required that they be killed so the proper Fem will not have interference or orders questioned.”

The other asks forcefully, “Who is High Fem now? It is their responsibility.”

I sigh, they are not making this easy, “There is no High Fem. Nor will there be one. There are no afts, fores, outcasts, Fems or any other sorting. Everyone is the same, everyone participates in decisions. Everyone takes responsibility for seeing work gets done.”

“Then I will have to do what needs to be done.” She rises with a wicked looking curved knife I have never seen before and comes at me with speed I could not have guessed at. She is larger than me and can easily overpower me.

Sali yells, “STOP!” and runs between us just as she strikes. She holds up a crafter plate just in time and the knife goes well into the plate. The force is strong enough to shake the plate from her hands. It clatters to the ground with the knife stuck in it.

The two Fem look on in horror, “You can talk!” They fall to the ground and bury their faces in the dust. Now what? This is becoming painful, not to mention dangerous.

Look at what you made me do? Do you understand now why I could not say anything?

“Will the others react this way too?”

The fores most definitely. The afts will follow their example even though they do not understand.

The one who attempted to kill me says, “I am not worthy to live. Please be merciful and kill me now.” She trembles as she says this.

Pasc is sitting down near by smiling. Waiting to see how I am going to get out of this no doubt.

“Oh cold. Everyone get up. Serve Sali if you want, but say nothing to the others. As you can see she can be difficult to work with. Be careful, she will attempt to trick you to get what she wants.”

I turn to her, “I am sorry. I did not know. You could have told me this

would happen. I really have no idea what is happening. I do not have the answers." I stomp off sun ward.

Pasc catches up, "Good job."

"You could have helped. You did help us get back to the main trail. I know you can help if you choose to. I could have died back there."

"Sali would not have allowed that."

"She nearly didn't stop it." He shows amusement and smiles. He knows something he is not saying or allowed to say.

"Think of it as a learning experience for her as well. She will not put you into that position again. I would recommend respecting her desire to remain out of sight though."

"She is already very visible. See any other Fem her age?"

"Soon she will grow and look no different than any other Fem. Nor will she be the only one hatched Fem. As I said, the north does not kill its Fem hatched."

"Will there be any at the clan circle we are going to?"

"Maybe. There is a fear among the northerners of anyone from the south, though it rarely happens that anyone makes it across the sea."

"When was the last time?"

"About three thousand years ago."

"WHAT?"

"It is not just the south that has its stories and fears."

"What will happen when we show up at the circle? Will they run from us?"

"Not if you behave. Act like northerners pretending to be southerners and act like fearful southerners."

Only make a few mistakes. You are just pretending. If you were perfect then they will get worried.

"How do we make mistakes? I know nothing of the north."

Not showing any fear of Pasc will be a start.

"Right, the trader was scared to death of you." I look to Pasc.

"Only the selfish need fear the White." White? Because of his covering?

One more thing. The circle will require something of value in trade for the privileged of entering the circle.

"As would we. A token of good faith so we do not turn on them. It would be returned upon separation."

In the north it will not be returned.

"And a token will not work."

"Maybe the grumpf jaws would be enough? They really don't serve

any purpose for us and are heavy to carry.”

That should be enough. The northerners fear the grumpf.

“Now I have to convince the others about this 'new' knowledge I have obtained by some method I can't explain.”

It will be harder to explain their behavior. Pointing to the Fem. The two are acting like slaves about to be killed for any wrong move.

“Cold. This is a mess I have started again. Why can't the three of us just go north right now. No one is watching. We hide until they are out of sight and then we go north. Easy right?”

Pasc and Sali both give me nasty looks.

“I guess not.”

We quickly catch up to the rest. I don't care if everyone is tired. Such a mess.

Lead sees me first with his rear sight, turns around and comes up to us, weaving through the others.

“I have explained things to the two Fem. They are serving penance for their bad behavior.” He shows concern, but does not respond.

“We are nearly there.”

“This is going to sound strange. We need to pretend to be northerners pretending to be southerners. Do we still have the grumpf jaw?”

“Of course. We hoped to trade with them for tools and knowledge.”

“A slight change in plans. We will need it as an entrance token to their circle.”

“That is far more than would be required in the south. But I guess when we leave it will serve us again.”

“Ah, they will keep it. In exchange we will be accepted by them. We can gain the knowledge that we need. Please explain to the others. We don't have much time for everyone to understand. Oh and keep the six out of sight.” He does not smile at that.

So much for equality. How do I deal with the six? Will they be seen as offenders as we see them or as wrongly taken slaves? I will not order them killed as most would have. We are not in the south any more and here the rules are clearly different. Best to find out before acting.

“It will take time. I am seeing that there are times when there is no time to debate an issue. Slow to act can mean death just as a bad decision would.” Pasc smiles. Cold, that is going to bake me sooner or later.

I use rear sight to keep attention on Sali. She is being pampered by the two Fem. Not good, but I don't have time to work on it now.

Northerners

We were surprisingly close to the camp. I had hoped for more time to get ready in my mind. Lead is at the front as would normally be the case.

Remember, we are pretending to be southerners. Let things unfold as would be expected, everyone will be less nervous following roles they are used to. But be careful and watchful, be prepared to adapt.

With only about thirty of us visible, and still alive, we are all close enough to hear the dialog.

The guard at the gap in the wagons goes first, "Look at what the wind blew in. Hey Hasr! Come see the costumes." A couple of other people rush over to look at us. Lots of whispering ensues. They are eating something that smells good, but I can't get what it is.

Lead must have noticed too and pulls out some cooked grumpf to chew on. A big piece. He looks over the camp as if he is deciding whether or not to stay or move on. The bargaining has begun.

In heavy southerner he says to them, "So, what do you want to join the camp for a short time?" Normally even we would offer very polite greetings. This is not normal, though more amusing.

The guard and the others look at us like we are aliens.

Lead smiles and says in good northerner, "What do you want to join you for a short time?"

"Sun baked, you scared the spikes off me. You got their accent down perfect. All of you look great. The best I have ever seen. Must have taken some time and creds to get your setup together. Back to nature group?" How would he know what we sound like if no one has seen southerners for three thousand years. The one next to him bumps him and whispers something. He then says, "Sorry, guess you would be called a clan, right?"

"Call us what you want, we tire of playing games. I am eating grumpf if that means anything to you."

"Well, they do wash up on the beach sometimes."

He breaks off a chunk and hands them a piece, "Does this smell like putrid meat to you? Taste it. I have lots of it. Enough to feed everyone here in fact." He tentatively accepts the piece and cautiously tastes it. He hands the rest to the others who also taste it, but with less caution.

"Good stuff. How many people did you lose getting it?"

"No one. Why would we lose anyone?"

He laughs at us, "They eat people you know."

“Oh we know that. This isn't the first one we hunted. We have the method worked out.”

“Hunted. You guys are hard.” The others nod agreement, but the piece is gone. Lead hands them some more. It quickly disappears too.

“You have some proof?”

“What do you want? You have tasted the meat. Know anything else that tastes like grumpf?”

Just then the Streakers make an entrance screeching loudly. Our group is used to them and does not move. The fores hold up arms for perches. The Streakers land on each of their partners with grace. The wagon people all have bang sticks out ready to kill everyone and everything.

Lead handles it with calm. He is good.

“Don't worry about our friends. They won't hurt you.” Pointing to the sticks, “You still use those old things? I thought we were going it rough. We have six more if you want them. Lots of powder too. Way too loud in the fields. Scares the food away and tells your enemy just where you are.”

The guard lowers his stick but says, “But effective.”

“Not really. If we wanted all of you dead it would have been done before you even knew what was happening. We are not here to fight. We are on our way back north actually. Just looking for company and information on conditions.”

“I don't believe you.” Rather defiantly.

Lead sighs, “You asking for a demonstration?” That makes the guard nervous. He talks with his streaker. A beautiful creature. Roger nuzzles me talking lowly too. I shush him quietly and give him some more grumpf. Where did they every develop a taste for this creature? Not possible for them to ever kill one. More likely to be eaten by one. Revenge?

Lead blinks his rear eye in a special pattern. Three casually unwrap something on the ground. It looked like a pile of packs at first. In reality it is a covering for the jaws. The three bring the jaws forward.

Lead moves aside as they set them down.

“Is this proof enough? They are yours as a gift if that helps. We have no need of them ourselves. Can't do anything with them and really too much trouble to carry around if you don't have a wagon.”

“What happened to your wagon?”

“Southerners do not use wagons. You really did not expect us to use one did you?”

“Not even as backup?” This is taking way too long.

Lead must have heard me thinking, he shrugs and turns around, signals everyone we are leaving.

“Wait, why are you leaving?”

“Why are you not letting us in? What would it take? Give us some idea of what you need that badly that people with their own skills, own food and no need of you have to give up just for your company?” Ouch, not being nice any more. Part of bargaining I guess. I was never this close before.

Another person comes forward and displaces the guard, who backs off respectively.

A High Fem? She is covered in cloth that makes Pasc's cover look like it was woven from weeds. She speaks, “We don't have much need for grumpf jaws either. Oh, I don't deny that there are some in the city who might want them, but as you know, the cost to get them there would not be covered by the price.” I only get part of that, but I think I understand the meaning.

“Funny that's not what Joss said.”

She suddenly gets very agitated. I think she is about to slaughter us all. This is not a safe situation. Still Lead is calm.

He is very good. Even Sali is impressed.

“That rotten piece of leaper dung boiled in piss. May he fry, have his entrails eaten by vomiting streakers, no offense, and then frozen, broken into powder and scattered by the winds in the southern seas.”

“We have information that might interest you then. We felt the same way about him.” He smiles.

“Felt? You didn't kill him did you? Dung, the Whites will bring us all in. Just because we are at the edge doesn't mean we aren't civilized.” I push Pasc to move into view. He resists at first, but then gets up.

He slowly goes up to the front. We know him and give him no special attention, but continue to look at the camp Fem. Upon seeing him though she starts to get very nervous.

“Maybe not to your liking, but he was slit from one end to the other, chopped to pieces and then burned.” He smiles. That just freaks her more.

“What are you going to do to us?” I am getting the feeling that Pasc is some kind of authority. He has no weapons and is impossibly old. What could he do to them?

“Nothing. Should I?” He looks over the Fem's back, then sighs, “The death was justified. I was there and interviewed all involved. I am satisfied. Call it frontier justice. We can't exactly put him in jail out here.” What is a jail?

“I can only give advice on this, but go easy on them. They have traveled a long way and are tired. Does this really need to be stretched out to the traditional small moon in length? Accept their offering. I vouch for them. Good people.”

Apparently he is ignored though.

“We already have a set larger than these, but I suppose we could sell these to a lesser Lord.” A larger set? I thought the northerners feared the grumpf?

“I was not thinking of the bones, those are yours to keep even if we leave. Just seemed a shame to leave them on the shore if others were interested.” He signals the three to put them down and leave. “My question is, are the six that were with him of any interest to you? If not they will become our servants or we could just let them go. We have no way of knowing whether or not they were just victims too.”

“How did they treat you?”

“They did whatever Joss told them to do.”

“With us they were more creative. They must have feared you.”

“More likely our friends.” Lead's streaker squawks on clue. “There were more of them back then. Not all of them are with us presently.” Lead gives the signal and the six are brought struggling to the front. When they see the Fem they struggle even more. With two holding each one with ample rope, they are unlikely to succeed in spite of their larger size.

The Fem comes out from behind the barrier, ignores everyone as she walks among us. She sees me and points. “Rise.” I do so. Sali gets up with me.

“Yours?”

“I am responsible for her.” That surprises her.

“Hatched Fem?”

“Yes.”

She walks a few lengths and randomly, or so it seems, picks an aft from among three others.

“The Fem I was just talking with. What is her name?”

He shrugs and says, “Razzel” like he has been saying all his life.

She turns and heads back to the barrier and pulls it aside.

“You may join us. We are just about to enter the Last City. Once inside, you are on your own. Keep your bones, you will need them.”

We file in slowly. *This was taking so long I almost took a nap.*

“You be careful in here.” She nods. The two remaining Fem look frightened. I am too.

It was easy to see that the ring of wagons was up against the side of a small cliff face maybe twenty lengths high. It slopes down on either side. Would be easy enough to get to the top. Probably chosen to protect them from the never ending wind. It does seem less windy in here. The wagons themselves help too. These are plain colored. Nothing like the one the trader had. Are they traders also? Or just sun runners like us?

No one is on the ropes that pull them. The ropes are carefully coiled up near each wagon. Are we going to run to the Last City? Sali is not telling me like she usually does. Should this worry me?

Once inside I see Pasc is with Lead. They both are waving us over to be near them. Both are smiling.

There is a large set of grumpf jaws behind them. I am looking at them carefully wondering where they got them. Just then two people come out from behind the wagon we are near.

“It's Oofik and Pesslet!” I hear someone say. We all gather around them curious to know how they got here. Everyone is asking them at once though and it is hard to hear anything.

Lead finally gets us to quiet down, by having us sit.

Pesslet starts, “After it was clear we had been deceived by the trader, three of us decided to keep the jaws he wanted so badly away from his grasp. A few others distracted his servants while we sneaked out of camp.”

One of the Fems speaks up, which is strange in itself, as Oofik is not Lead. Maybe they are learning?

“He was raping us.”

“Yes, I listened in on the questioning. I'm very happy that all of you survived and he is dead. I would have liked to have taken a piece of him to fertilize the low gatherers myself.” It is then I notice the large gash on his side, still obviously raw and painful. How Oofik managed to help with the jaws says much about him.

“Where is the third? Gaffer?”

“We did not have as easy a time being allowed in. We had obviously been in a fight and they did not want trouble. Gaffer died because of a misunderstanding. Our City talk was not as good as Lead's or the High Fem.”

I speak up, “There have been a few changes. I am just Razzel again. No more High Fems.” I do not say this very loudly. Fortunately I am fairly close to Oofik. He looks at the other two Fem, but they refuse to look at him and continue to attend to Sali, or at least pretend to. Must be embarrassing to them. Who knows how many rules I have broken. If I

had done this in the south I would be staked out and allowed to freeze to death or be eaten alive by sneaks.

One of them comes up to us, “Come, we enter the City. Our time in this unforgiving wasteland is over.”

Two huge slabs of rock are moved aside by means I cannot see or understand. A hole in the hill is revealed.

Shut

The sight of the doors opening is frightening. What is opened will be closed again, but with us inside. Trapped, no escape. Like a crafter on its back in the sun. Sun, how do we see once the doors are closed?

I ask Sali, "Are you sure this is the only way?" No response. I guess after this much time I should not expect one.

Behind us there is a commotion. I turn to see better than my rear sight can manage and notice lots of activity and shouting, then cheers. What's that all about. Everyone is gathered around in a tight group. Something comes through the air towards us and falls to the dirt. Five more of these things go off in different directions. I stoop down to get a better look and notice the male parts of a person. That makes six. I can guess now what has happened.

"Why now?"

Because on the inside the rules are different. All weapons must be turned in. Otherwise no one would be left alive at the end of the cold.

"Wait, you mean we stay inside this hill for the entire time?"

Oofik and others hear me and quickly tells those around them, who tell the rest of the clan. I hear lots of whispering. The two Fem next to me have the look of horror. I am not sure I look any different. I don't even like being in a shelter unless it is absolutely necessary.

This is absolutely necessary.

"Cold." I have never been more depressed in my life. How many times in the last circuit have I thought this was the end? I have never been more sure than this time.

"If it helps any, I have done it before and I am still here." Pasc of course.

"That does not reassure me any." But I manage a small smile. Then I notice that Roger has hopped down to the ground and is poking at the male parts.

"You don't want to eat that." I throw him some more grumpf meat, which he quickly chokes down. I then dig a small hole in the ground with my foreleg and push the pieces into it and cover them. Not something I would want to step in. I check the bottom of my foot anyway and look between the three toes. Nothing there but streaker shit covered in dust. Nothing unusual, given present company.

Oofik comes to us and bows to me. Not good.

"We have known each other nearly since hatching. Know that this

decision does not come easy.” Others nudge him.

“We can't go inside. We were never intended to be trapped like that. We understand that your trail is different than ours. Certainly your becoming Fem and then of course Sali and now Pasc, have shown all of us that.”

“Run with the wind Oofik.” I turn to the others, “I said you were free, that I am no High Fem.” I pause for effect, “Run with the wind!” A cheer goes up. They immediately take positions and run from the camp towards the trail. I watch them as they turn and go sun ward. I watch until they are out of sight. I wish I was with them. I hope I see them again, but I doubt it.

I turn back towards the remaining. The two Fem look very nervous. Lead is stoic and shows no emotion.

“You are under no obligation either. Any of you. Join them if you will. Otherwise Oofik is likely to become their next High Fem.” That brings a look of shock, but they don't move either.

“Last call!” The hundred have already all entered it seems.

As we pass the jaws, which no one seems to want to take inside, I notice that the streaker clan symbol has been carved on each piece. I smile. They are likely to be here when we emerge on the other side of the cold. On the other side are piles of weapons. We place ours with the jaws. It only seems fitting.

I am stopped at the entrance. Pasc and Lead are ahead of us and stop to see what this is about.

“Sorry, but you three played part of Fems. Your 'clan' has been the most authentic we have ever seen. Are you by any chance hiding, ah, a Fem weapons?”

“No, I was never given one.” I hope the two behind me gave theirs up.

“You will be searched inside. It will go better for you if you leave them here.”

“I understand, but everything I had is on the ground with the rest.” I look to the two Fem behind me sternly. Reluctantly, they remove their knives and drop them on the pile. One was the one which was used to kill Joss, but they are clean now. We are fully spiked and not without our abilities. Except for the Fem weapons, it is normal to leave weapons outside of a shelter. But even at our largest, the clan I was hatched into was never this large, nor have I ever seen so many weapons in one place before. Our pile is very tiny compared to the hundred, but looks larger than it should.

Once inside, the doors are closed by a gang of ten. No one will get out

by themselves. My life is over. Now what?

Inside

There is light inside. Not as bright as outside, so close to the sun edge, but not as dark as the cold edge either. Enough to see where you are going and what is in front of or behind you. We stick together as close as we can and still move. Except for Pasc of course. He is in front and it appears as if he has been here before. Everyone gives him space.

I go up to Pasc, "I did not see the bang sticks outside the opening."

"In the wagons. They need to be protected from the rain and ice. Not likely to be able to hide one in your belongings anyway."

I laugh, "No, I expect not." I am relieved until I start thinking again.

"There are many ways to die without metal or stone."

"And it is dealt with swiftly and cruelly. Put it from your thoughts."

I look up at the things that are giving us light. Balls stuck to the walls of stone. I place my hand on the nearest wall. Not as cold as I thought it would be.

We are searched thoroughly, as are all of our packs. Pasc does not carry one, so is let though first, though they do search under his cloak. He waits for us nearby. I think this is why we are not given any trouble. I do hear some low whispers about some of our items.

Pasc tells us afterwards, "The authenticity of your possessions is impressive to them. Many will try and trade for them. Don't accept any trade unless I am present. That will keep them honest. Keep your leaper coats no matter what. You will need them." Ah, so it will get cold.

"Shit, what about Roger? He is still with us!" I just felt him move on my back.

"Shh, he is old enough to make his own decisions. Many circuits they have noticed these caves that people go into and then emerge on the other side. He will be the first of his kind to actually see the inside. Great honor will come to him." Pasc scratches Roger behind his neck. Ugly to see such an arrangement. Took a lot of careful observation to understand how their food and air holes could work together on their eye stalks. At least the sharp teeth are recognizable. We all have those. Biggest disadvantage is that they can't talk and eat at the same time. I am not even sure they can breathe at the same time, but apparently they way they eat they do not have to hold their breath for long.

Sali seems to be as curious as I am. The two Fem stick close by him. Lead just looks straight ahead.

"What is your name Lead? I think the time has come that we need to

be our own clan and a clan of six is too small to have secrets. You are the only mate able male among us. Your position is secure.”

“Wuf will do.” He gives me a suggestive look.

Knowing a Lead's name means you want to mate with him.

“You could have told me before I said anything.” Some help you are. I know it had to come up sooner or later, but here?

One of the Fem is with egg from Joss.

“Oh cold beyond cold.” I look at Sali, “Are you sure?” She nods, but does not tell me which one. It will become obvious before we re-emerge. That has to hurt inside. We all need to mate with Wuf as soon as possible. It is the only way to hide this with honor. That must be why Sali did not stop me. I am included. Lack of knowledge is a problem.

Wuf is experienced, er, has the knowledge. Not the same thing.

“Cold.” I don't like being dependent on those two. I know they know what to do.

“Wait, I saw Joss close up. He has been changed. He could not possibly be the one.”

I do not understand either.

“Fa'reem. Don't try to find me. Go to your assigned place.” Pasc looks very upset and takes off ahead of us.

“Do we wait here for his return or do we keep going forward?” Wuf asks.

One of the Fem answers, “This area is not safe. Too many side passages. Hard to defend.”

“Forward then.” We do eventually see others, some of whom I think I recognize from the one hundred.

A small male comes up to us finally and asks, “You look lost. May I help you?” The Fem eye him cautiously.

“We were with Pasc. He said for us to go to our place.”

“The White?” Wuf nods. “Come with me please. You can call me Gigger. He will be resting near where I do.”

Hesitating, Wuf says, “Wuf.”

“First time in this City?”

“Yes. We have been on the trail a very long time. Survey work.”

“Looks like it if you now have four Fem with you.”

“Others continue the work. We elected to come here.”

“It does get tiring out there. Nothing to attack you in here and the food is better in that it is at least cooked.”

“There is that.”

“Great trappings. Most authentic I have ever seen.”

“Many say that. Thank you. We made them ourselves using the old methods.”

“Whoa! That took patience. You really must have been out a long time. Well, the layout is typical of any of the Cities. Laid out in a star. You can't get lost. Just find a main artery and follow that to the center. From there everything is labeled well. Population of the City for this half circuit is approximately one hundred and sixty, give or take five or so. I never was that good at numbers. Rare that everyone is in one chamber at a time to make an accurate count. Well here we are. Not the emperor's palace, but we call it City. I am three doors down.” He disappears.

We are alone in a chamber bigger than most shelters outside. We have been going down hill for most of our short walk, so that puts us well below the surface. It is cool, but nothing like the cold edge. I wonder how much cooler it will get.

The fact that Pasc said to keep our covers suggests it will get much cooler. A half circuit is a long time.

I laugh, “Yeah, half your life time. It would seem long to you.”

The two Fem immediately decide where they want to be. Just inside the opening. There are carved sections in the walls that look good for storing materials. I go a little further around. It is a large circle and comes back to the opening if you follow it around. The carved sections are nearly the entire edge. There appears to be another opening at the opposite side. After setting my pack down I proceed there to investigate.

I look inside and see it is a very small chamber. Not big enough for anyone to stay in for a length of time. There is a strong smell of waste and a gentle flow of air downwards. I nearly fall in when I finally notice the hole in the ground.

I tell the others, “I am guessing this is where they want us to put waste.”

Wuf comes over and looks, “Looks safe enough. Now what about the other end? Where is the food? A half circuit is a long time to not eat.”

“If we are all not part of one clan, duties would be assigned. Food collection and preparation would be part of that I assume. Pasc should be able to tell us.”

The smaller Fem says, “It would be best to wait and rest until his return.”

Wuf nods, “I agree. We are in a strange place without knowledge. We have enough grumpf left in our packs for some time.”

I add, “Though it will smell in such an enclosed space very soon.” I take some out and sniff it before adding some to my mouth. Still okay.

“We regenerate arms or legs when we have to. I wonder if the six can regenerate what they lost. I did not see them outside when we entered. I assume they are here as well.”

Wuf looks upset, “I hope not. They are likely to blame us for their misfortune. Be careful everyone.” So much for being a nice safe place.

What must have been a small moon that we waited. I can't imagine how I am going to survive a half circuit. What do you do when there is nothing to hunt, nothing to repair, nothing to prepare and the worst, no place to run. A few attempts to run the main trails of this underground city only gained us curses.

“Miss me?” Pasc returns. He does not look happy though.

“I have brought food. This will be the last until we figure out what tasks you can do to earn your way. They will feed me without question. They are not so endured to your presence.” He sneers.

“I gather it did not go well?”

“No it did not.”

I have to ask, “What is Fa'reem?” One of the Fem curses when I say it. I now know which one is with egg. The larger fortunately. She will be the stronger one should something happen.

Something will happen soon.

“When a White in training is dismissed he is made unable to mate, but not unable to produce the necessary male component. To do that would be to kill him. Without the desire to mate, people lack the desire to live. He was not of high enough discipline to be raised to White, but at least at the time, he was not so bad as to deserve death. It is too bad that the judges did not know the future.”

Wuf asks, “They why did he become what he was when we met him?”

Pesc shrugs, “Who knows. Some resent their failure and blame others for their own faults. Something may have happened to him out there that changed him. The edge in many ways is far worse than the south. There is still a code of honor in the south.”

“Not that it is always followed.”

“That is true, but the edge tends to gather the worst of the worst. The ones who are smart enough to know they will be put down if they stay with others too long. Of course they are few and good people come here as well. Most of the people we reside with currently are the curious. Being in the larger cities tends to make one loose connection with the ground, the wind, the sky, the sun and the cold. All that make us what we are.”

“Which is why they like our covers and such.”

“Yes. If you wanted a task, make more of what you have.”

Wuf laughs, “And how do we do that trapped in this cage like a leaper in a snare?”

“Ask for what you want. There are stores of most of the materials that you will need. What is missing you will have to adapt.”

One of the Fem snatches at something. A sneak. She quickly kills it and gives it to Roger. Nothing unusual there. Any of us would have done the same. But why are their sneaks here?

“What would a sneak eat here? There are no low gatherers in these walls. Not enough soil or light.” Roger finished the sneak and begins to look around for more. He is soon on the hunt of this chamber searching among our things and in cracks and corners.

Pasc smiles, “All of you are very good at catching sneaks aren't you?” Roger finds one himself, shrieks, and dives for it, making a mess of everything in his way.

The small Fem who caught the sneak comments, “The youngest aft in training could do the same.”

“Yes, but none of the ones here could catch one if their lives depended on it. Sneaks have been the bane of the Cities since the beginning of the end. It would appear you may have found an even better task for your streaker clan.”

Wuf says, “We probably should do both. There will soon be no sneaks about to trade their deaths for. And even I will become tired of eating them. A half circuit is a long time to eat nothing else.”

“Indeed.” We all laugh.

Pasc adds though, “Usually first timers get such wonderful tasks as garbage and waste removal.”

“Sneaks are really not that bad. Quite tasty really.” Wuf makes a funny face and we all laugh.

I don't do garbage.

“Sali says she does not do garbage.”

“Better keep up on your number of sneaks then.” Wuf looks serious. No one else says anything. Yeah, I did not think it would be easy in here either.

We need to get all of our grumpf meat to the preparation area. They will appreciate and we can't eat it all in time.

“We would curry favor with everyone too. Can't hurt to start out on the sun side.” Everyone else looks at me.

“Sorry. Sali says we should turn over our remaining grumpf meat to the food area.”

Wuf turns to Pasc, “You know the way?”
“Come with me, all of you. Even you Princess Sali.” What's a princess? Sali gives me a bad look. Not a good thing I guess.

Reflection

We go outside the rest area and Pasc points at an image on the wall.

“This is the layout of the City. Notice the pattern.”

“A star. Gigger told us.”

“But notice this black hole in the pattern? This is where you are in the pattern. Remember this. This image shows your position throughout the City. The black hole will always show you where you currently are. This line next to ours. Avoid. Do not go there.”

“Why not? Something dangerous?”

“That is where they store the food for the stay here. Anyone caught there is killed without question. Otherwise the food would be gone and everyone would die of starvation.”

“Then why are we taking the meat to the preparation area? Is that where it is?”

“Which way is sun ward?”

Pasc hesitates, “Inside there is no sun ward. Don't let it bother you.”

The larger Fem says, “Our existence depends on knowing where the sun is.”

“Not down here. Really. It does not matter at all.”

“We are not moving until you tell us which way is the sun.”

“Look. We are not running. The position of the sun is changing. Currently it is here.” He points to one of the lines of the star. “When we emerge, it will be here.” He points to the opposite line on the star.

We all stand around in shock.

“You already know the world is a ball.” He holds up a large low gatherer seed. Where did he get that?

“The sun starts here.” His hand is on one side. “As the world turns the sun's position appears to move. We usually run to keep up, but inside the City we don't run. The sun continues to move. Soon, a quarter circuit from now, it will be on the other side of this world, then another quarter circuit, it will be here, on the opposite side of the world as when we entered.”

“Makes sense.” I say.

“Scary. Very scary.”

“Do people live on this other side of the world?”

Pasc smiles, “Yes, there are people there. We will meet them.”

“Wait, if they are on the other side, after the cold, then they must run away from the sun, not towards it, like we do.”

“That is correct.” He smiles again and then turns back to our rest area.

“I wonder if they are like us?”

“Maybe Oofik made the right decision.”

Pack the meat. Take it to the center of the star. That must be where they prepare everything. All legs of the star must be fed.

“Wuf, we take the meat to the center.”

He looks at me, “Of course. Were else would we take it? Out meat will not last, therefore it would not be taken to the storage area. As no one is allowed there and everyone must perform tasks, preparation would not be in the storage area.” If I had any doubt about his ability to lead.

We gather our packs and set out, leaving nothing in the area. We don't know the others. Outside we would not leave anything about without some of our own clan present. We are too few to leave anyone behind.

As we walk down the main line towards the center we pass others. Many stop to look at us. Some follow. From a distance. We are covered with leaper skins and it is getting hot moving down the line. Fortunately the City is actually quite small. We reach the central area quickly.

It is a large open area. I sigh. It feels good to be in some semblance of openness again. There is lots of activity. There are low stone platforms with metal pots of materials. Where did they get so much metal? There is a fire in the middle with metal pots hanging over it. I look up and see an opening at the top. Explains where the smoke goes. There must be open shafts somewhere to bring in fresh air. I can feel a gentle breeze. Nothing like the wind of outside.

Wuf goes ahead and talks to some of those present. Others look at us like we have some kind of disease. Some look like they are going to gag. I wonder why? The food smells fine. Too much barbar, but edible.

Wuf comes back.

“They welcome the meat, but ask that we leave it here and return to our area. They don't like our smell. Guess they are not used to those who hunt for food.”

I comment, “Look up. See any rain clouds? How do you think they will smell a quarter from now? Especially when all the water outside is frozen solid.” They nod approval, but we drop the meat, turn and go. We are the new clan here. Best to not be pests.

Sali sniffs, *I smell fine.*

“You can't smell yourself. Everyone knows that.”

You smell like a leaper in heat.

“You are no cool running stream either.”

I really don't want to think about it. I really don't.

When we get back there is a flat stone in the middle of the area. Pasc sits at one side of the stone.

“I have work to do. You can stay if you are quiet. But it is important that you say nothing.” He looks at us sternly.

“Do we need to do anything to start our sneak hunt?”

“Or making more of our normal things. What do you think would interest them?”

Pasc sighs, “If it will help you keep quiet, they would be most interested in the decorations. The more intricate the better.”

“They took our knives.”

Pasc sneers, “Even I know they did not get everything. The small knives should work fine. This entire area is soft stone. Should be easy to work and it comes a nice variety of colors.”

“He's right. Good eye.”

Being recently an aft, I used to spend a great deal of time making small totems. Wuf nods to me. He seems to be equally interested. The Fem are clearly more interested in the sneaks.

I will go with the Fem. I do not have the patience for making things.

“Be careful. You are too good at getting into trouble.” I smile so she knows I am teasing.

When the three have left Pasc tells us, “Inside they do not like to see mating. If you two are going to do that, find a private place. There are alcoves for that purpose.” I am shocked. I was not thinking of that.

Wuf comments, “Strange people these insiders. Mating is normal, just like running, eating and making waste. Who has time to find a non seen space on the line?”

“Now be quiet. Here they come.”

There is enough rubble around the space. I find some likely stones to start work with. I meditate on one particular stone that feels right. I try and visualize the creature inside. Others enter the room. Being alone is not normal for us, so I ignore them as I concentrate.

I feel a small crafter. Intricate designed appear on it's plates. Spirals, dots, knots. Yes. I see it now. Life knots are what is needed. Nothing can exist by itself. Every action has multiple effects.

I take out my small carver and look at it. Definitely could not hurt anyone unless they let you. Sharp on one side and a scratcher surface on the other side. It lets me work course and fine. I try an experimental scratch. Soft stone. I will have to be careful. It would be easy to remove too much.

I immerse myself in the work. I become one with the stone and ignore

all else around me. The shape unfolds in my hands. Not much opportunity outside to not keep some awareness on the outside. I make a mistake. I am too concentrated and trying too hard. I try listening in around me, while I work to cover the mistake.

Two people sit before Pasc. They each tell a story. Pasc asks a few questions which are usually answered, but not always and then he makes a decision. They leave and two more come and take their place. Everyone is quiet and respectful. No one questions the decisions. Strange. If we have a dispute it usually ends with someone getting a new scar. This seems less painful. I have to wonder if it works though.

I think there were five sets of decisions before I am far enough along for someone to see what I am making, though they won't. The colors of the stone here are fascinating. It is time to set it aside. Finishing in one session is bad luck. It takes time to be sure the vision is true. I don't start another stone either. It confuses the vision. It is best to start on something different.

I open my pack and look at the contents. What can I do without and adapt into something else. I used a knot design on the stone, maybe actual knots would work. I cut fine strips from dried leaper sinews. I sniff to be sure it no longer smells. Things dry out in here quickly. My skin itches thinking about it.

The sinew is not long enough, so I interweave the pattern to pick up new strands as needed. If you have enough leapers you can weave yourself an entire new pack. I am better at stone than sinew, but the idea is the same. Find the pattern in the materials.

More people come in, tell their stores, are questioned and wait for a decision from Pasc. Most of it seems to be petty stuff over materials or relationships. Really the same kinds of things we would argue over. Sometimes I am convinced the arguments are just for fun, a way of passing time during a long stretch of running.

I don't know when Wuf left, but at some point I look up and he is gone. He has carefully hidden whatever he was working on in his pack, but not taken it with him. That is strange. On the other hand, maybe we are the strange ones. No one who comes in here for a decision has a pack with them. It is not like you can accidentally leave it behind as we run. I am really going to miss running. I need to find some way.

Knotting goes much faster than stone carving and produces a much larger finished item. I have made a stretch bag for carrying items that need to have good air around them. Could be used for food, or for keeping a living thing alive until needed. The fun is in knotting into the

design the nine major live forms we need to survive. I even put in large representations of what we believe the unseen gatherers must look like. Without them scraps would never be gone and there would not be enough room for the living.

I finally notice it is quiet and look up.

I freeze.

I am looking into a face, but it is not a person. Large enough to be, but it is white, not dark gray like ours. The ridge flaps are tiny. The eyes look the same, as do the lids, except for the color. They blink. I move down to the air hole. Again white, as is the food hole. The eyes look down at my hands. I look down and see the creature is looking at my finished knot work.

I hold out the work to the creature and a hands very much like mine come up to accept it. They are white too. White is not a strange color of course. Our back ends are white. Everyone's is. The creature carefully handles the bag, looking at each of the creatures I have woven into it.

It turns to look to the side. I see Pasc's face. It speaks!

“Amazing. You said she did this in less than three turns?” Too high to be a Fem voice. Is this a person? What kind of person looks like this?

“It was after she nearly finished her stone carving. Wuf made a set of stone carvings also, though smaller. Don't ask to see it though. She will not show you until she decides it is finished.”

“So the knot bag is finished?”

I nod.

She? Looks right at me, “You have not seen an ice chaser before have you?” I shake my eye stalk. Ice chaser?

“Not that different really. Same basic body plan.” She turns around. She is dark gray on the back side! Definitely a she under her covers.

I finally get out, “No spikes?”

“We don't have spikes. We have course fur instead. Feel my back and you will understand.” She lifts the cover off and I see the dark fur that looks like very small spikes. I carefully place my hand on it.

“Touch in the direction of flow, otherwise they can hurt you.”

“Small spikes then. How could they protect you? Too small.”

“Our ways are different. We have no need for large spikes such as yours.” She replaces the cover. It is a soft yellow orange color like the setting sun. A warning color for us. A setting sun brings the cold. Time to run. I don't sense a warning here though.

“You are Fem. We don't have Fem as you understand it. We are what we are when we come into the world.” She has always been fem then.

How strange.

“Do you see minds as those of us hatched fem do?”

“Some of us can. The ability varies. We see emotions better than details. I cannot see your words, just your feelings about something.”

“Even I can do that. The changes in sounds and looks, even smells, of a person tell much.”

She smiles, “A little more than that. I expect in the south it was important for you to be able to read each other.”

I freeze again. Pasc whispers to her.

“I am so sorry. I did not know it was a problem. I will tell no one.”

“If you like the knot bag, you may have it.”

She looks surprised, then concerned.

“That alone would tell me where you were from. If you want this to remain a secret, always expect something in return.”

“I do. Friendship.”

She laughs, “A very high price indeed and gladly given. My name is Leega.” A strange name. I always knew there were ones on the other side, but to have finally met one is very special, especially one so nice. She makes me feel good inside.

“I am Razzel. Are you like Pasc, a helper in disputes?” She looks at Pasc.

“You did not hear me speak until just now. How did you learn this?”

“You wear a cover, like Pasc does, only a different color, but since you are the first one I have met I have no way of knowing if this is common or rare. If you chase the ice, you may need it for warmth. Spikes make such thin covers ineffective against the cold. We need to use something thicker like leaper skins. How did I learn this? I don't know, I just knew. Something about your manner. You are gentle, yet learn what you need to satisfy your curiosity. I have been listening to Pasc for a length of time to do two works. He is the same.” Pasc smiles.

Just then Sali comes back in. She stares at Leega and then at me.

She knows where we come from!

“It is okay Sali. She will not hurt you.”

Leega turns rapidly and stares at Sali.

“Interesting. Very interesting.” She turns back to me, bows, then leaves. She did take the knot work though. Hopefully I have a new friend.

I turn to Sali, “She is from the other side.”

There are several about.

“Ah, so not that unusual.”

There is something you need to see.

“I notice the hunting has been good. If you eat any more you will not be able to walk.”

Amazingly they do not eat them when we offer them the kill. Seems wrong to waste food.

“I agree. I wonder why they don't? Hope they are not poisoned.” Sali gives me a very pathetic look.

“Probably not. Might be a northerner thing. They probably only eat bansig and slanik eggs.” An insult.

No, they only eat this mush made from low gatherers with a slight bit of meat of unknown source.

“They were happy to get the grumpf meat at least.”

I turn to Pasc, “You staying?”

“My work time is not over yet. Others may appear.”

Run

“What is it you wanted me to see?”

Come with me. It is at the end of our line. The others are waiting.

“You are running errands for the Fem now?” I smile. She ignores me and leaves our area. I follow. I want to run but I don't. They don't like running here. Explains why everyone is so fat. Our area is nearly at the end to being with, so it takes almost no time.

The two Fem are waiting. No Wuf though.

“Where is Wuf?”

“We have not seen him. I thought he was with you.”

“He was, but left some time ago. Guess he can find his way back if he gets lost.”

The two Fem move aside and show a portion of the wall. Most of it is stone, but the section revealed is metal.

“Where did they get that much metal?”

I hear a strange voice, “No one knows. There is one at the end of every line, or I assume every line. Never been on the food line.” I use rear sight and see Gigger. I turn to face him.

“Sorry, but I saw all of you pass my rest area. I was curious.”

It is a door, like the one to where Pasc was living.

“Sali says it is a door.”

“Where does it go? The image does not show anything past the end of the line.” Gigger looks confused.

I have to ask, “Any rules about trying to open it?”

“No one knew it was a door, so how could there be any rules? Wasn't the last City you were in the same? Everyone I have been in has this at the end of each line.”

I quickly respond, “We have been in the field a very long time. Most of my life in fact.” All of it actually.

“If it is a door, then it can be opened. We need to figure out how.”

It can only be opened from the other side.

“Sali says it can only be opened from the other side.”

“Salt, then why did she bring us all here?”

“Perhaps I can help.” Pasc appears. I look up to him. He looks concerned.

He looks to Gigger, “This is not your path. You do not need to stay if you don't want to.”

He laughs, “If you knew anything of my life, you would know I need

to stay. Maybe this will give me purpose. Is it likely to be dangerous?"

"Not immediately. Beyond that I cannot say."

"I would like stay, if that is fine with the rest of you. I am not part of your group and I don't want to intrude."

We need the numbers and having a local is good too.

"Sali says yes." The two Fem relax. I was worried they would resist, but I guess they will follow Sali.

"Beyond this door are ghosts. They will not hurt you unless you let them. The important thing is not to be afraid. They feed on fear, not flesh."

"How do you know what's there?"

"I would rather not explain at this time. Perhaps in the future when you are ready. What you have experienced so far is the tiniest portion of what there is to experience. Through this door is a new understanding. This understanding will change your view of life."

Leega appears, "I came as soon as I could."

"Good, then we can begin." He called her. How?

Leega goes to the door and places her hand on the north side, if I was facing the sun. Nothing happens, but the hand remains. It is apparent she is concentrating. I look to Sali, but she is watching Leega intensely.

I hear a faint click. Leega removes her hand. She is clearly exhausted.

Pasc looks behind me. I use rear sight to look too. No one but us.

"Quickly. No one else must know." He pushes the door open and goes inside. We quickly follow. Once inside he closes the door and we are in darkness. I only saw briefly, a few lengths away was another wall.

We immediately hear a pounding at the door. Pasc snorts annoyance and opens the door a crack. Roger jumps in and flies past me down the corridor. Pasc closes the door again with a click, "Pesky thing."

"He does not want to be left out."

"You people are strange." Gigger of course.

"Far beyond anything you can imagine. Still time to leave." The small Fem says. She does not trust him. If Sali doesn't say anything I don't care what the Fem think.

"No, he knows too much already. He stays." Pasc.

A light appears at a distance.

Pasc announces, "We run!" No wind though and that is definitely not the sun. Still, we get to run. Almost immediately we leave Gigger behind.

We stop and he comes up panting heavily, "You didn't say anything about running."

I ask, "Did you ride in one of the wagons the entire way here?"

“No, I took my turn pulling the supplies. No one rides. You all run so fast? You must rest often to avoid catching the sun, or, er, the ice in your case Leega.” She bows.

The large Fem snorts, “I am with egg and I can run much faster than you. You have spent too much time with the lazy ones.” She still speaks with a heavy southerner accent.

He laughs, “Maybe, but I think you have all been in the field too long.”

“There is no need to run quickly. An easy pace will do.” Leega suggests, then adds, “Gigger, why don't you set the pace.”

He bows and laughs, “I remember in the stories that the one in front is always the first one killed, but I accept.” He begins to run. We follow. Not really more than a quick walk, but it still feels good not to be slow walking everywhere and worse, in the resting position for so long.

A short time in we hear a shriek, Gigger jumps at the sound and nearly stumbles. Roger appears shortly to rest on my back.

We stop at the light on the side of the wall. There is another one in the distance. “What? You were ahead of us. How did you come from behind?” I had noticed that we have been veering to the south, but did not think much of it, as that is where the line lead.

Sali says to me, *You wanted to run. I found a way. Are you not happy?*

“Rr'gr!”

“I think Roger needed to fly too. So, what is this? It is outside the image on the walls, but appears to circle around the entire City. And according to Gigger there is a door at each star point. I see a pattern.”

Gigger says, “There is a rumor that it was not people who built the Cities. We just occupied them after the others left. Maybe this has something to do with them.” Pasc looks at him carefully. He knows something.

He announces, “Follow me.”

We go only a short way, then stop. Another door. Only this one is on the outside wall and much, much larger. Pasc goes up to it, bows and then moves a large bar to one side. He then pushes the door outwards. It is actually two doors. I rush to help with the other one.

Lights appear. Inside is a very large chamber with strange shapes. There is a low vibration and the sound of water and air, yet I see and feel nothing of either. We slowly walk to the other side.

I believe we have found Wuf.

He is lying on the ground. There is blood everywhere. Not clear if he

is alive or dead.

“How did he get here? You saw how hard it was for us to get in.” I ask.

The eye stalk slowly turns until it sees us, “I avenged the dishonor I caused.”

The two Fem go up to him and question, “Where are they?”

Gasping with obvious difficulty he says, “Follow the blood.” He then sighs and dies. Closer it is obvious that he has been heavily wounded. He rear eye is missing and large gashes over most of his body and clotted with blood.

A smeared blood trail, over the slick surface of the ground, leads into the darkness. As we follow it lights appear to allow us to continue.

They respond to movement. If nothing moves for a time within their sight, they stop. I nod my understanding. Wuf must have stopped moving, not surprisingly. He must have been trying to make it back to us to report his success.

We soon come upon a large dead person. The large Fem goes up to it and lifts the hind legs for all of us to see the missing male parts partially healed.

“That is one.”

We find two others next. The two Fem examine both and announce, “Three.”

The last three are together. I am guessing they were surprised by the attack. Probably never expected anyone else to know how to get in here.

“How did Wuf get in here?”

Pasc points upward. Far above is a hole in the wall.

“The air flows are connected. He somehow found one in the main part of the City and followed it here.”

“Then why were they here?” He points to the wall. I go over. Others follow me. It smells awful. A light appears and an open door becomes apparent. I go inside to see a large circular area with a strong thick liquid inside. It then becomes obvious.

Gigger says, “So this is where all the waste goes. They must have been brought down here to work. It makes sense. No one would have trusted them on any work detail in the City itself. But, I don't understand. If the Lead here knows of this corridor and this place, why is it not open for everyone? Why hide the running place? After a half circuit we can barely move. As you can see from me, even with the half circuit of running for every circuit I am without strength.”

Pasc sneers, “A weak clan is an easy clan to rule.”

“If Gigger did not know of this area and he has been in many Cities, then they are all doing it, not just here.”

Pasc nods, “It would appear that I have much to report. I fear where we go will not be much better though. There has been a change in the way people engage each other. Not a good change.”

Sali says, “That is why you wait a hundred circuits. The change becomes more obvious.” Pasc nods.

Gigger faints.

The smaller Fem says, “These northerners are weak.” I don't say that she nearly did the same the first time she heard Sali speak.

I ask, “Do we clean it up? There are no small ones here to do the work.”

“I am afraid that we will all be thought responsible for this action. We need to leave the City now before we are discovered.”

Leega smiles, “If my understanding is correct it will be very dark and very cold outside the City at the moment.”

“Cold, I have forgotten. How long have we been in here? It did not seem that long.”

“We were already close to the cold edge. The valley we were in shielded us for a time, but it is likely to be snow and ice outside now. We could make it I am sure, but the exit will be guarded. Besides I know another way they do not know about. We were going to have to take it soon anyway. I still need to get north to report, as does Leega.”

“However my band does not know of these secret ways. You have withheld knowledge from us.”

“You are a twenty circuit report giver. Certain knowledge is only given to the hundred circuit reporters. I assure you your white cloaks know of these ways.” Ah, so the color signifies the length of time before reporting.

He continues, “As your next report after this would be at one hundred circuits I only bend the rules a little by showing you now.” She bows to him and he bows back.

Gigger is apparently awake and asks, “Then why are we allowed to know? Will you kill us once we arrive?”

Pasc laughs, “The cloaks are not allowed to kill anyone. Do not worry, there will be a role for you, but hopefully it will not involve dying any time soon. Not that the path is without danger.” He shrugs.

Leega looks about, “It would be better if they did not know we were here. Be careful where you step and do not track blood back to the entrance. We need to hurry. They will be checking on the six soon to be

sure they are working hard.”

I check the bottom of my feet to be sure, as does everyone else. We carefully circle around the messes and reach the entrance we left open.

It was closed on the corridor side to keep the six inside. I see Gigger watching Sali closely.

Pasc closes the door and checks it carefully. He then turns to Gigger, “We need to run now. Stay in the middle of the group. Call out if you are having trouble. They will catch up to us if we don't move quickly. The lights will give us away. We will be able to rest once we are out of the City.”

“I understand. I will do my best.”

We are as quiet as possible while we run. I am nervous and I suspect others are as well. Sali runs alongside Gigger. Soon he seems to calm down. Sali is not hurting him or asking him to do anything we are not all doing. He will learn quickly that Sali is not that bad for being The One. Whatever that is.

Gigger is doing his best, but it is also clear that this is hard for him. A large moon from now and he will be better. Always hard after a long period of little activity or injury. It was not that long ago now that we survived the snow and ice of the sea crossing.

We have our packs. Gigger does not. I wish now that we had not turned over all our food to the others. Running keeps us warm for the moment, but I sense our surroundings are getting colder. Not ice cold, but colder.

Just as Gigger is about to call out we stop. He nearly collapses. Sali and I help ease him down to the ground. The surface is cold. I take my leaper cover out of my pack and place it on the ground.

“Gigger, rest on this instead of the ground. Otherwise your legs will hurt when you move later.” He nods and moves to the cover.

“I will never look on a lep coat with disdain again. It feels wonderful.”

Sali curls up with him. She is still young. Hard sometimes to remember that except for her size. The two Fem watch the rear. Pasc is looking for something against the wall. I don't see a door this time though, just the smooth stone surface that has been everywhere outside the rest areas. For some reason the surface there was much rougher. There are no broken pieces to collect here to work on. I contemplate bringing out my work again.

Pasc moves a short ways down the wall, feels the surface and then comes back. He suddenly pounds the wall with great force.

We all jump. He has been so gentle I did not know he could do that, in spite of his size. Again he pounds the wall. A snap and a low rumble happens. A section of the wall moves.

“Quickly. They will be here soon. They are searching the entire corridor.”

It is a tight fit, but we all get through. I make a last look to be sure we have not left anything clue behind that we were here. No footprints. The surface is much cleaner that I thought it would be. It is then that I notice that the center of the path is depressed. How long have people been running this corridor? It reminds me of some areas on the lines we passed through. Some lines are very well traveled and the stone is like this from so many have passed so many times.

“Razzel, come on!” I duck inside and Gigger and Leega push the wall closed.

A small light appears next to Pasc.

“We can rest here for a short time. They cannot hear us through the wall, nor are they likely to figure out where to press.” He smiles, “If they press the wrong location they will regret it.” A trap?

I question, “We have no food. How long is this path?”

“That is a concern. I was not expecting to be leaving without preparation. I am afraid we will all be very hungry before we arrive.”

Sali says, “It is possible we may find some food along the way. This tunnel is very old. It is likely to have breaks in it occasionally. We may be able to find buried caches.”

“What about water?” I add.

“And waste. Never leave a trail if you can avoid it.” Gigger adds.

The two Fem look at him and Sali smiles, “Well said City person.”

Pasc sighs, “Water and wastes will not be a problem. The path has been made with those in mind. Food is our only concern.”

Gigger looks concerned and then bravely says, “I would be the first sacrificed. I want you all to know I understand and accept my place.”

Pasc angrily comes back with, “No one will be eaten!” With that he gets up and begins to run along this new path that is away from the City instead of around it. We all jump up to follow him. So much for rest. Not that I am tired yet. I worry about Gigger, though he seems to have found more energy now that he knows he will not be the next meal.

I run along side Leega to ask, “How were you able to open the door from the other side?”

She looks thoughtfully at me and then answers, “Our training is long and extensive. We have to be able to move where others can not. We are

forbidden weapons of any kind. We are not even allowed to kill to eat, but must rely on the kindness of others. A compensation of sorts. Opening a door is not that different from making someone uncomfortable by turning their insides. We do not kill, but we can assist others in making the correct decision.” She smiles when she says this.

“Is this something I could learn? I was an aft for twelve circuits and always felt bad about killing others, even when ordered to do so.”

“Already there are two of us who cannot catch food. It would be best if you waited until we reach our destination. We may need your abilities before then, though I understand and honor your aversions.” She does a short bow while we run.

Sali says to me, *You will learn this ability. Patience is necessary for the time being.*

“You are leading us on a strange path Sali.” Gigger winces when I say her name.

I come up to him, “Gigger. I was High Fem of my clan for a short time. We all have names and there is no dishonor in using them. Well, except for the two Fem. They have not figured this out yet.” I smile and he smiles back.

Then he looks at me in horror!

“What did I do?” I ask quickly.

“I just realized that I am the only intact male present.” Everyone laughs hearing this.

Leega pats him on the back, “You have nothing to fear from any of us I assure you. There is no time for more eggs than what we are already carrying. Two is enough.” So the small Fem is carrying now as well. At least Wuf was able to start one. He died an honorable death. I just wish it was not necessary. The lack of food will not be good for the eggs though. Normally the Fem eat more than anyone else.

“There is some food value to our leaper skins.” I offer as a reminder.

Break

There is not always light as we run, but the path is straight. We hold out hands to the outside to prevent running into the walls. We occasionally bump into each other though.

Gigger is even more curious than I am I think, “Why are lights not in some places?”

Pasc answers, “This path is very, very old. We have no way of repairing the lights. The knowledge has been lost. Soon it will not be possible to use it any longer safely. I am seeing a noticeable change since my last time here.”

Leega looks shocked, “Just how many hundred circuit runs have you done?”

He laughs, “The answer would scare you and best not said. Just accept that I too am very old.” More than one hundred circuits? How is that possible? Afts rarely live past thirty. Fores a little longer, maybe as many as fifty, if they are lucky and avoid being made Lead. Fems I can only guess, but some die when something goes wrong with the egg. Some die of injury from fighting other Fem. Maybe they might live to be a hundred circuits. The oldest Fem I can remember was nearly too old to run any longer. Others carried her pack and she got the best food. That was the first High Fem I can remember and the only one I can remember that did not die of wounds. She just laid down to rest and did not get up again.

Do not embrace death so much in your thoughts. We will survive.

We ran without any food other than sucking on leaper skins for what must have been a large moon when suddenly got very much colder. We shared our skins with Gigger, Leega and Pasc. We really did not have enough to go around. The two Fem insisted that Sali not give up any of hers, but she passed over some when they were not aware. It was mostly our legs and arms that hurt the most.

“I feel wind!” A cold one. Colder than anything I can remember, even the sea crossing.

“We cannot rest here. To do so is death.”

Sali quickly runs ahead of us and climbs a pile of dirt that has come in through a crack in the wall. Frantically he works, using small knives. The soil is too cold for hands they would freeze off if anyone tried.

“Help me. There is food here!” That excites us into action.

With everyone else scrambling up to the crack I concentrate on what they scatter as they work. It looks like a very large cache. I wish the light

and the crack were strong enough to see what was above, but I am not sure I could survive the wind and the cold. This does not stop Roger who flies to the crack and disappears only to reappear quickly. He comes streaking down towards me and buries his cold body between my few leaper skins and soft spot on my back. He shivers violently for a time before looking out again. I hand him a seed, but he spits it out.

“Not all of it is good.”

“Collect it anyway. We can sort it later. We need to leave here as soon as we can. Cold can trick you. Besides, what does not look good now may be a feast later.” When we are very hungry.

What seems like a moment later Pasc yells, “We run! Quickly! Run!”

It gets warmer as we run. Soon I can feel my hands again. I had not even realized I could not before.

That was close. I need to be more careful. I had not realized how much hunger can blind.

I am shocked that Sali would admit to weakness in judgment.

I pass around what appear to be the better seeds and dried low gatherer. “It tastes better than bansig.” I smile. I have never tasted bansig of course. I am not convinced that it actually exists.

Gigger laughs and says, “When we reach others we can say we feasted on the best bansig in the entire world and it was wonderful.” The comment gets approval from everyone.

“Not too much. This has to last. We may not be so lucky next time.”

Thanks for the reminder.

I laugh at Sali's thought.

A small moon later it starts to get warmer.

Pasc slows us down. Yes, it is getting warmer. Normally when we slow I feel the cold more, but now I feel the heat.

“Have we reached the sun so soon?”

“We are traveling north, the sun would have to reach us and it is far too soon even for mid fair.”

“What is mid fair?”

Gigger looks at me shocked, “How can you not know what mid fair is?”

You might as well tell him. Surprised it has taken him so long not to notice.

I am about to speak when Leega laughs, “Silly crafter. They have never experienced mid fair. They have never stayed in a City before the one we left. They have never been this far north either.”

The two Fem get very upset, “You had no right to say these things. We

don't know we can trust him.”

“Who is he going to tell? And is it not better that he knows now than accidentally reveals it in front of others later?”

“Know what?” Gigger looks very frightened.

I feel sorry for him, “Gigger, I know you feel like we have been keeping you in the aft place, but it was not intentional. At least not on my part. I simply forget that you did not know. You have felt right with us, like you were part of us. Maybe you have some of the streaker clan in you from long ago.”

“Oh just tell him and stop the torture.”

Sali does it, which I think was a mistake, “We are from south of the sea.”

He nearly faints again, “All of you?”

“Pasc and Leega are from the north. Opposite sides of course.”

He looks at Sali, “And you are not just a small Fem from the south are you? You were born Fem and you have the ability to see thoughts.” Sali nods.

I expected him to faint for sure at this understanding, but he grows confident and stronger instead.

He laughs, “I have had no purpose to my life for as long as I can remember. I expected to die without notice not even worthy for the stew pot. Now of all things beyond imagining I am part of the clan bringing The One to Paradise! Even if I die at this very moment I will be remembered as having taken part. There is no greater honor. I thank you all for considering me worthy. I will not let you down!”

He is totally changed.

Even I can feel the difference. I see that Sali and Leega do as well. Pasc smiles, but also looks concerned. Sali then takes some of the pride upon herself and straightens up some.

Pasc tells us, “Wait here. I need to go alone from here. I will call you when I am ready.”

It is warm enough to finally rest with some comfort. We sit against the wall and wait. After the break in the wall and the new Gigger, it is good to rest. I pull pull out the stone work I started so long ago and begin to work on it again. As each new experience happens I see more patterns emerge in the stone. I concentrate anew and am soon aware of nothing else.

Knowledge

I am not aware of the passage of time. I never realized how dependent on the sun and others I was for my sense of time. Still, I feel that I am far enough along that I can relax now and even let others see what I am doing.

I look up to see Leega watching me again.

“It is a shame that so little stone work is seen in the north. Is it true you can carve stone even while running?”

“Yes, but only as an aft. Since we are followers. Sorry, I was a follower. The afts do not have to give as much awareness to the trail as the fores. As long as we give some attention to what is behind us we serve our purpose while running.”

“So the fores do not work stone?”

“No, they care for the Fems. It is their purpose in life. Afts are lost in battles whether a clan wins or loses. Fores are only lost to the losers. Of course a fore watcher will have whatever work they did while they were afts themselves.”

“As well the Fems?”

“Afts were not allowed to look upon the Fem and I have never been trained to be one, so I am not sure.”

She smiles, “Of course you looked anyway.”

“A little. Death awaits those who are caught, so it is not wise to do so except as a glance while doing something else. It would be impossible to function in any role if we could never look ahead of us. We spent a lot of time looking down. Fems are secretive though and hide much of what they do. It is possible they still have their works, but hide them as well.”

“I like what you have done. You are a very good artist.”

“Artist? What is that?”

“Someone who does great works.”

“But one is not better than another. All have value to the one who did them.” She seems shocked by this obvious truth. Strange.

“What happens when someone dies? What happens to the stones and other works?”

“They are buried separately from the body. That way the cleaners will not harm the soul of the person contained in the works when they clean the body from the ground.”

“Out there somewhere are piles and piles of buried stones worked by countless afts. Are any stones ever found by accident later?”

“All the time, but we rebury them quickly so the cleaner do not see them and eat the soul. As long as the soul is buried in a safe place the person still live as part of this world.”

“We do not believe in the soul. We believe that when someone dies, that is the end.”

“If you do not bury the works properly then that would be the result. It is possible that your people lost this knowledge a long time ago and now, because there is no knowledge of souls there can be none.” She nods looking concerned, as she should be.

“Maybe I should start my own work then.”

“Oh yes, that is an excellent idea. Normally we are taught as small ones, but I am sure you can learn. There may still be time. Especially if you are expected to live a hundred circuits like Pasc.”

“You will teach me?”

“Me too?” Gigger has been listening to us apparently.

“If there is time. We have no metal to make tools though. First we have to find metal.”

Each searches about their bodies and pulls something out to present to me. I examine each piece of metal.

“Too soft. It has to be hard metal. This would scratch some rocks, but not well enough to carve it. Usually we scrounge for the bits at the bottom of a forge fire.”

“There are few if any forges in the north. Still, we may find something that could serve the purpose. The journey is long.”

“Go with the wind.”

She looks confused, then laughs, “With us, we fight the wind. That is why we have smaller ridges and shorter spikes. It must be wonderful to run with the wind.”

“I had never thought of that.”

Roger comes screeching into our group and alights on my back.

“P'sc!”

He looks me in the eye and yells again, “P'sc!”

“Does this mean he is coming back or is he in danger and needs our help?” Gigger says this concerned.

“I don't know. He can say most of our names. Often it seems random.”

Roger hops off of me and lands on Leega.

“He feels funny!”

“Don't offer him a finger, he will think it is food.” She nods understanding.

“Le'ga! P'sc!”

“He told us to wait. So what does this mean?”

The small Fem says, “He said to wait until called. This sounds like we are being called. The streaker did come from his direction.” I wish she would use his name. Only creatures with souls have names and streakers do not have souls by her understanding I assume. Probably also means that Leega doesn't either. Wonder if she will stop using her name now as well?

Gigger, “I will go. Better to lose one than all.” Our brave aft is likely to be the last and only aft our new clan ever has. Before I can think about this though he has started to run down the path towards Pasc's location. Roger obediently leaves Leega and follows him.

“Well I don't want Gigger to die alone. I am going too.” I get up, put my work back in my pack and start running also. I am still much faster than Gigger, though he is getting stronger. I catch up with him quickly. I hear the others behind me.

When we get close Roger leaves us and flies ahead.

The light and heat get much stronger as we progress. It is almost too bright to look at.

A moment later we have entered a very large open space. It is like being beyond the sun edge in brightness. My eyes hurt even when nearly squinted shut.

Pasc is near the center with someone else. Roger flies right up to him and announces, “R'zzl!” Maybe he is not so random. Next to them is something very strange. It does not look like it belongs to this world. A glowing ball in the center, though this is not the source of most of the light from the room. It looks like the entire upper wall is on fire. There is another ball, not lit, a length away with no visible means of support. It just hangs there in the air, as does the glowing one.

As my eyes adjust to the brightness I look further around the area. We are surrounded by creatures I have never seen before. At first I am startled and prepare to defend myself, then notice they are not moving. One in particular reminds me of something, but I am sure I have not seen anything like this before.

The rest arrive and Gigger immediately runs in front of me to protect me from the creatures.

“They won't hurt you. I don't think they are alive.”

“You are correct young one.” A person that looks even older than Pasc addresses me. The voice sounds fem, but higher than I am expecting.

She is a hatched fem like I am, not Fem like you.

She continues, “The story begins over here, if you will follow me.” I

am not at all convinced that she will make the short trip. I move to one side to help her keep balance and immediately Gigger moves to the other side to do the same.

“Ah, to be young and strong again. Thank you very much.”

I tell her, “If you would prefer to use mind speech we don't mind. We are used to it.” I should have said I was used to it. I am not sure Sali uses it with anyone else.

Your mind is strong. You will do well. That was definitely not Sali.

“I am comfortable with sound speech thank you. I am not that old yet.” She laughs. I am worried that it will break her when she does though. Her entire body shakes so much when she laughs.

We slowly make our way to what appears to me now as a line of creatures. The first one before me makes no sense at all. It is the one that scared me when we came in. It is low to the ground and has eight legs. The eyes, if those are eyes, are on stalks raised above the rest of the body.

“This what we used to look like before the change came upon us. We will now take the journey to becoming.”

“Is this from the time before time?”

“Very good. Yes. This is what we looked like before the world stopped turning. None of this is real. These are all 'works' as you would say, that represent as accurately as we can what they looked like. Much has been lost from the time before time, as you say, so who can say if they are true or not. Let us proceed.”

We walk slowly along the line examining each. The eight legs become four, with the front two becoming the arms we now have and the middle to end legs becoming smaller and smaller. At first they appeared as small arms, then as they continued to get smaller it becomes apparent they are what become our food hole parts.

“Of course, these are only the ones that led directly to us. The experiments that failed are not here. Only the scholars have any interest in those.”

“What are experiments?” She looks at Pasc and gives him a dirty look. He shrugs. She then turns back to me.

“Experiments are works of a trial nature. Like when you are learning a new skill, but something that no one has done before.”

“Guesses.”

“Yes, precisely, but well thought out ones. Not just playing. You start with an idea of what might work and why and then do a trial to see if you are correct. The process usually has to be repeated many times. Many different designs were tried at first before settling on this one.”

“But these are just the sun chasers. Where are the ice chasers?”

She smiles, “Ah, that is an interesting story. At first only the sun chasers were made.”

“Made? What do you mean made?” I pull out my stone work. “I made this with my soul and hands. Is this what you made?”

“Made might be too strong a word. They adapted and changed what was into what we are now. Just as you changed the rock into what it is now.”

“But I did not change it. I saw what was inside and removed all the rest.”

She thinks about this, “I like your explanation better. They too could only work with what was already there. You saw how the legs of the original were seen to have value as arms and food helpers. They brought forth what was already possible.”

Gigger asks, “Why? What was wrong with the original form?”

“Ah, the original form was great when the circuit was only one half small moon in length. It was colder during the time of darkness and warmer during the time of light, but not so intense. People could be outside during either without harm. Water did not freeze during the darkness and did not boil away during the time of sun.”

“So, the entire circuit was within the band.” She looks shocked and turns to Pasc.

“Keep this one. Definitely keep this one.”

Pasc smiles, “I intend to. It's the other one I am worried about.” Sali looks offended. They both laugh.

“Not another of The One is it?”

“I am afraid so. Pesky little things aren't they?”

“Remember the last one who thought they were The One? What a disaster. Such a mess to clean up afterwards.”

“How long ago was that?” I ask.

She responds, “Let me see now . . . not going to tell you. Trying to trick me into telling you my age are you? Well a lady does not ever reveal that detail about herself.” I have no idea what a lady is.

You will find out soon. Not a nice thing.

“So what was the potential danger here? I don't see anything dangerous?”

She fumes over this, “Are you stupid? Do you realize what this knowledge would do if it were released into the clans and groups, the Cities and the fields? Disaster! There would be killing, murder, war even.”

“What is war?”

“I hope you never learn.”

Pasc adds, “And yet, no one here is overly concerned. They are not attacking each other over ideology.”

“Maybe not, but they will. Just wait. If they are stupid enough to tell the others, just watch then. Foom! Everything goes up. Why do you think we have kept it secret for so long?”

“You changed more lives than us didn't you?”

Her mouth opens in shock, “Who are you?” Pasc laughs. Sali looks annoyed. Leega confused. Gigger ready to fight. The Fem though. They worry me. They are very quiet and still.

Sali sees my concern and turns to look at them when there is a sudden flash of movement too fast for me to follow. I barely see their hands move from under the sides of their packs.

Sali attacks them! I have never seen her touch another in violence. Leapers, sneaks, and anything else edible or interesting, yes, but never a person. He smacks them down hard.

“You are my followers! You do not act on your own and you NEVER attack without my direct order to do so.” She then does the most amazing thing, she throws the Fem darts away to the other side of the area.

Gigger goes open mouthed now, “How did you do that? How did you catch them without harm?”

“Fast isn't she?” Pasc asks Lady.

“Maybe. We will see. You need to loose those two though. They will cause trouble.”

“They keep her honest.”

She thinks about it, “Maybe you are right. Just be careful.”

“I am always careful.”

Lady turns back to me, “You are correct. We changed many of the creatures. Most just died after the change of course. We could only work so fast. The most important were what you call the low gatherers. Without them the entire system falls apart. Tell me what forms we did not need to change at all, or very little?”

“I would have to think about that. This is the first I even knew it was possible for life to exist different from what it is now. It is hard to believe that anything could be the same. Maybe some of the cleaners under the right conditions could survive.”

She looks to Pasc, “What are cleaners?”

“Unseen ones is another name for them.”

“Ah, decomposers or death eaters. Correct. Name another.”

“R'gr!” We all laugh, except Lady.

“Correct! The flying sneak catcher and egg raider gets the prize.” I did not expect that. When you think about it though, it makes sense. They can fly easily from one location to the next. I wonder how they handle their eggs though. We lay them and they hatch within the width of a band, so maybe they can do the same.

“We work as a team.” Pasc says.

“So it would seem.” He looks directly at the two Fem. They don't fit in my opinion either.

“Will you be going with us? Pasc joined us at the last city ruins. You are welcome to come.”

“Sorry young one, but these old bones can't run any more. My place is here to explain the truth to all who make it this far.”

“So, it does not bother you we are from the south?” She looks at Pasc who nods.

“I need to learn to ask more questions of this one before I agree to his requests.”

Pasc smiles widely, “Who me?” Huh?

She turns to me, “Be careful, the north is a dangerous place for one such as you. A terrible waste if anything would happen to you.” She looks at Pasc when she says this.

“Enough rest for us. We need to be going.”

We leave at the opposite end of the open area. The light recedes behind us as we run again.

“Too bad she did not have any food to spare.” Yeah, that would have been good.

You would not have liked it, even as hungry as you are. Nasty stuff.

“And how would you know?” Gigger asks. He then suddenly goes wide eyed and open mouth. Guess he knows now what her special ability is. How could he know of the prophesy without knowing the details though? Someone has to tell me the story of The One sometime soon.

Stars

“How come we could not have any food at the glowing room?” Gigger asks.

“Because there was only enough food for the caretaker and you would have eaten his entire circuit worth of food.” I laugh. Probably true too.

Did you notice the glowing spot on the dark sphere?

“No, I saw the two balls, one light and one dark. What of it?”

The glowing one was our sun and the dark one was our world. The glowing spot was the room in relation to the world and sun. We are nearly half way through the dark side of the circuit.

“Good to know, if your idea is right.” She shrugs.

We come to one of those 'way stations' that have waste facilities and water. No food though. Our seeds are long gone and all I feel is growling through most of my body. Even chewing on the leaper skins is not working any more. I weigh less and it seems colder each length between stations. Filling up with water only helps for a short period.

“It is time. I cannot wait any longer.” The larger Fem announces.

“There is nothing to eat. What will you feed the young one.”

She looks in horror at Gigger's remark.

I whisper to him, “It is an evil egg. It will be destroyed immediately.”

“Why is it evil?”

“The mating occurred by force, by a person banned from his own clan and guilty of murder many times over. The two Fems could not suffer to have the hatchling in their presence or with anyone else. The fear is that it would grow and seek revenge somehow, someday. It cannot be allowed to live.”

“You southerners eat your young I have heard. At least it will be food for some of you. I could not eat my own kind.”

“No one will eat this one. Bad luck. Very bad.” Though I am hungry enough to do so. Sali must be thinking the same thing. She better not though. She would lose her support from these two instantly if she did.

This time I watch. If I am to go through this at some point I want to know what I am in for. I never did get to mate with Wuf. Not enough time. I think I was embarrassed by my lack of knowledge too and avoided the topic. I look at Gigger. He is the only intact male present. Not sure it I could mate with him either. Do we have a choice though? The smaller Fem is starting to show. Did she have a choice? Or did she just accept like I suspect she did, that this was what was expected of her.

When it is over I am convinced that I never want to mate. I can't believe that someone can survive that much pain. Gigger's face nearly goes white. He must never have seen this before either.

"I don't understand. Don't you have majja root to chew on?"

"I have never heard of that and where would we get some here?"

No one touches the egg. We all rest. It was hard for us as well. Maybe because we are so weak from hunger.

Finally the large Fem asks us, "Please leave. This is a disgrace and I would rather not have others watching."

Without a word we walk away. A ways away we hear a crack and a wail. No one will ever speak of it. It is sometime before she catches up. Her expression is emotionless. Once we are together again we run.

The next way station is a mess. The water does not work and waste has piled up and dried. We have nothing to add of a solid nature, so move on.

"I feel cold."

"So do I."

"A rare treat. Hurry!" Pasc runs ahead. I don't know how he can move. The combination of the cold and hunger are making me want to stop. Forever.

We find him standing in a soft pool of light looking up.

We quickly come up to him and look up. The small moon is overhead. Nothing unusual there except I can see details on it that I have never really seen clearly before. But it is what else we see that is amazing. Stars. Lots and lots and lots of stars. We climb the rubble and go out on the surface. No wind, exceedingly cold, but the stars are amazing. The sky is covered with them. I have never seen so many or even imagined there so many.

"Come back inside quickly now!" Pasc yells at us. We are not so quick though. We all want to stay and watch the stars, even the Fem.

When we get back inside, what seemed very cold seems hot.

"Come we run. We need to get warm again."

"Warm again, it feels like the sun edge in here."

"That's because you were all nearly frozen solid out there. I would not miss it for any danger, but we need to get warm. None of us has any fat reserves any more."

We run, but we are all silent. Each of us thinking of the beauty beyond anything that can be. I feel like I am part of a very special clan now. I have really truly seen the stars. A number beyond counting. Red ones, blue ones, yellow ones and white. Big to barely visible, all glorious.

Pasc finally comments, "We were lucky. If the large moon had been visible we would not have seen so many stars. Its light would have reduced our night vision."

Leega asks, "How were we able to stay on the outside so long? I thought the dark side always meant death."

Pasc laughs, "You were only out there a moment. Besides we are getting close to midway and our destination."

"Could we have waited until then? At least it would have been warmer." Gigger says.

I ask, "Why would it be warmer? I would think being at the farthest from the sun it would be the coldest."

"Oh no. It is the way the air currents work. We ride with the wind and Leega's side runs against it. In both cases the wind moves towards the sun edge. It has to go somewhere after that. At the hottest middle of the sun side it rises."

"Sure, hot air rises. Anyone who has watched smoke or burning low gatherers knows that."

"Right. But we are talking a lot of air. It rises way up into the sky. There it is pushed to the side by the air rising and it begins to cool. This sets up a circulation."

I think about this, "And as it cools down it must fall, but on the cold side it is still lighter than the cold ground air. It can't come down until it cools down to that of the ground, or at the center of the dark side."

"Actually it is not colder than the ground air. Remember the cold air is rushing towards the sun. This creates a sucking action that draws the high air down to the ground again. This air is actually warmer than the surrounding air, but once it hits the frozen ground it begins to cool as well."

"So why is this important?"

Leega says, "You were not listening. Have you forgotten already how cold it was out there with the stars? This air is warmer. Not as warm as the sun edge of course, but compared to the normal dark side air it is quite warm."

Pasc adds, "Mostly it signals that the dark is half over and a cause or excuse for celebration. The City must have been getting ready for some time. It is too bad you will be missing their festival. We will have our own though."

I hope soon. I am beyond hunger now. I don't even think much about food any more. I feel so light. It's as if I could fly, but I am so weak I am having trouble balancing have nearly fallen several times. I don't think

anyone else it doing any better. Except for maybe the small Fem. We all liked Wuf and want his egg to live. We give whatever we can to the small one.

At first I thought the path was devoid of life, but through the various cracks some life made its way in here to avoid the cold. Once some creature tried to fill the place with seeds only to find them forever disappearing. Not much more than a brief snack, but it helped.

Festival

Roger suddenly takes off. Those talons of his are sharp. Of course avoiding my spikes is probably not easy either. He comes back shortly. He is always flying ahead of us. I don't expect to find anything out here, we have not seen anyone in moons, but it can't hurt to have a fore watch of some sort.

“Clk'r!” This gets Giggers attention. I have no idea what his is talking about.

“He must mean clickers. How did he know that word? I did not teach him and from the look on your faces, you don't know what they are.” He looks at Roger carefully, then shrugs. “We should run ahead and find out. They are not the best meal in the world, but better than air.”

We follow as close as we can. I have no idea what a clicker is so am possibly not as enthusiastic as I should be. I can hear them before I see them though. They click. At first it is just a few, but the noise gets louder. Then suddenly the most awful racket I have ever heard is echoing off every wall. We rush up to Roger and Gigger.

I shout, “What is going on?” I see round black bugs all over the place. They are covering the walls and ground. Not moving much. I am wondering if they bite. Roger is not waiting and is consuming as fast as he can. The smell! I did not notice it at first, but now that they are being eaten it is intense.

Gigger sees us, “Gather as many as you can in your packs. Crush them first like this or they will crawl out. Mostly shell, but your body will get something from it. Mind you, no one would eat them unless they were desperate.”

“We qualify.” I crush one as shown and pop it into my mouth and nearly spit it out. Instead I force myself and get it down.

“They must have gotten in through some small crack. I don't see anything, but it would not take much.” He looks at me and smiles, “Bad after taste huh?”

“Oh yeah. Have any more?” I laugh back. I start filling my pack and eating at the same time. Eventually the others catch up. Sali looks at them and cautiously tries one, but only after she sees me eat one. The look on her face tells me she does not like the taste at all. She does start filling her pack though, as small as it is.

The Fem both start without complaint. I can't say that I have eaten worse, but I have eaten a lot of things not much better and right now I

would eat almost anything not poisonous. I actually believed I was no longer hungry. Now I can't get enough. Pasc watches as if amused, but does not eat any of them.

We get nearly all of them crushed and packed away. I can't smell them any more and my stomach is full. Not sure yet if I will actually keep them down.

Pasc announces, "We have arrived. If you will follow me."

Just around the corner from the clicker nest we are confronted with two doors. One very large and well carved and the other much smaller, plain and worn. So small in fact that any of us except Sali would have to stoop down to enter it. Interestingly it is as wide as the tall door.

The other strange thing is that the two doors are the only thing in this open area. There is no other exit or path. All this way, nearly starved and frozen and we are confronted with essentially nothing.

I look to Pasc confused. He stands waiting for something.

I think he wants us to chose a door.

"Is this some sort of game? We don't know much about doors and I doubt very much we could get back alive if we went back."

"We are to enter through one of the two doors. We need to decide which one. I assure you both will open."

Gigger gives a try, "Large fancy doors indicate position and power. We are hardly that." I have no idea what he is talking about. Power I understand of course, but position? Fancy? I go up and look at the carvings.

First the large door. "Not well done. A four circuit aft could do as well. The figures are only half done as if the person was in a hurry. No detail at all. These could never come alive again. Covering the entire surface in shiny metal is a waste. Not good work." I go over to the smaller door. From a distance it appeared simple and well weathered. How that can be in here is a mystery. Up close it is something very different.

"Come here everyone." Sali is first. Always curious. She gets very close and carefully touches the designs. The two Fem come up, munching clickers at the same time. They too touch the designs. Very fine work. The creatures nearly come alive. The metal work is subdued, adding to the expression rather than overcoming it.

Gigger pushes his way in. There is not enough room for all of us and I move aside.

"Whoa! I never would have guessed. It reminds me of the work all of you do."

“Only better. This was a strong worker. He knew these creatures personally.” That is high praise coming from the Fem.

“It would appear that a decision has been made. Can I assume you are more interested in what might be behind this door as opposed to the other door.”

The other door holds no interest for us.

“You could have said that you know.”

You don't know what is behind the door yet do you? Or if they are listening to us even now.

“Any objections to this door then?” No one complains.

He motions us aside slowly sits down directly in front of the door and studies it carefully. I am beside him curious as to what he is looking at. He raises a hand and without touching anything, he passes it over each figure. I almost believe they glow briefly as he does so. There are the familiar, streakers, leapers, crafters, even clickers and of course people. What are these other creatures though?

Finally I recognize one, the first people, from before the end. Eight legs, no arms, eyes on stalks. I point to it.

“Thank you. Just what I was looking for.” He presses it. It glows dull red and stays lit. How strange. I wonder what causes that to happen?

“Now find the next one.”

“Huh? You mean the next one in the line to us?” He nods.

It takes me some time before I spot it. He presses it and it is a brighter red. Less time to find the next. Orange red. I progress down the line until I find the last one. Looks just like us, well sort of. It glows white and there is a click. Not a loud click. Not even as loud as a clicker. There is an intake of breath from everyone behind us. The entire pattern is white. I step back and see a perfect circle. It parts in the middle and the door parts in two away from us.

But beyond the door it is dark and cold. Very cold.

“In we go.”

Gigger asks, “What about the other door? Where does it go?”

“Ah, I would not know. Never been through that door.” Leega smiles. I suspect that both of them knew the answer all along.

I look through the door again. Outside. I go through.

“Hey, not as cold once you are outside.” I say back to them. Outside looking back I can see the entrance. It is on the side of a large rock surface. Oh, that is funny. I wait until the rest come out though.

“Hey, look, there is a light in the distance!” Gigger announces. I look towards his sight and see it. Not that far away really.

“First, come out further and then look back.” They cautiously come further out. Not sure of my surprise?

“Now turn around. Go on. Nothing will hurt you.”

They do so, even Pasc and Leega. Pasc raises an eye and smiles. Leega laughs.

The small Fem asks, “I don't understand.”

“Look!” I point to the side of the door we came through and not the door itself. “It is so obvious now. How many doors do you see?”

Then it gets them.

“There are two doors! One small and one large. Both doors open to the outside. I did not matter which door we chose.”

“Ah, but it does matter a great deal. A very great deal.” Pasc smiles. I don't trust him. There is a reason for all this and I am not sure I will like it.

Leega announces, “I can see from the sky and wind and the air that it is officially midway. Time to celebrate!”

“With what? Even if there was food, I am so full of clickers I could not eat a bite.” We all laugh at that thought.

“Gigger, tell us about Festival. We will walk towards the light hearing stories of Festival.”

Leega says, “I can help. There are differences between the sun and ice sides, but we both celebrate it. Gigger, you begin.”

“Very well. Let me smell. Not see mind you. It is the smell that you notice first. The kitchens work constantly for a moon getting ready.”

“What's a kitchen?” I ask.

“Ah, a kitchen. You don't have those, being from the wild. Ah, a large enclosed space where lots of food preparation occurs.”

“You mean like the food area in the Last City.”

He sighs, “Yes, that is a kitchen. A very small kitchen and it is only one kitchen. Imagine much larger ones and hundreds of them all working at once.”

Leega tells us, “Let him finish his story. We will explain anything you don't understand afterwards.”

Gigger tells us his story as we walk. I understand almost none of it, but I do feel his emotion and longing to be there with the others. It sounds wonderful. Everyone working together for a common good, even if only for a brief time.

Leega's version is similar, only the names and descriptions seem to change. She, however does not emit the same longing to be there. Like Pasc it appears her task is to observe and contrast with a past time. They

see the changes and report in to whomever needs to know this information.

I ask Pasc, "So how much has changed since the last time you were here?"

He looks at me shocked, "I was not expecting that question from you curious one. I have to think. Most of the foods are similar. Some of the names are pronounced a little differently. Interestingly the length of time taken to prepare the feast has lengthened. The feast itself is longer too. The culture seems to spending more time and emphasis on this feast in particular. It will be interesting to see what else has changed. Of course this is only Gigger's description of events. Maybe he exaggerated some?"

Gigger looks offended, "I may have been influenced by our recent lack of food and the sudden consumption of a clicker only feast, but I think I was accurate." He burps for effect. We all laugh.

The large Fem surprisingly adds, "I think I prefer the clicker feast. Much less fuss." She smiles though and then spits out a clicker leg. We all immediately imitate her and spit out imaginary legs as well.

"Does this make us the Clicker Clan now?" Roger screeches.

"I think Roger would object." No one laughs. We remain the Streaker Clan.

"Wish we had our weapons and clan flag still."

The small Fem fumbles in her pack and pulls out a strip of cloth. She carefully unfolds it.

"I don't believe it! How did you keep that from Joss?"

Pasc says, "Don't answer that here. Protect the flag." She nods understanding. I am confused.

Leega, "The main thing to understand about festival is the sense of having survived another circuit. It does not matter if you are from the south or the north, survival is not easy and is to be celebrated as an accomplishment. Which leads me to my question. We celebrate Midway Festival to mark another circuit. How do you celebrate this?"

Sali looks at me, "Though I am now about a circuit and a half old, I have never experienced the celebration."

"Sali, I am afraid you have missed much of what normally happens. I am sorry I have not been able to do this for you."

The large Fem adds, "I am sorry also. We serve you, yet we are not able in this place to do what is right and proper."

"Tell us what normally happens. That will help even if we can't experience it directly."

I think, "I have experienced twenty two circuits now. I am half way

for a normal life time. Half of all normal people will have died by now, usually by accident or struggle with other clans, but also, as we have nearly experienced, starvation. Add to this the occasional disease and you can possibly understand why we celebrate Touching the Pole.

Each clan claims a line, a path that we run. For countless generations we have run these lines. Over time we learn the path and mark its changes. Most learn their path within three circuits. That is when we officially exist. Until you learn the path you are no better than any other creature of this world. It is only people who learn the lines.”

Roger says, “R'gr!”

“Sorry Roger, but this was before we knew of your kind. No offense intended. Our two kinds have not always been friends.

But to continue, we erect special poles made of carved stone. Each clan carves their own pole. As Streaker Clan we would be expected to do the same. Now, these poles cannot be left out in the open in easy to see and find locations.”

“The other clans would destroy them?”

“Or hide them. To destroy one is an evil that would bring about what you have told me is war. Therefore it never happens. Hiding it however is bad, but not evil. It does waste time for the clan seeking its pole. Time that may be necessary for survival. When resources get scarce poles are found and hidden. When things are good, they are ignored.

A Pole is the identity of the clan, the symbol and reason for our existence. There is a great deal of ritual and rites surrounding the Pole. These are secret and not shared with other clans. Each is different. Unfortunately as an aft watcher I was never allowed to witness the actual ritual Cleaning of the Pole and I doubt that our Fem would tell you either.”

One answers, “That is true, but both our clans are gone now and we are a new clan. Therefore we are expected to listen to the Gods and do what they proclaim for our cleansing. Touching the Pole is intended to cleanse our wrong doings of the previous circuit and prepare us for a successful circuit to come.” A task that I have clearly neglected.

Gigger asks, “So it involves lots of special foods?”

I smile, “Our ways are not so obsessed with food as yours are apparently. There are no special foods. Mostly blood letting as symbols of sacrifice. At least for the aft watchers, the sacrifice part is emphasized.”

The small Fem answers, “It is the same for everyone. We all make sacrifices so the clan may survive.”

Leega sums it up, “We each celebrate having survived. The north with

food not dependent on location and the south with location but not dependent on food.”

“So which is better?” Leega shrugs at Gigger's question.

Pasc gets upset, “Why must one be better, or right?”

Gigger things about it, “I guess I am shadowed by what I am familiar with. Would be best to open the doors to my mind.”

“Good idea. Best get started soon.” He growls.

Gigger cannot leave it alone, “I can see value in the southerner version. The ceremony emphasizes commitment to the community. In the north it is more about self pleasure.”

Leega counters, “Ah, but the north shows that even the individual is important and cannot be wantonly thrown away just because someone gets angry.” Gigger bows to her and Pasc laughs shaking his eye stalk.

“I have a question. How did the old one in the works room and the ones in the Last City obtain food?”

Pasc looks at me aghast, “You did not really think this entire passage way was maintained just so I could come back once every hundred circuits did you?”

“Then where are they? The ones moving the food? Shouldn't we have seen them?”

“Not really. They bring enough at the beginning of ice time and again at the beginning of fire time to take care of needs. We are between times. Besides, I carry the messages from the City to the north. Someone else passing this way will carry ones back or the supply wagons will. Also remember this brief period outside is not easy most of the time.”

“Why do the people from the north come to the south?”

Leega answers this one, “A variety of reasons. Some like the simpler life. Life in the Cities can become overwhelming for some. Some are running from their pasts and choose to run from the ice or the sun instead. They never stop running though do they?”

“No. We never stop running. We believe that even at the end of times for each person, we continue to run in the next life. This is especially true of those who die young. We hope that eventually we will reach Fem or even High Fem, over repeated life times.”

Gigger smiles, “So being an aft watcher is not so bad when you know you have additional chances to finally succeed.” Not a question.

“You can imagine my surprise when I was made Fem and then High Fem. It may be a goal for my people, but I have learned that it is not so special.” I turn to the two Fem, “We all make sacrifices and we all serve the whole.” I bow to them.

“There is a lot of decomposed metal here. If we had a forge we could purify the metal out of it and make new weapons.”

“Can't hurt to fill out packs with some. I have some space left over from the clickers, now that I have eaten so many of them.” Is the smaller Fem getting bigger because of all that she has eaten or because of the egg is getting bigger?

“Can't hurt. They must have forges. They are civilized aren't they?”

Leega laughs, “You will not think so after you meet them.”

We collect the rust and corrosion anyway. Even some bits of metal in the mess. I examine a piece and taste it. Not a taste I know. What kind of metal is this?

“We are nearly there.” Pasc announces.

Another stone wall or so I think. There is a fog surrounding it and us. What appeared as one light from a distance can clearly be seen as a group of lights now.

“I don't understand what I a seeing.” I whisper to Sali.

Until I get closer and can see their minds an explanation will have to wait.

“So that's how you do it. You see the answers in those around you.”

And use my own thoughts. I am not a made work to be played with.

“Sorry, I did not mean it that way.”

We walk up to a large door. I quickly look around for a small one.

“There is no small one curious one. Just this one on this side of the valley.”

He uses a very loud voice, louder than I thought possible. I guess I was fooled by him usually being a quiet speaker.

“Open in the name of the Centurion Pasc the Fourteenth.” I can't imagine thirteen others before him. If each lives at least a hundred circuits or possibly two, though. No, I can't imagine that. That would mean a very long time they have served the whole.

Nothing happens.

“Open in the name of the Centurion Pasc the Fourteenth I have come from a long way.”

He whispers to us, “We have our rituals as well. Annoying aren't they?”

He takes a big breath and says again, “Open in the name of the Centurion Pasc the Fourteenth. I have a report to give.”

Only then do we hear a click and the large doors slowly open. There is much light inside and a row of people lined up with weapons. I instinctively reach for mine to realize it is not there. Still on the ground

outside the City. Burn, I wish I had it now. I flex my spikes as best I can.
The last meal was not that nourishing. I am still weak from our travels.

They will not hurt us, at least immediately.

Horror

We enter as a group, not sure what to expect. The ones with weapons make no movement. The doors close behind us. Several of the stationary ones are showing distress for some reason.

“Snow! Two of them collapsed! Should we help them?”

They can't stand the way we smell.

“What do you mean? We cleaned ourselves at the stations. Not as good as a hard rain, but, oh, the clickers maybe? I can't smell them any more.”

“But remember how they smelled when we first encountered them?”
Definitely the clickers. I can see it in their minds.

“Sali says it is the clickers. Maybe we should clear out our packs of them.”

“Great idea. They will probably feed us. They will feed us won't they Pasc?”

“Yes. I assure you, you will be fed.”

Good enough for me. I empty my pack of my remaining clickers. When we do so, three more collapse.

“Sensitive aren't they?”

Sali is curious and goes up to one of the fallen.

“All done.” The large Fem announces. Two more fall.

“Where did that come from?” The small Fem pulls something out even I can smell.

“Looks like a slab of rotted grumpf. I am surprised you did not find it earlier.”

“It was in a secret compartment normally reserved for ah, protective objects.” She pulls out a small curved knife.

“You were supposed to give all of those up. Glad you have it now though.”

They will require it here also. Best to hide it again.

“But they all must have seen it.” I turn around and am stunned. Others see me and turn around too. They have all fallen now.

Pasc smiles and Leega laughs, “You don't need weapons apparently. Maybe we should be called the stinker clan.”

Roger squaws loudly in his own speak.

“I think Roger would object.”

“Oh my, what have we here?” A short person comes in. No spikes and covered with an elaborate cloth covering. The person looks around the

room and sees all of the collapsed guards.

“We never went near them.”

“Apparently you don't need to. Clickers are nasty things. There is an entire colony just inside the door of the Path of Retreat. They keep coming in because it is warmer”

Pasc corrects, “There was. They are all dead now.”

“Hmm, maybe this will discourage them from using the Path again. I will have someone clean up the mess. Now the real question is what to do with all of you.” The person bows to Pasc, “You two may leave. Sorry for the wait.”

“They are with us and under my protection.” The fancy one is shocked, but nods slowly.

“Then I can assume you will be ah, washed together?”

Pasc nods.

I see the person look at our packs.

“You can leave those disgusting things here as well.” Turns around and goes. We remain. After a moment, realizes we are not following.

“Well, come on. The sooner we get you clean the fewer people will succumb.”

“We will not give up our packs.”

A shrug, “They can be replaced.”

Pasc laughs. That gets attention.

“Gee, on your salary, how long do you think it would take to replace our packs oh wealthy one?” I don't understand.

Shh, this is funny.

“They are rags. A single meal ticket would cover it.” A hand reaches for mine.

Pasc' eyes rise, “They are genuine hand made southerner travel packs. When was the last time you saw one outside of a museum of a High Proctor?” The hand hesitates.

“You're kidding right? A white joke, no? You do have a reputation you know?”

“They are genuine. I vouch for their authenticity.” The hand slowly withdraws.

Darn right. Sali smiles.

“They can be cleaned?” Asked hopefully, but now clearly frightened.

“Only in pure rain water. Anything else would destroy their value.”

This clearly upsets the person, “I will see what I can do. I hope the rest of your bodies are not so picky?” A look of disgust.

Pasc shrugs, “We will follow him.” A male then.

Everyone we pass gets upset once they smell us. We begin to make a game of it, trying to guess how fast they notice. We purposely go into quiet stalker mode. Even on this hard ground we are quiet. Most never see us before they notice the odor.

I soon get bored and look around. The light is the same as in the path, but more of it. I walk up to one and knock on it. Yep, same hard substance as in the path. Whiter than the ones in the Last City.

They are made. I am sensing that no one here knows how they work. All just accept that they do.

“Strange. How can a culture work without knowledge?”

Knowledge is withheld in the south as well.

“Not the same. There are secret rituals, yes, but not secret crafts. Everyone over a few circuits knows how the making happens, they just lack practice.”

Leega tries to explain, “Life here is far more complex. It is not possible for any one person to know all the crafts needed for the culture to work. Each learns a small part very well in order to serve the whole.”

“And I thought we were abused as afts.” I am shocked. “These people are little more than slaves.” Leega smiles at my comments and looks to Pasc. Pasc shakes his eyes.

The smaller Fem cries out, “What is that smell?” It smells horrible. It is like being buried alive in cliff low gatherers in full reproductive growth.

“Only the dead are treated this way!”

Pasc nearly laughs to sickness. Strange reaction.

“It is coming from the area ahead of us. Fancy Cloth is going in there.”

We wait at the edge of the area. There are pools of water, steaming water. We only see steaming water when we have gone past the sun edge in an emergency. No, it is not possible for the sun to be here. We were just outside and definitely no sun.

“What do you suppose they are going to do with all that water?”

“I am worried about this. Very worried.”

“I think they are going to cook us and eat us.”

“No, they wouldn't do that would they?”

“Maybe they have not cleaned up the clickers yet and we grab them and run.”

“Really everyone it's not that bad.” Leega says. I don't believe her. Even if she is a White, or Yellow? How did they insure she could not mate?

Ask her: She is not secretive like the Fem.

“Don't forget that I am Fem technically.”

I go up to her to ask until I notice she is headed for the water. I back away and watch. She goes up to the water and steps in. Not deep where she is entering. Soon she is up to her breathing tube and stops. She uses her arms to scoop water over her back and arm neck. She even pours water over her eyes. Well, normally that is not a problem, but normally water is not steaming either.

“It actually feels very good. Come on in.” Roger takes this an offer and is soon splashing in the shallow end. It would make sense that his kind would know of warm pools. They can always fly away if it gets to hot.

Pasc rushes past me and Roger to splash his way in to upset Leega and gets splashed in return.

“You can't believe how long it has been since I was able to enjoy this. I must be insane to keep signing up for yet another hundred.” Leega looks at him, but does not ask the obvious. Just how many hundreds has he seen?

I am not big enough for this treatment. I will drown in there.

“Stay in the shallow end?” I am still looking at the water with suspicion.

Gigger goes in. He is larger than I am and he is a male. Frustrating. Fems should be larger then the males.

“I think he has done this before.” The small Fem comments.

The larger says, “We need to go in. We are the smaller clan and need to fit in.” But she does not move either.

“Okay, I will go in.” They follow me as expected. It feels very strange to put my feet into warm water. At first it seems way too hot, but once in my muscles relax and I quickly get used to it.

“I did not realize how cold I had gotten. I wonder how long they will let us stay?” I splash her and she looks stunned at first and then tentatively splashes me back. Soon everything in the area is wet, but Sali chokes on water and we quickly get her out.

People come up to us with pieces of cloth.

“Looks hard to make cloth like that. I wonder what they want.”

One hands me a piece and moves on to the others.

“Too small to be a covering. What do we do with it?”

One of the people asks, “You really don't know?”

We shake our heads. I look to Gigger, Leega and Pasc. They are rubbing the cloth on their bodies. Why?

“It is to dry yourself with.” She points to the others who are continuing to rub themselves.

“Why would anyone care or want to do that?” I ask.

She looks at me shocked and finally says, “It is just what we do I guess. Some of the floors are best kept dry.”

“What is a floor?”

“Oh my.” Flustered she drops the remaining cloths and quickly leaves.

I think Pasc is going to get sick from laughing again. Sali actually looks dry. I did not see her rub the cloth on herself. Oh well. I take mine and make the attempt. Not that easy. Probably takes practice.

Gigger offers, “Let me help. If we dry each other it will go faster.”

He is right and we are able to do what we could not do alone.

“Now what?”

“Food or rest? Either would be appreciated.”

“Being in the stew pot was not enough rest for you?” Pasc asks. He nearly starts laughing again. “Maybe you should go back in. Not soft enough yet.” There he goes.

Leega suggests, “I think he was alone for too long this time. I am going to recommend a twenty five year instead of a hundred this time. Not that they would listen to me.”

“How old are you Leega and how did they make it impossible for you to mate?”

“I am forty five circuits and what made you think we cannot mate?”

“Pasc said the Whites are not able to.”

“We are not able to produce live eggs, but we can mate all we want. Most don't because it seems pointless, even if there is some pleasure involved.”

“Pleasure?”

She looks at me, “They haven't told you much have they?”

The larger one states emphatically, “There is no pleasure in doing ones duty. That would not be allowed. We are not like the northerners or you ice chasers.”

“No you're not.” She smiles like she knows a secret.

She is saying we are not like other southerners either.

“Yeah, I got that impression too.” She looks at me when I say that with some concern. Now what?

“If you will follow me please.” I turn to see a young male, but he is looking at Sali, not me.

“Remember what Joss said about the north. The females here are like you. They run things.”

I remember. I will stay with you. Do not let them take me.

“She says that she will stay here with us.”

The male becomes very nervous, “She must. This is not a request.”

I offer, “You understand what she is?”

The male lets loose some waste and nods.

“Then you understand that you cannot compel her to do anything she does not want to do?”

He nods, “But I will not be the one doing the compelling. They will.”

“Who are they? Everyone has been nice so far.”

Suddenly my mind goes black and in immense pain.

I wake to hearing Pasc yelling, “Stop it. They are with me. If you harm them the entire council will be your enemies.” The pain eases, but does not go away entirely.

Leega whispers to me, “It will pass in a moment. You are not used to it. Faster recovery after a few times. That was just a taste. Usually it lasts much longer.” I see our messenger was also affected.

I turn to Sali, “Is this why you brought us north? To be tortured to death?”

Not the reason, just a bump in the road. She is clearly angry. A very minor bump. It will not happen again, now that I know they will try.

The small Fem whispers to me, “We need to be very careful here.” I nod slowly.

Pasc whispers something to the attending male who nods in return.

“Come this way please, all of you.” Pasc nods and everyone falls in with me.

The cool air outside the stew pots hits us and feels great. I am not sure what the purpose of that area was except to make us smell of death. Outside though I still smell it on me. Or is it everywhere in this place? We are still inside a mountain, just like the Last City, but it is much more open and the colors are lighter. I don't feel as trapped here at least. There are more of those light things above us too. I miss seeing the sun on the horizon.

We follow a path more complicated than passing through the bad air vents on the south path. I always dreaded the small moon it took to get through that part of the line. Probably never see them again now. Is that good or bad? Life is the line.

“Go with the wind.” I hear several others murmur the same thing.

We are led to a nice quiet subdued light area with soft cloths on the ground. Is this a floor? We are soon all resting soundly.

Covers

We are aware for some time before anything happens. I am working at my stone. Not much else to do. A few more moons of this and it will be done. Not likely to find any more stones around here. There is no sign of soil or anything that can become soil. I have no idea what the walls are made of and have been warned not to damage them.

We are called to food.

“How do you know that?”

Everyone eats on some sort of schedule. Other areas around us are going.

“How strange. We always ate when we were hungry when food was to be found. Most of the time we were just hungry. Though from the look of the ones we have seen so far, none of them should be hungry.”

They could not run the sun.

“No they could not.” I laugh.

Sali leads us this time. No one has come for us. Pasc and Leega, who must have been here before hang in the rear.

“I see people. I see them putting something in their mouths, but I don't smell food. What are they eating then?”

The large Fem says, “Not anything fit for us I am sure. Have not seen even a sneak about. Roger is going to get very hungry here.”

Roger squawks a weak, “Rg'r.” I pat his back a few times.

We come to the eating area and everyone looks up at us in shock.

We wait for an invitation. They wait for us to do something.

They do not follow custom here. Barbarians.

“Apparently. So, what do we do?”

Sali concentrates. Seeing the minds of those present. Finally he announces, *Follow me and do what I do.* I motion to the others.

She goes to an area to one side. There are bowls of pure white there. I tap one, but it is made of some unknown material. She takes one and goes down a long flat area putting things into the bowl she has. I follow and the rest follow me. Even Pasc and Leega follow us and do as we do. Shouldn't they already know?

Remember, it has been twenty five for Leega and a hundred for Pasc. It would appear that their rituals change over time.

I look at the food in my bowl and have no idea what it is. However, since I did not see Sali eat any I do not either. Apparently we are not allowed to eat standing. We are to kneel down near these other flat stones

and place our bowls down there. Then we carefully reach in and select items to be eaten in some order I cannot discern. Or so I am guessing by watching the others.

When we reach an open flat stone area and attempt to kneel there, the others all get up and leave at once.

“Rude aren't they?” The large Fem suggests.

Gigger states, “Something else. I have never been in The City before, I was hatched in one of the Last Cities, but normally when a person of high status sits all those who feel they are not worthy leave to make room.”

I laugh, “They do not see us as high status. I am guessing the opposite. We have offended them by choosing their location. They will probably burn and purify this area when we leave.”

Sali looks at me with open breathing hole, but says nothing.

Pasc motions us to kneel.

He whispers, “Allow me to offer a prayer to the gods. That way they will see we are not ignorant savages.” I nod.

“Great gods, we thank you for our safe passage from the Sea of the South, below the City, below the Last City, area of waste, savage beasts, and death. Though we numbered over thirty we few are the ones you have blessed. May you continue to watch over us and grant us good fortune to see your paths.” He motions us to eat.

I pick out something dark purple red in color. This has to be mostly low gatherer and therefore a safe start. It is hard and crunchy like the shells and bones of running ones, but there is almost no taste. I try several others of different colors. Again the same texture and almost no taste.

I whisper to Gigger kneeling next to me, “Will this provide our needs? There is no taste.”

He whispers back, “Having no taste is an improvement. We are eating what I would call last rations. Normally we do not get food like this until just before the food wagons arrive. Yet, we are only halfway through the cold band.”

“Are they short of food then? Are we going to starve?”

Leega whispers to us, “This was normal when I was here last. They always eat this food. I am curious and will try and visit the kitchens to see how it is made if you like.” We all nod.

I ask, “Will they be offended if we do not finish it?” I have eaten only a third. Roger can't stand it any longer and hops down on the flat surface and sticks his eye mouth into the bowl. Disgusting, but I am used to seeing it now.

“I think he likes it!”

Small Fem ask, “So, you are saying we are eating stalker food? Is this what they eat normally when they are not, ah, eating meat?” Meaning our young and anything else they can fly down.

“I have certainly never seen food like this before. Maybe the Fem have this made for them?”

The larger shakes her eye stalk no.

Gigger offers, “Think about it. They cannot go on a hunt. They have to make something for food out of what can be stored. How many foods do you know that can be stored for a half circuit?”

“I know of none, but we would not have tried. Though we did find those buried mounds of food left by others.” I turn to Leega, “Do you know that ice chasers bury food to be gotten later?”

“Oh, not for themselves, but for you. We bury food so you can find it later. We had always hoped that you would repeat the favor for us, but it never happened. Now it is a sort of ritual. By the time it has made a full circuit it is ruined. Helps the new low gatherers grow, so it is not a total loss.”

I bow deeply to her, “We never knew. Maybe if we could have some how talked, but though we always thought you existed, no one had actually seen any of you. I am sorry. We just didn't know.”

“You would not have understood this. Took me nearly a circuit to learn your way of speaking. Maybe we can change that when we get back.” Yeah, maybe.

“Will you sign up for a hundred this time?”

“I just finished my first twenty five on your side. Next I need to do a twenty five on the ice chaser side. First, though, I have to reacquaint myself with my own culture.”

“You could not tell them what the difference was if you did not know what to compare it to.”

“Just so.”

“That means Pasc also has to spend time here.”

“Actually he reports on the southern edge of the northern section, so he does not need to do anything other than return. If that is what he chooses. Or rather, what the council decides is needed.”

“And they always know the best thing to do?”

“Oh no. Rarely in fact, if you listen to us who spend so much time alone.” She laughs.

“Yeah, same as our culture. My last High Fem made a terrible mistake and lost most of the clan. I have lost most of mine as well.” I shrug.

“They may still be alive. You did not leave them for the death eaters at least.”

“Against northerners with bang sticks they will not last long. Stealth only goes so far. Once your enemy learns, they will have the advantage again.”

“Very few northerners decide to go a circuit on the wild side and most of those are inexperienced. Those who know better, those who have already tried it and survived it, avoid going a second time. If they keep the gathering of grumpf a secret they will do well.”

“Why do the northerners come south in the first place then?”

“Would you believe boredom?”

“What is boredom?”

“There is no excitement in their lives. No danger.”

“And they dislike this? How strange these people are.”

“Indeed.”

Someone new comes in. Roger squawks at them causing them to hesitate. He turns to Pasc, “They are ready.”

“About time. I was getting ready to go back without them.”

“No one knew which part of the City you would show up at. It takes time to make the trip here. Apologies are extended.”

“At least I am on time.” The messenger smiles and bows.

Then says, “This time.” Pasc smiles back.

“Come clan, we go to see the council.” This horrifies the messenger.

“No, they cannot come. It is forbidden.”

“They are necessary. I have a tale to tell. And since when are guests forbidden when a Centurion gives report? Usually this is the main entertainment for the entire sector.”

“Things have changed.” He says shyly and quietly.

“The witches again?” This horrifies the messenger who looks around frantically, but seeing only us, relaxes and nods.

“They come anyway. Especially because of this change.”

“It is forbidden.”

“Okay clan, let's stop at the kitchen to stock up. If we run we can still get to the small door before the midway warmth is past.” We immediately put things away in our packs and are ready in moments. The messenger looks like he is going to split into two.

Finally he says, “On your back?”

“As always my friend.” Pasc sighs. How old is he? Does everyone around here live to be hundreds of circuits old?

Gigger says something to him I can't hear. Pasc and he come up to me.

Pasc says to me, "This is your decision, but I agree with Gigger it would be best."

"What?"

"Have you noticed that most people here wear coverings?" I nod.

"They have a place here so we can all find ones to fit us."

"But you and Leega already have ones and the rest of us do not know how to wear them."

He laughs, "Mine is a hundred years old and need of replacement. Not wise to face the council looking like a beggar."

"What is a beggar?"

"Someone who depends on the charity of others for basic needs."

"But we all depend on others for basic needs. How could it be otherwise. That is why we form clans. A lone person is a dead person."

"You are wise beyond your time here Razzel."

"Let us go to this place. Maybe the others will not look at us so if we look more like them." The large Fem says to me.

I turn to look at her and the smaller one. Then I understand.

"I know your names. I do not understand how, but I do. You are Bebe and you are Trif." Their eyes go wide their mouths and breathing holes open, then they fall to the ground.

How did you do that? I have not told you and I am sure Pasc would not. And clearly they did not.

"I don't know. It just seemed to be right."

I would not recommend telling anyone else. It brings shame on them for others to know. Those were their fore watcher names.

"I understand." I turn to them, "I am very sorry. I am as shocked as you are. I do not understand how or why I know. I will try and be more careful."

"Only a true fem can see another's name."

"I assure you. I cannot see your minds. I really don't know. Let's go to this cover place." They nod.

I find I am very self conscious as we move down the paths.

Pasc notices, "I am not sure this is a good thing, your seeing yourselves as without covers. You are being changed by your surroundings. Not good." He looks very sad by this.

"Then we should not get these covers."

"No, we need to. Every culture has its ways and it is important that people here see you as equals, not as curiosities for amusement."

"Boredom does strange things to people doesn't it?" He is surprised by that statement, but says nothing.

“I miss running. This walking everywhere is so lazy.”

Pasc lightens up, “Then let's run! Follow me!”

“No, follow me,” Leega says, “My image of this place is only twenty five circuits old.” He bows to her and we start. Others look at us, but I don't care. Running feels so good. We nearly step on many who do not move out of the way fast enough, but soon others are moving in anticipation of our coming and it gets easier.

“I think we have circled back Leega. Hard to tell without the sun as a guide.”

“Things have changed. I am looking for alternatives. Yes, up there. I know where we are now.” She races ahead. Once we stop in front of the area of covers those watching us cheer.

“Why are they doing that?”

“Probably never seen anyone run before.” Bebe says with a sneer.

“They are so fat.” Trif says. I laugh.

We go inside the area. I cannot see straight. I am disoriented and dizzy. I sit to be sure I do not fall.

Gigger comes up to me, “You have not seen a place like this before have you?” I shake my eyes.

He takes my arm, “Let me help. Certain colors are for special people.”

“The males like Pasc wear white and the females like Leega wear yellow.”

He corrects me, “The Centurions wear white of either male or fem and the quarturions wear yellow. The decadiions wear orange. Only the females with the gift of seeing minds wear blue.” He looks at Sali when he says this and then at me.

“What do Fem wear?”

“There are no Fem here. I would guess you can wear any of the ones without a single color. I will help you choose something that goes with your iridescent eyes. A nice green color might do, with streaks of gold.”

I hesitate, “Northerners require trade for goods. We have nothing to trade with.” I open my pack and look for something. I had forgotten about my second knot work. That took a relatively short time to make. Not as good as the one I gave Leega, but maybe it will do. I am not finished with the stone yet, so do not even contemplate it.

“That will do nicely.” He carefully takes it from me and goes up to the person in the middle of the area. A discussion ensues which I cannot understand as they speak too fast and in a strange way. I hear the word southerner. I am guessing he is using the argument that the article is of value because of where it came from. I hope he does not tell them who

we are.

He comes back without the knot work.

“We are fine. Everyone can have whatever they desire.” The fem comes out from the center and up to us.

“I would be happy to assist you. My name is Alini. I have been helping with fine cloth for many generations. I understand that you have been in the wild a long time and now desire to be fitted with the latest fashions as befitting your rank.”

She looks at Sali and does a deep bow, “I am most honored to serve one of the Highest.” I suspect that the Highest never have to trade, but I don't ask or push.

Sali tells me, *Tell her I am still in training, so maybe something in a lighter blue would be best.*

“She thinks a lighter blue would be most appropriate.”

“Ah, yes, I understand. Excellent. Come this way.” Sali starts to go off with her.

Come with me. Tell the others Gigger can help them. I do not want to be alone in this place.

I wave to the others to go with Gigger.

She looks at me with confusion then finally asks, “May I speak openly?” She is most nervous about Sali.

“That would be easiest.”

“You are fem, but are a little too large and you speak. Do you have the gift?”

“I have never been tested. I was hatched in the wild. I serve the Highest.” Indicating Sali. I am careful not to say her name.

Thanks.

“I understand. I am not worthy to speak directly with her.” She does not seem upset about her apparent lack of rank. Just what is. She then proceeds to show us a variety of shades of blue until we come to one very light blue. Sali is being modest.

Better to aim low and be brought up than aim high and brought down.

Also works to make you enemies underestimate you.

You are getting clearer in your thoughts. Most interesting. We need to be measured next.

“She likes this blue. You may proceed to measuring her.”

“What about you? What do you like?” She says this nervously looking at Sali the entire time.

“I serve and am of no consequence. It was suggested earlier that I should be covered with green and gold.” I have no idea what color gold

is.

“Something more subdued, low gatherer colors.” She is wearing a simple brown and black herself. I have seen others with these colors.

Servants wear those colors. I want you to be a little higher than that. Otherwise they may not let you serve me. She understands this.

We are shown a few examples. Some would be excellent at hiding in the wild, but maybe too quiet here. Finally we are shown one with intricate details. Not creatures and gatherers, but complex and repeating.

This is the one.

I nod to Alini. She smiles back and then gets nervous again.

I don't think I like the clan called the Highest.

Nor I.

Being measured was simple for Sali. Alini did not even touch her, just looked very carefully.

You are not allowed to be touched apparently.

Not by her, but make sure you touch me in her presence so she sees you are allowed. She will report to others.

Understood.

“I have an idea. Measure me first so I can see what you need.” She relaxes and goes to work on me. She drapes the measuring line across my back in several different ways and then measures each of my legs and finally my eye stalk.

“I think I understand. If you will allow me, I will take the line and place it on the Highest. You can read the lengths?” She nods and smiles.

It does not take me long. This all makes sense to me after seeing how the cloth is used to cover others. I am careful to actually touch Sali many times.

Tell her where we are staying. The items will be delivered there when ready.

“We are staying with Centurion Pasc.” Thankfully I remember his title.

She leaves at once with the cloth. The entire area could buy all the food in the south. I have never seen so much cloth in one place. It is also much smoother and finer than anything I have seen before. I can't believe we are trading a simple knot work for it. I hope the work brings her much pleasure.

She will not be the owner.

I turn to her, “What? How can that be? She accepted it.”

She works for others. They will receive the work. She is paid in lesser materials.

“Then she did not make . . .” I don't finish before I feel a whack to the back of my eye stalk and a cloth sack quickly covers my eyes. I hear Sali struggling. Then suddenly one of those horrible headache things.

I awake to Pasc looking down at me. Sali is next to him.

“You took it the worst being right next to her.”

Sorry, but I am new at this and did not know how to protect you from it.

“Apparently they really want Sali. If they had not hit you first they may have succeeded. It would appear we cannot leave you two alone any longer. They will try again.”

I rub my eyes and eye stalk, “Roger! Where is Roger?”

“Roger is the true hero. He was not affected and attacked the attackers. I saw them run past with their eyes shredded. Gigger is cleaning him up.” Apparently Pasc was far enough away and the attackers have some immunity.

“Well they know how powerful she is now.”

Pasc looks worried, “They have no idea. If they did . . .” What, if they did? What are they not telling me. He turns to Sali, “We need to talk. Alone.” He takes her aside and I can hear, but not understand one side of a conversation.

“What about Alini?” I ask Gigger.

“She was out almost as long as you were. She will be fine. Remember the locals know about this method of discipline and are more resilient to it's effects.”

“I hope you explained she was not the one being targeted.”

“We did. Did you see them at all?”

“No, the bag went over my eyes too fast. I need to use hindsight here apparently.”

“We all need to. Considered rude to the extreme even here, but I don't think we have a choice. I would rather be rude than dead.”

“The Council can wait.” Pasc and Sali return, then Pasc leaves again. I see him talking with Alini.

He returns, “Come with me. I know a place. Not as nice, but we need something less obvious for a bit.”

We go back towards Alini and follow her to a door at the back of the area. She opens the door and we enter. She stays outside.

“Good luck.” She says it like we would to one whom we don't expect to life another little moon. I have my own doubts. Prey you can't capture usually ends up dead so no one else can have it either.

We go down narrow paths, most not well lit. I look up to see some of

the light things obviously broken. I normally would be curious to see their insides, but we can't stop. There are strange metal things like low gatherer vines only much bigger. Water leaks from some of them. I smell waste also.

Roger suddenly takes off with a squawk.

"Where were you when I was being hit?"

"Probably up in the stones above us." Bebe offers.

A moment later he returns with the worst looking sneak I have ever seen.

"At least one of us is getting something tasty." We all laugh.

It takes us some time to follow the line that Pasc is following. Finally he stops at a metal door and knocks on it. It opens a crack, a few soft words are exchanged and it opens the rest of the way. We hurry in to see a room lit by fire lights.

"You can't believe how good those look to us." I say.

"All we need now is a sun on the horizon."

An incredibly old male comes out from behind the door, "I think I can arrange that." He puts a clear object in front of one of the lights and I see it is a painting on the clear object. The light from behind makes it look like the sun.

"Come, sit and eat. Just sneaks, but I cooked em right." He did.

Gigger says, "I can't believe I actually missed these. They are so good."

Pasc says, "Welcome to the south side." He then laughs. The rest of us do too. But we also eat.

"Excellent. May I ask your name. I definitely want to remember the one who offered the best meal of my life." Sali says.

We all look at her in shock.

Oops.

We turn to look at the old man.

He does not get down on his knees. He does not bow. He just stares.

Finally he says, "Thank the gods I lived long enough to see you. Now get out there and clean up this mess."

Pasc comments lowly, "She may not be the one. Remember the others."

"She certainly is and you know it. I felt that mind quake even here. No one else has ever sent one that large before. I hope they are heading for the southern sea in horror right now."

Pasc sighs, "They will not accede power that easily."

"No, I suppose not. Smear the lines with their blood then. I would

settle for that.” He turns and goes back to his pelts and snuggles in and is soon asleep.

Pasc says quietly, “Rest while you can. They have ways of finding us. We will have to keep moving.”

It is then that I notice. Our host is not sun or ice. He is somewhere in between. How can that happen? Why aren't there more?

Hiding

We never did learn his name. We keep moving. Usually with similar residents in secret places. Though none of them were mixed sun and ice like the first one though. There are an amazing number hiding places just out of sight. Some go south to the edge of the sea to get away from the witches. Others hide nearby. I am not sure either feels good about their decisions. Many complain. Most tell their story. Some are guilty of a crime of theft. Usually a minor amount of food or cover. I thought we all ate for free here, but we were under the protection of a Centurion. Most have to trade for what they need. I am guessing now that the incident at the table was about our being with Pasc and getting a free meal, not that we were naked and strange.

Somehow Pasc gets word out to where to leave the covers and we are now proper, though our nice covers are soon soiled with the remains of where we need to stay.

I would never have thought there were so many hidden areas in a city. But then this is the first time I have been here and I did not get to study much of the Last City.

“Just how big is this City?” I finally ask.

“Big enough.” Pasc answers.

Leega answers, “It goes around the entire world this far north. It is possible to run the sun or ice weighing nearly twice what we do now. Most don't even try and we couldn't without bringing attention, so don't even think about it.”

“How far north are we?”

“Nearly to the pole itself. There is a slight tilt to the world, so the northern most point is not worth it. When the volcanoes all went off the world was slowed and the air was not breathable above the surface for a time. So, we went underground. Over the circuits the Cities merged together.”

“How did the runners happen then? Or rather why? We know how it happened.” Gigger asks.

“The City is dying. You have seen the lights that no longer work. Ten thousand circuits is a long time for anything made to last.”

“You mentioned before that the people no longer know how to make replacements. This seems strange to me. We all know how to make everything we need.”

“That is why you were made. To survive we needed a group that could

survive after all this is gone. The witches are not bad people. They are just trying to hang onto a memory. A memory that can never happen again.”

“Explains the food too. Is it even good to eat?”

“Barely. If you look around you will see more and more people sick from lack of a complete diet. The smart ones find sneaks and eat them.”

“It would appear the only ones left are in the service tunnels where we have been hiding. Not too many there either. I have seen many traps with old food in them.” He nods.

Leega says, “The cloth makers are still working. Everyone is wearing much more detailed cloth than the last time I was here.”

“A last gasp. It takes the mind off the boring food that does not satisfy. The generators are about to go. Enough have already gone, soon it will be too many. There are no more backups.”

Leega understands. I do not. “What is a generator?”

Gigger tells me, “It means people will have to leave soon, either willingly or not. Someone will be making decisions about who can remain.”

“They would at least wait until the band passes I hope.”

Pasc shakes his eye stalk no, “There are far fewer people here than when I was here last. The witches are deciding. The last thing they need is someone who knows what is really happening.”

“Shouldn't it be obvious?”

“Surprisingly no. That is why we have the Centurions and Quarturions. They see the changes that are too slow to be seen in a short life time. Most here rarely live past thirty now. The old hide. They know they will be found and put out eventually.”

“If they are found during the band, they could run at least.”

“Look around. If we did not just come in from the outside would you know when we were? Nothing in here tells anyone. They even keep the deliveries secret and bring out materials at different times.”

Gigger asks, “Wait, we had better food in the Last Cities. How come they are not affected?”

“They supplement with local food. Why do you think the wagons were out there? For fun? It is possible that the ones you left behind Razzel could end up very rich if they can keep hunting the grumpfs without too many losses.”

“So it was not the bones that Joss was most interested in.”

“No.”

“If we are to be hunted then I want a knife and sword. I will not go

down without a fight.” Trif proclaims, but we are all feeling it.

I tell Sali, “We can't stay huddled together all the time around you. You will have to rest at some point. That is when they will attack. They will not expect us to be armed.”

“We have metal, in our packs and about this place. We need a forge.”

Our current host comes in, “I might be able to help there. No one knows what they are so they actually hide them in plain sight. I doubt even the witches remember what they are.”

“That means we just need burning rock. Where do we find that?”

“Show us where the forge is, then we will hunt down the rock or something else we can us.”

“I warn you, it is out in the open. You will be seen. I will only go so far. After that you need to go the rest of the way yourself.” She motions us to follow.

It is surprisingly chose, though our host is out of breath and clearly exhausted. She will not last much longer. Then she will be food for the sneaks. The circle will be complete.

“Through this art shop, then into the middle of the open area. There is a display sitting on top of it.”

Bebe volunteers, “I will go. Too much attention if we all go. They will not expecting us to split up either. Clans stick together.” She smiles and darts through the shop and beyond.

I volunteer, “I will go into the shop and keep watch.”

Then I come too.

“They will be expecting us to be together. Stay with Pasc and Leega. You will be safe with them and you can watch me from here.” She accedes.

I go out into the shop pretending to look at the carvings. Bebe is near the display. She circles around it pretending to look at the display. This probably makes her visible as no one else looks up at the display. She starts to come back. I pick up one of the carvings. Not well done. The material is very soft, though a nice dark color. Then it becomes obvious. Of course. The shop uses what was laying around. This is burning rock!

When Bebe passes me, I hold back a moment and then join her in hiding.

She gives her report first, “The forge is intact. But we are still missing burning rock and the tools to work the metal. We can't do that with our hands.”

I tell them, “The shop is full of burning rock. All the work is done with it. Maybe not the best quality, but it should work.”

“That means trading for it.” I had not thought of that.

I pull out my nearly finished stone and offer it to the others, “Maybe this will help. It is the last thing I have that is worthy of trade.”

Sali is going through her pack and then turns to mine and goes through it as well.

Empty the packs of the bad metal.

“Empty the packs of all metal.”

As we do so, it becomes obvious that we have our tools as well.

Pasc says, “We will need handles to avoid being burned. We will also need a large container of oil and one of water to quench the metal.”

I am surprised.

“I was not always a Centurion. I ran the lines once.”

“You were from the south?” Trif is surprised.

“A long time ago.”

“Wrap our covers around the ends. It will protect us long enough and we really don't need them in the hiding places.”

Our host says, “I know where there is some oil. A long time ago someone left it in a service tunnel. A bit thick.” So that is what they call the hiding places. Servants must have used them at some point. But, surely the witches know of them.

Even they appreciate the lack of sneaks out in the open. They allow a certain number to remain.

“Great”

“What?” I point at Sali and shrug.

It was not easy to move the oil container, but we finally get it near the exit to the open area. We clean up the metal pieces and sort them into what can quickly become a weapon and what can be used to fashion them. We then wrap the ends of the tools with the covers. This makes us naked again, but I am used to it and it does not bother me. Actually feels better. I am sure the death eaters were attempting to eat me alive, being covered in burial cloth.

Gigger in the mean time attempts to buy burning rock with my carving without success. Finally Pasc is called in to authenticate the carving. He goes out another exit and comes to the shop from the outside. My work is worth the entire shop, but of course the servant cannot make that trade. The leader finally comes and offers half the shop and a supply of uncarved rock. We offer to give back the carvings for more of the uncarved, but the price is the same. We finally leave with a shop of uncarved rock. Of course this makes them even more curious, especially when we have them deliver it to the display.

The two Fem are the most skilled at the forge and they go out freely to the display and remove it to be set aside. Pasc tells them not to destroy it as that could bring offense. This draws attention from the bored people around. Soon they have the bored people helping by bringing burning rock and our tools.

Within a short time the forge is heating. There is no way to rush it and we wait patiently. Sali and I go off to hunt sneaks. Working a forge is hard work and everyone will be hungry. Our host shows us where edible death eaters are and we add them to the growing pot of stew we are making. I just hope there will be enough to feed everyone. How could we turn away anyone who helped?

We are going to need sharpening stone.

“Look around you? We are standing on it. We need to pry a few up.”

We set to work with the few remaining bits of metal. Our host sees what we are doing and comes back with proper tools.

“What do you expect to find underneath the stones?”

“It is the stones themselves we want.”

“Strange people. You have noticed that one of your clan is about to lay an egg.” She turns away.

She is correct. Trif is near.

“Not the best time.” Sali shrugs. “Isn't she late?” I ask.

The temperature was low for most of our journey and so was the food supply. That would make the time longer.

“How do you know these things? Ah, Bebe is thinking about it.”

She smiles.

“The forge looks hot. They are laying metal. This stuff we got from the outside is strange. I have never seen anything like it before.”

A mixture of different metals.

“I know about mixtures. Add blood metal to sun metal and you get a softer version that will still hold up to use. Not good for weapons, but is good for holding water or keeping small amounts of materials dry.”

Some mixtures are stronger than either is alone or they resist weather better.

I hold out some of the metal. The surface weathering chips off easy enough. “This stuff did not hold up well.”

It has been out there ten thousand years.

“What?”

How long ago did you think all of this happened?

“I don't know, but that seems too long. Are you saying that the City is that old?”

Older. At least here.

“No wonder they are worried about it breaking. Nothing I have ever seen would last that long.”

No need for our way of life. We can always make another.

“A better way for the long run. Life is change.”

Pasc comes back to us.

“This metal does not heat well. It melts easily and then weathers rapidly when hot. Eventually it falls into dust. We need to find other metals.”

I hold up the tools we used to remove a few stones. Once one is out the others are easy to remove.

“Perfect.” He takes them to the forge. Gigger, Leega and he are watching. Soon I hear the pounding of the hammer and finally this hiss of cooling.

Pasc comes back with one shape ready for sharpening. Sali and I begin to work it on the stone. This stone is good and hard. Some stone crumbles easily, but this was meant to last. It will take some time to sharpen completely.

“We are attracting attention.” There is a growing crowd watching the forge and a few watching us.

“What are you doing?” It is a few smaller ones. About Sali's age I am guessing.

“Making weapons to fight the witches.” I say without emotion.

Do you think that was wise?

Do you think they believed me?

You are hiding the truth in plain sight? I nod.

“We know a story about ones from the south. They made weapons in the story. They destroyed the witches and freed the people.”

An adult hears this and silences the young and takes them away.

“Nothing changes.”

This one is done. She whacks a piece of burning stone chipping it easily.

More dull swords are brought to us. Where are they getting all the metal?

Sali looks up, *Apparently the people are bringing metal to the forge.*

“What?” I look up and see a large crowd now. I don't like this much attention.

We have company! Pasc tells us. I have rarely heard him mind speak. This sounds like trouble.

The crowd parts and then falls to the ground. Sali draws me back into

the hiding place. I watch through the door.

It is then that I hear Trif scream. She is laying the egg right now. Bebe places old leaper skins under her and I see the egg coming out. It happens quicker than I expect. She quickly covers it with her body.

What appears next is not anything that I would have expected. The creature is not a person. I strain to see clearly and then realize it is from the work place that made us. This creature is one of the original forms.

What is going on here?

That hurt. I am guessing that this is a High Fem. Did all people originally have this ability?

Pasc and Leega did not fall to the ground, though Gigger did.

I can't help but watch. Sali covers behind me.

“Honored one. We are creating props for entertainment purposes. Notice how some of us are dressed as people from the south.” Bebe looks up for a moment, then down again.

And the egg?

“A miscalculation.”

I am looking for a young fem.

“There are many here. Take your pick.”

White, do not push too far!

“Me? What did I do?” He smiles when he says it.

The High Fem gets very upset and looks poised to do something, then looking around decides against it. What does she fear?

I cannot read her. She is blocking well. I must concentrate to do the same.

Instead she sits and waits. The others get back to working the forge. It is not clear what she is doing or why. The locals however disappear back to their own work, including the shop keepers. I wait looking through my crack. I don't dare sharpen the swords either. She would most certainly hear that and investigate. Luckily the ones at the forge understand this and do not attempt to bring the swords to us.

I decide to watch her. She certainly looks like the first form in the old one's area. Even scarier alive. She has eight legs and is shorter than us. That might explain why we need to duck to travel the service areas. They were originally designed for her type of people.

What of the males? With us we all start out as males and as we grow larger, the largest ones eventually become Fem. I look at Sali. She started at the same size as a male hatched at the same time. I think she might be smaller than a male of the same age though. Just like us though it is the fem aspect that leads.

Three more coming.

I change my direction of sight and look down the path that she came from. Sure enough three very large males are slowly coming toward us. Pasc sees them and smiles. They are very much larger than he is, yet he continues to help Bebe and Leega at the forge. Trif sits on her egg watching and commenting, though I can't hear what she is saying. The finished swords and knives pile up waiting for sharpening. Looks like everyone will be sharpening their own.

I am getting hungry again. It has been some time since our last batch of sneaks. No time to hunt now.

The three arrive and wait next to her. Eventually she moves a front arm. A signal of some sort. One of the three comes toward her and presents her with something. I can't see through him to see what it is. He then turns and comes towards my clan members. He holds something out and speaks.

"Make another one like this." He talks to Pasc, but it is Bebe who takes it and looks at it carefully. She shrugs goes over the pile of scrap, rummages around in it and comes up with an identical piece. She hands both pieces back to the large one and goes back to work. The large one takes them back to the High Fem.

Where did you get this?

She is certainly annoying.

Agreed.

How come she mind talks so loud.

Bully. Sali is clearly upset. I can now feel the emotions in her speech. So far the High Fem has done nothing hostile though.

She will. She can't help it.

Pasc answers her, "Just outside the gate between the City and the path to Lost City thirty one. There is lots more out there if you are interested. Surprised no one has gone through it yet." So that's how they keep them sorted out.

She has no face to read emotions on. That gives her a large advantage.

You will be watched. She then moves. The large ones follow her. She is soon out of sight.

"Interesting that she does not mind we are making weapons. Far more than the four out there need. Wouldn't that make you wonder?"

She feels confident in her power.

"Or dares not openly oppose Pasc. What does he know?"

What can't be done in the open can be done in darkness.

The crowd comes back. Slowly at first and then more and more come

out of hiding to see they are all still there.

Two come over to our hiding place and open the door we are hiding behind. I have my newly sharpened weapon at the ready.

They are not a threat.

“Sorry. I don't trust the High Fem.”

“Nor should you. She will leave everyone alone for a time. Wait for mistakes to be made. She will also try and slip in an information collector. It is always obvious who it is and we delight in giving them false information.”

The other says, “Come on out. It is safe for a time.”

“What is that smell?”

“Burn! I forgot about the stew. Come help me move it out for everyone to share.” The two come in and help me move the slowly cooking pot out to near the forge. Sali stays close by keeping a careful watch. No wonder I was getting hungry. The smell was getting to me. Burn. I am lost in thoughts. I am fortunate it was slow cooking. I would have hated to burn that much food.

Bebe takes some to Trif who smells it and comments, “Burned some.” I think it is an insult until she adds, “Smells like outside. We need to leave this place. I will not hatch a young one in this place. Evil.”

Leega comments, “We are nearing the time of the band.”

“Look around you Leega. We are mostly sun chasers. Less than a third are ice chasers. We can't run backwards.”

“We?” She smiles.

Gigger's mouth opens, then, “I just thought that maybe others would want to join us. Get away from this place.”

Pasc looks around, “Well, are any of you interested in a nice run?”

“But we are not ice chasers, nor do we know the way of the wild.”

He turns to Leega, “Well, are you willing to teach us the ways of the ice chasers?”

“Don't we have an appointment with our superiors?”

He sighs, “We do, but it will also take time for everyone to get ready.” He holds up a newly forged sword, “These need to be sharpened.” He looks at me, “Would you be so kind as to give them lessons?” I nod. The two of them leave.

I hear Roger squawking as if from some distance, but can't figure out from where. Others hear it too and a few begin to search. Finally someone opens a storage area and Roger comes streaking out madder than anything. He takes off down the path that the High Fem went, but soon comes back and continues to circle our area.

Gigger asks, "What's wrong with him?"

"I don't know. Probably did not like being confined. I know I wouldn't."

"Maybe."

Bebe stays with Trif, so Gigger and I distribute the swords to anyone who is willing to take one. We then show how to sharpen them on the ground stones. I don't want to take the time to remove another stone from the ground. They will only do one, not tens like I was expecting too, so they should be fine. They may be sore after wards, but that won't hurt them either. If they decide to join us outside they will really know the meaning of sore.

I go around and correct the angle of some, demonstrate to others. Soon the area is nicely filled with the whoosh, whoosh of the blades against the floor. It will be obvious we have been here. Each ground stone is marked by the process. It is then that I notice that where others have walked, the ground is depressed slightly. Near the walls it is raised. These paths have been here a long time. Longer than the lines we ran I think.

The High Females look like the original people who lived here from before the end.

I ask someone at random, "Where does the food come from?"

She looks at me like I have spoken southern. I am sure I did not.

"Food? The stuff we eat to fill our stomachs?"

The old fem from the hiding place is next to me, "I am not sure I would call it food. More like filler to stop up the stomach. I can show you, but you might lose your last meal. Not bad, by the way, considering what you had to work with. If you are leaving count me in." I look at her. She could not keep up with the ice anywhere except the north pole itself. She would have been dead a long time ago outside.

She notices me looking at her, "I am not a dreamer. Just rather die outside like we are supposed to than in this prison." What is a prison? I have learned not to ask questions, as it only tells people we are not from here. I just nod that I understand. I do, I think.

I turn to Sali, "If that was a High Fem, you are not one of them."

No.

"Why are they still here? Shouldn't they have died out when the change happened?"

Pasc comes up to us, "Razzel, think. I know you can answer this one."

I think out loud, "They were the original people on this world. We were made starting from them, but made to fit the current world."

"Go on. Where are they and where are most of us?"

I look around, “There are certainly people here, but it would be hard to say how many. The City is very large.”

“I will help you with this one. There are eight times more people outside than in the City.”

“Counting the southerners?” He nods.

“Well, I have seen almost no new people in positions of leadership. We appear to all be in positions of service. I understand now that the wagons were used to gather food from the outside and bring it to the Cities. But, only those north of the sea can do service to the High Females and their clan.”

“You are close to understanding.”

Then I see it, “They made us to serve them! We are all slaves to them.”

“And why do they want Sali so much? She can't do much on her own.”

“Because she would be a rallying point to the slaves. She would remind them that they are slaves only because they choose to remain slaves. With eight times as many, no amount of power could prevent a takeover.”

“Many would die.”

“How many already have? How many have been set out in the ice or the sun to die? Everyone here fears death by the High Females or their bully helpers. Can it mean that much difference to die fighting for freedom rather than suffering in the cold?”

It is then that I notice that I have had others listening to our conversation. And they are all holding swords or knives.

“It won't take the High Females long to come to this same conclusion.”

“They already have.”

I turn to the others, “Spread the word. Quietly, but rapidly. Be ready. Find the hidden ones. They can help. Don't strike unless you are assured of success and then disappear just as fast.”

“They have that mind thing that they do.”

“Tell me about it. How far does it go?”

That freezes them.

I look around to obtain landmarks.

“Over to that wall?” They nod.

“Something further away then. How about around the corner of the path.” They don't know.

“Maybe that would be enough. She might have to see you to make it

work. Otherwise all kind of accidents could happen every time one of them went off.”

“Right. They want to bully everyone. If they killed all the slaves they would have no one left to serve.”

Gigger asks, “How fast can they do it again? How long between attacks.”

One person smiles, “Hard to tell, as we are not conscious. Some of us have developed an immunity of sorts and are out only for a moment. It still hurts like someone smashed your mind case open.”

“Do they travel alone most of the time or with others?”

“This one was unusual. Usually they have several and an equal number of the big ones.”

“Ah, so one could fire their mind thing and while they are resting, another one could fire, then rest.”

“Yes, that could be it. If they hit you more than three times, you are out for some time. No one can withstand that much. Usually though they just hit us once, as a sort of warning to behave. We pretend to be hit so they won't do it twice. It means they did not expect any resistance this time.”

“You mean they were not expecting Pasc to be here. That's strange as they should know we all travel together.”

“It means that their communication is not perfect. We have come some way from where we entered. Using the hidden ways. Probably just said if anyone matching our descriptions should be seen, attempt to bring in Sali and then report back either way.”

I turn back to Pasc, “That means they will be here soon. We have already waited too long. Everyone go back to what you normally do. Hide your weapons. We will leave now. Once the forge has cooled, replace the display.” Good thing we did not use the carved burning stone after all. Well, not a lot of them.

The hardest part was convincing Trif to move with her egg.

“If we stay here, we are dead. There are too many of them. You do want Wuf's egg to live don't you?”

Bebe answers, “We all do. Come, I will help.” She says to Trif. Trif reluctantly allows Bebe to help her wrap the egg in leaper skins and put it into her belly pack. Better than what I had to carry Sali with.

The old fem is waiting at the door and leads us in. I would have preferred to stay out in the more open area. Strangely Pasc seems to be comfortable anywhere he is.

She asks, “Where is the best place to hide?”

Pasc smiles, Leega is without emotion.

I answer, "In plain sight."

"If you run, they have something to track and they find you. If you are in plain sight, someone spots you and turns you in. The best place is on their blind side."

Bebe asks, "No such thing." We do see well behind, though not as well as forward.

The old one looks confused, sighs and says, "Underneath you?"

Bebe looks down immediately, "It could work. How?"

She relaxes, "I know where."

We follow her for some time. The way is very twisted, back and forth, up and down.

I ask, "Is this the easiest way to get there?"

"If it was any easier they would find you."

Gigger comments, "We do seem to be going lower gradually. Look at the walls. No one has been down here for some time. Surprised that any of the lights still work."

"They sense us and only come on when someone is around. Since no one has been here in hundreds of circuits they still have much life in them."

"Also means no one will replace any that fail. Surprised no one has come down here to get lights to replace ones that have failed in more used areas. There are a lot of ones out above us." She smiles.

She is lying to us. Be careful.

"Burns."

Then I hear from Pasc, *It is necessary. Follow along.*

Sali does not look pleased with that.

"We are here." She announces.

It is surprisingly open for being under everything. Evidence of sneaks. Should be good hunting for a bit anyway. We won't starve.

"You stay here. I will check in from time to time to see how you are doing. I have to get back so no one becomes suspicious." She leaves, but through a different passageway.

Gigger points up, "We were up there a small moon ago. She was not hiding us from them, but from ourselves." Pasc nods approval and smiles.

"I am understanding that we work better as a clan than as separated. Each of us has abilities the others lack." Good for Bebe. I never thought she would see or accept the northerners.

"We can't really call ourselves the Streaker Clan any longer. Oofik is still out there with the rest." Roger gets upset by my remarks, but says

nothing, just digs his talons into my back harder.

“Well as long as we are burrowing in tunnels we should be called the sneak clan.” That gets everyone laughing.

Pasc announces it, “Sneak Clan it is. The one and only. I am sure no one else would choose that name.”

“I like that. No one north or south will have our name. We need a flag now.”

I am getting nervous, “I think we need to leave here.” That brings everyone down again.

“To where?” Gigger asks.

“If the original plan was to hide below them, maybe above them would work as well?” I ask.

Leega says, “Well, if this place has not changed too much in the last twenty five years I think I can help there.” Pasc looks at her with concern. She looks back questioning him. Maybe they are mind speaking?

Gigger announces, “If this place is anything like the Last Cities, then I should be able to help too.”

Pasc seems more pleased with that idea and says, “Please lead us up.”

“There is actually a logic to the way things were designed. The ah, servants, needed to be able to serve. Lots of back ways to get everywhere. The larger areas such as this were for storage. The fact that it is empty and has been for a long time says that most of the population is now gone.” He indicates the entire area. “This used to be full to the top with food and other supplies gathered from the outside.”

“Leega you say too much.” Pasc warns.

I answer, “She has said nothing that was not obvious. Just because we come from the south does not mean we are stupid.”

Pasc looks very sad, “I would never accuse any of you of being stupid. You are all the smartest people I have ever meant. I am concerned because there is an order to what needs to be revealed. Go against that order and confusion leads.”

“We are on a path of sorts. One that you have run before.”

“Many times. And just like any path that you have been on before, it is never the same each time you come around. There is always something a little or even a lot different from the other times.”

“Any aft knows that.” Trif sneers and we all laugh.

Someone is coming. We need to leave now!

“We go. Gigger move it!”

He leads us up a stepped path in one corner. I am surprised when we do not arrive in the area of the forge, but keep going up. It becomes

noticeably cooler as we go.

Less rock between us and the surface. Glad we kept the leaper skins.

“The sneaks look fuller up here as well.”

“All fur. How come there are no hidden ones up here?”

“Yeah, that is disturbing. The only reason they are not is because this place is not safe.”

“Or too cold.” Leega says.

I turn to her and tease her, “I thought you were an ice chaser. This is not even cold by sun chaser standards.”

“Wait until you have to be still for a half moon. Then you will really feel the cold.”

Roger takes off and grabs a sneak to immediately bite it's head off. Blood is everywhere. That sets everyone else off to hunting. I am sure we are heard, but no one stops until they are satiated.

You need to see this.

Sali comes down the steps that go even further up.

“Come on everyone. Sali has found something.” I don't like that she left the room without me though.

There is no one up there. No one alive anyway.

Gigger goes up first and I follow. Sali follows me. The two Fems stay below with Leega and Pasc. I suspect they already know. Pasc seems to know everything.

I go up the steps and into a dark room. Slowly my eyes adjust to the lower light. What is surprising is the lack of smell. What is before me are pieces of people. One with no eye stalk at all and only one leg. Another with the back half missing. Body parts are strewn on the ground. When we entered the sneaks disappeared. This is their food source. I touch one of the corpses. The reason there is no smell is because the flesh is frozen solid. I can feel gnaw marks everywhere.

“Apparently we are close enough to the surface now that anything with water in it will freeze.”

Gigger tells us, “They keep their meat up here until needed during the ice band. During the fire band they use the lowest chambers or dry the meat.”

“This is not the meat of leapers, crafters or sneaks.”

It is the meat of those they say were told to leave the City.

“It means the food that those below eat is themselves.”

“The same food we ate the first meal we were here.”

“I have eaten a downed person before. Meat is meat. Why waste it or give it to the sneaks and death eaters?”

“In the north we do not do this. It is forbidden. But apparently we do so unknowingly.”

There is much in the north that is done without the knowledge of the people.

“Do the High Females eat this meat too?”

We go back down to the others.

The look on the two Fem tells me that they have been told. We say nothing.

“We need to leave this place.” I say.

Pasc shakes no, “One more thing must happen. We go back to the forge.”

“That's not wise.” I remember well the leaper attack that set me on this path.

“All the same, it is the path we must take. There is more at stake than our needs or desires.”

“The survival of the people.” He looks shocked, but nods yes.

Fire

We are back at the forge, now cold, quickly. Gigger was right. We were very close and the old one lied to us. Why?

Others see us. One comes up to us, "It is not safe. They have been looking everywhere for you. They even looked into our minds. Since we did not know there was nothing to see."

"Did you hide the swords and knives?" Pasc asks.

"Of course. But since they did not think to ask that question they did not see it in our minds." The one smiles.

Pasc tells him, "Go, gather your swords and knives and meet back here." The one is shocked, but bows and disappears.

Pasc looks at Sali, but says nothing. Nothing that I can hear.

We do not have to wait long for the people to arrive. They remain on the sides of the path waiting. Pasc does not move. We do not move.

They come. Pasc neither says or does anything.

Suddenly Roger takes off from my back and screams down the path flapping his wings frantically. He rises to the very top of the walls and darts down at his highest rate of speed towards the figures coming around the curve. Three High Fem and their guards.

One of the guards tries to bat Roger away but misses. Roger goes straight for the High Fem. I am sure they are going to hit. The High Fem tries to protect herself and raises up her front end. It looks very awkward. Roger hits her just below what must be the mouth and she tumbles backward onto her back. Roger bounces off and back into the air. She looks very vulnerable on her back, legs waving in the air.

I hear an intake of breath from the people around me watching. Roger circles around to try and attack the second. Meanwhile the guards right the first. Roger fakes his attack on the second and suddenly switches to the first again knocking her down again. Why doesn't she use that mind pain of hers on Roger? Why does she allow this?

I am blocking her. Streakers and High Females have been mortal enemies for a very long time. I owe Roger this.

This time when she is down, he attacks her underside and breaks through to the soft insides. He pulls at the insides. The guards have awakened and react, but Roger is too fast for them and flies between them back to us. There is blood all over his mouth parts.

They attempt to help her, but it is clear that she will not be helped. Even with us, attacking in this place is always fatal.

Attack! The other two yell.

None of us moves. Roger cleans himself as they advance towards us. The two High Females are in the rear and their guards are in front.

When the guards get within striking distance they suddenly fall in apparent pain. No one has struck them. The High Females bring out weapons. Three sided swords of a design I have never seen before. Nasty looking. These have no purpose in the hunt. They are designed only for the kill.

I expect them to come towards us, but they aim for Pasc. He does nothing to defend himself. He does not move. Sali sits and waits too. I jump up and put myself between them and Pasc. The two blades go into my body quickly and easily. The pain is intense. I am no more.

Sali!

I awaken to a chants of “Sali! Sali!”

I am still where I lay, but I feel no pain.

“It is about time you woke up.” Sali says to me. The chant stops.

“You are talking again.” Explains why they are chanting too.

“How do you feel?”

I stand up easily. Everyone has fallen to the ground in a bow. I slowly turn around. Pasc and Leega are also bowed. I turn more. Gigger is bowed, as are the two Fem. Strange.

“Your talking did this? Now everyone knows.”

“Everyone knows, but it is not my talking that did this.” Sali's voice is behind me.

I turn towards the voice and see Sali bowed to the ground.

“Why are you bowed. Do they not chant your name?”

I look up from Sali and see two blood stained pulpy masses against the far wall.

“Strange. What are those?”

I feel strange and it comes back to me as if in a dream. I see the two High Fem attacking me. Oh crab! I feel the pain as their swords enter my body. The swords are withdrawn. I am still watching them. I sit down and stare at them. I am fully awake. I understand. The two stare at me in amazement as my wounds heal. I raise my hand and they accelerate towards the wall with tremendous force. Such force that when they hit the wall they are obliterated. I then collapse.

I look at the patterns on the wall now. I understand that they are my doing. I dissolve the patterns. I understand now.

Pasc says, “About time you woke up.”

“More will come.” Leega says nervously.

“We will go where they cannot find us.”

“That will take time.”

“We have time. They do not. Their time has gone.”

I turn to the others.

“Rise.” They do so cautiously.

“Even a streaker can kill a High Fem. You have the means. Choose your own path now.”

One brave one says, “But you must lead us.”

“It is better that we are not seen again. A ghost is more powerful than a corpse.”

Pasc announces, “We run with the wind!”

Council

Not without meeting with us. I don't recognize this mind. I quickly figure out where he is though. It is all coming back.

Without thinking I open a portal and walk through into a large well lit room. Lit by fat oil candles and fire pots. Before me stand thirteen older males in white robes. Thirteen of course. Amazing how that number keeps propagating.

A moment later Sali and Pasc come in using a second portal. Gigger and the others are not with them. I quickly scan the area we came from and they are still there.

“Why didn't the others come?” I ask.

“They can wait. Probably still wondering about your exit. Remind me not to wake you up next time when others are around.”

We had the courtesy to get out of sight first at least.

“Is this your council?” Pasc smiles. They scowl at me. After an entrance like that they must know we could take anything they try and be bored at the same time.

You need to rest before doing anything. Going hyper on us won't help anyone.

“If I remember right you were the one most likely to go hyper Sali. And why can't you talk here. Surely that is no longer a concern.”

Normally no sound is permitted in this room. It is you who are being rude. Pasc tells me.

Fine. I address the council, *What do you want?*

Not making this easier.

Pasc bows before the council. Sali and I follow his example.

We wait.

For some time.

I hate hierarchies. What are they waiting for?

One moves, shuffles some papers he pulls out of a pouch. Didn't know they had writing. Stupid southerner. I should have been more observant. Of course until a few moments ago I did not know what writing was.

He hands one to another who looks at it through lenses. Didn't know they had those either. Makes sense. Someone had high tech to build all this stuff. Actually lenses are pretty low tech. Throw back.

Centurian Pasc, please explain.

Am I demoted now?

We do not know the others. Meaning they don't trust Fem or Females.

Especially ones who open portals and talk rudely. They are easy to read. Practically shouting. They can't read us either. Knowing what I remember now, that is a good thing.

They can read you. Pasc tells them.

They are quiet. They do know how to shield to some extent. I could punch through, but I don't. For now.

We wait. Eventually we all sit. The thirteen stand.

I grow frustrated and draw air to myself and make a seven dimensional sculpture and float it before us turning it through the dimensions.

Show off.

Just bored. Lots of work to do and we are stuck here.

Be patient. We are not here for our own purposes.

I am wondering if I can pull the same trick twice. Pasc scowls at me. Guess not.

We need to know your intentions.

Pasc stands up. This should be interesting.

We await the arrival of one more. Right, Bug is missing.

For over ten thousand circuits you have waited. Are these two of the ones you await. He nods. 10K? Crab. I really mistimed it.

You have broken covenant by initiating change.

We only released the pressure that was building. If we had not done so, another event would have. Yeah with far more violence on both sides.

Pasc continues, *The end result of waiting would have reduced the population to a dangerous level.*

Possibly, but that was for the council to decide.

We can leave immediately if you wish. Classic response. I'm ready.

I speak, *You wanted the High Females controlled for some time.*

Understandable. They had gotten to a bad place. Many suffered. Now the means is before you. Do you wish us to accelerate the process? That would be ill advised. A victory easily gained is not appreciated.

They stare at me like I had just advised them to jump into a battle pit.

She is newly awakened. You will have to excuse her. Sali says.

What she says is essentially correct. However we do not allow Fem or Females to talk in this chamber. Then why did you let us talk for so long?

I scowl, *Then what is Leega? What are you afraid of?*

Pasc smiles.

We the council of Centurions. No Fem'ale is allowed here.

Ah a separate council. A higher one no doubt.

Sali laughs and says, "You are no different than the High Females.

Come we go. No point in playing games with hatchlings. You deserve each other.”

Pasc shrugs and smiles as he turns away from them dropping his white covering on the floor.

Have they been in conflict for the entire time? I suspect so. I was expecting wisdom and I got fools. Does it never change?

Hey, we set it up this way. What did you expect?

Maybe we should try a plasmodic form next time?

What and have the whole thing be over in a microsecond?

Speaking of which, does anyone know the time constant for this life form?

Hydrogen is the same for everyone. Figure it out. Pasc smiles as he opens a portal.

I do the calculation. Whoa! This should be very interesting indeed.

Did I choose it right or not? He is already through the portal.

Summit

We arrive back at the forge where the others are waiting.

Leega asks concerned, "How did it go?" She notices Pasc's lack of cover.

I ask, "You knew where we went?"

Pasc comments, "The Centurion council. They are not amused."

Oops, his past life is showing.

"What are they going to do?"

"What they always do."

"Nothing then." He nods. She shrugs and takes off her cover as well.

Gigger comes in, "Look around you. They are ready. Too long they have been abused by the High Females." People are watching us. Some are removing their covers.

They? What about you?

"I'm with you aren't I?" He looks nervous.

"What? You don't want to be in the war?"

Sali says, *It is not our war. They have to earn their freedom now. We have shown them how, it is up to them if they really want it or not.*

"R'gr!"

"No one is forgetting you Roger. I saw what you did to defend me. You have been hurt by the original people here for a long time. If nothing else comes of this, it will be that the Streakers are friends not enemies."

"P'pl fr'nd!"

I look into his mind and learn his language. I let out a sharp scream in Streaker that thanks him formally.

Roger bows before me and says, "Wl'cm." We all laugh.

"Am I correct in guessing that the new people cannot produce hatchlings with the old ones?"

Pasc answers, "That is true."

"Where are the males?" Gigger asks. If he asks it I have to wonder also.

Leega states, "I have never seen one of their males either."

A stranger comes forward, "I have seen them. They are large bloated things. Stupid as stones. They are only kept for their egg quickening ability." The stranger is clearly blind. Her eyes are damaged by what looks like repeated blows. Too mangled to regenerate. We can regenerate arms and legs pretty well, but not whole internal organs, including brains. Eyes can if at least half is intact.

“I can still sense light and dark, but not much else. I used to service the males. We were all blinded as part of the need for secrecy.” She pauses, “And to warn us what they are willing to do to keep the secret. Guess I am an offering now, if you don't save us.” She looks pathetic trying to see us. Slowly her eyes reform and moments later are shiny and young again.

She bows to touch the ground and whispers, “Thank you.” She then backs away.

We need to leave if we don't want a crowd. Everyone suffers in some way.

“What about all the people here? Don't we have some responsibility for starting it?”

Pasc says, “We were set up for just this effect by the Council. Let them figure out how to handle it.”

“What do you mean set up?” Gigger asks.

“We don't have time right now. People are talking, soon they will come.”

“As soon as they overcome their fear.” Trif says.

I look to Pasc. *I did it last time. We are in the band. Just take us outside.*

He sighs and we are suddenly on the surface. I still like the portal better. Need to see for some time where I am going. Scanning is not the same. Still the wind and the air are wonderful! I spend several moments just breathing deeply.

That's because you are too cautious. Have to take chances sometimes.

“That's easy for us to say, but not a good idea for everyone else.”

I was always that way, even before knowing.

“Very lucky then.” I smile.

Ever notice how much like rats sneaks taste?

“Oh crab, now I won't be able to eat sneaks.” I am just kidding though. Our new bodies are adapted to the local food.

Gigger asks, “Whoa, that was fun. Do it again!” Pasc shakes his eye stalk.

“Not going to happen Gigger. We don't like displaying our abilities to those who don't understand.”

He looks at me, “You mean you really are like Pasc?”

“And Sali. We share the same abilities, though we are each better at some abilities than the others are.”

“Exactly what can you do?”

I smile but do not answer.

*We are likely going to have to include everyone here at some point.
Do you think one of them is Bug?*

Pasc answers that one quickly, *No*. I have to wonder how long it took him to recognize me.

Trif and Bebe are looking for a good nesting spot. I had forgotten about that need. It gives us time to decide what we are going to do though.

I ask Pasc, “So what is going to happen to all the people below?”

“We will need to keep a watch on them. Knowing the Council it is likely things will simmer for some time before it gets really bad. This is good. It will give the people time to get organized and find weapons. They already know how to hide their thoughts. Without us then fewer will die.”

“They would have attacked immediately with us there.” He nods.

They have something to think about now.

Gigger adds, “They don't know how to fight either. All they know right now is the one vulnerability. Even they must know the High Females will now guard against it.”

“The High Females are just like the Council though. Old, tired and afraid of change. They will try to make things go back to the way they were and the people know enough to allow this for a small time at least.” Leega says

“Why are they called High Females? You are a fem with some abilities. They are nothing like us and cannot mate with us.”

“There are no females with their abilities among the people. Only a few males like Pasc and the Council members. There are far fewer such males than there are High Females.”

I am thinking that their desire to have stupid males for mating only dumbbed everyone down.

“Why don't you just talk?” It's rude to leave the others out of your thoughts.

“I can hear her.”

“So can I.”

Sali sticks her eye stalk into the air and turns away from me. Now I know where that came from.

Stupid squid.

“Silly kitty!” We both laugh. Pasc shakes his eye stalk, then laughs.

Gigger of course, asks, “What's a kitty?”

Pasc answers, “Oh, one of the most fearsome nasty creatures the universe has ever seen.”

“What's a universe?”

He has only seen the stars once Pasc.

I forgot.

I don't believe that.

Hey, even I can forget. Especially when people wait a long time before remembering.

“Oh crab. He is going to get me somehow, someway.” Sali looks up at both of us and backs away some. Gigger picks up on this and backs away too, taking Leega with him.

“What?” she asks.

Bebe snarls, “Can we stay on task? I say we find the Streaker Clan.”

Roger who has been quiet takes off from my back.

I send him my thoughts, *We are too far away to find them Roger.*

Come back and wait for the rest of us.

I am instinctively facing the sun, as are Trif and Bebe.

Leega states the obvious, “We need to be facing the ice people. We are on the ice chaser side of the world.”

“And the others are on the opposite side.”

Gigger asks, “Can you do that special thing that far?”

Pasc answers, “The question is, is that the best thing to do? There is merit in learning the ice chaser ways. I for one never have.”

Sali and I are both amazed. Oh, no, is this part of the trap he is laying for me?

“What did you do the entire time then?”

He smiles, “Oh, this and that.”

Bebe snarls again and states the obvious, “What kind of High Fem are you? We need food now!”

Real food or TK chow?

We need to save the local wildlife for those below. They will need as much food as they can. It will be very hard for them before they learn to hunt again. We also don't need to teach the local food to fear people just yet.

“Everyone else stay here and help Trif get settled in and feel protected. Normally a Fem would be surrounded by a double layer of protectors. Sali and I fill find food.” We leave on the run.

“Oh it feels good to run outside again!” I exclaim loud enough for everyone to hear. Scaring as much wildlife away as I can.

Sali announce, *Roger went that way.* She points.

We are not actually trying to find any leapers or sneaks.

Do you remember exactly how they taste that you can make a dupe

without a model?

“Ah, no. Good point.”

We run fast in an attempt to catch up with Roger before the egg hatches. A little TK boost helps.

We find Roger in an open area with a half eaten small rafter on its back.

“I think I know now how he did that. Come in fast and hard. If they don't expect you they go over.”

And if they sense you, you are one dead stalker. The impact would kill you.

“Risks in all forms of life. He must be a good hunter.”

Explains why he was chosen for the role.

“Interesting. So he did not chose me for my spine free landing spot?”

We make crafter meat as that is what is at hand. Enough for now anyway. Getting back was uneventful. This place is really empty.

Gigger brings us back to task, “I see we have two options. We can go north and over the pole to meet up with your Oofik on the other side or we can go south to the nearest Last City and wait inside until they arrive.”

Leega picks up the stick, “If we go north we need to factor in the time it takes to get there and how far the sun and Streaker Clan has moved in the mean time. We would essentially be going north and then following nearly the same path back. It is not easy to go north from here and it will be a struggle.”

Pasc asks, “What is the learning value? We are not trying to get anywhere quickly.” Meaning we can't just open a portal and be there.

Trif states, “I do not want to spend any more time in a dark cave. I want this hatchling to see the sun. Do what you need to do, but I am staying outside.”

I state, “I am not breaking up this small clan just yet. It sounds like north it is.” I glare at Pasc who pretends not to notice.

Leega looks very concerned, “You do not understand. If what you experienced crossing the southern sea was bad, this is much worse. It is unlikely that everyone will survive.” Meaning the non TKs and maybe even concern for herself, a level one.

Gigger asks, “Have you done this trail before?”

“There are thirty six Last Cities coming into the City. There are six paths north from here, all underground. We are not near one of those lines at the moment. There are no paths above the ground. The cold, the weather, and the sun are all unpredictable. There is no shelter. There is

very little if any food, alive or dead.”

“And people have done this before?”

She shrugs, “Rumor has it.”

“South anyone?” Gigger offers. Not a possibility.

I sigh and try looking at Pasc as sad as possible.

“That just looks pathetic. You were never good at that Ro . . . ah, Razzel.”

Gigger looks confused.

“Why did you choose the name Pasc?” I ask.

“Short for Pascal. An early programming language I used, ah, a long time ago.”

Everyone except Sali and I stare at him. I am smiling. He notices and shuts up.

One for you Roo.

Better not to even think that name, ghost.

Meow!

“Stop it!”

They are all looking at me now.

“Anyone know where the Streaker clan is right now?”

Of course. Sali answers.

“Then give me the coordinates.”

Nothing happens.

“Now. Don't make me ask again. I have just been through a rude awakening. You don't want me to get, ah, upset.”

“That's true. You definitely don't want to get her upset.” Pasc smiles.

Fine.

They arrive in my mind.

I make the bubble. I always preferred bubbles to portals.

“What do we do now?”

“We enter the bubble.” Sali and Pasc are ahead of me. I go in next.

“Come on. You don't want to be left behind in this place if Leega is right.”

“I am.” She comes in next and Gigger follows.

Bebe urges Trif to get up with her egg.

“This had better be good. This poor thing will have been rolled over most of the world before being hatched.”

She gets up and she and Bebe enter together.

I break the bubble.

Reunion

They are looking at us when the bubble breaks. Some are holding their meal in their hands. Some are part way chewing with their beaks open. It is like they all froze.

“I thought I gave enough warning. Did you not see the initial bubble?”

The one closest to us answers, “The light was shining on the ground from the opposite direction. I stuck my hand in the area and the light changed on my hand as I moved it in and out of the circle.” I did not see that. He could have lost a hand if my timing had been any different. Still asleep. Not safe yet.

Gigger comments, “That will certainly prevent anyone from following us. Hi everyone. I am Gigger.”

They are looking at Leega though.

She shrugs, “My name is Leega. I am an ice chaser.”

“Whoa.” Several say.

Oofik comes up to me.

“High Fem.” He bows and I see that he is nearly Fem now.

I smile, “There are no High Fem in the Streaker Clan!” A cheer goes up.

Bebe huffs and asks, “We need a nesting site now!” That breaks the group and everyone scrambles around trying to put things in order. Two more Fem come forward and gather around Bebe and Trif. Oofik stays separate.

“It would appear you are High Fem now.” I say to Oofik.

“More a combination with the Lead role. We decide things most of the time by consensus. Only in an emergency does everyone let me command.”

“Good choice. Where to now?”

Streakers come in to roost on their partners.

I look around for Roger.

“Crab! Where is Roger?”

Everyone looks around, but we can't find him.

I quickly scan where we were. It takes me a moment, but finally find him. He is the only streaker in the north region. I shake my eye stalk and make a portal directly in front of him so he can't turn away in time. He flies into our space shrieking loudly. He is immediately answered by all the other streakers, who rise as one to greet him.

Oofic comes up to me, “How did you get here? What is a crab? You

look different. What happened to you? Where did Leega come from?"

"Any more questions?"

"Much. But I will wait until I hear the first answers."

"We met Leega and Gigger in the Last City. There are thirty six of them by the way. Last Cities."

"We suspected that. We have been trading with them. Metal for grumpf. There are an amazing number of those hungry fish out there." She points to the ocean.

"Lose anyone?"

"One. A young aft trying to prove his courage before being properly trained. No one else has been that stupid since. The grumpf got away. We'll catch it eventually. We left scars to know which one it is. Where is Wuf?"

"The six who helped Joss hurt our Fem have been avenged." Enough said. He does not ask about Bebe's egg either. We all know what happens. "We made it all the way to the City. It is run by a group of beings not like us. They set up a system where the ones on the outside, Joss was one, provided most of the food and materials necessary for themselves and the people who serve them."

"Why stay outside and hunt? Harsh life."

"Much worse inside. They can't run, they are malnourished. They are all slaves to serve the beings. The beings eat them when they are no longer of use. They are fed to each other when they are selected to be food. Anyone who disobeys them becomes food."

"You keep saying beings. What were they?"

"Not like us at all. They have some mind power that gives you extreme pain and causes you to lose awareness. It happened to me twice. Once out, you can be killed by their huge guards and dragged to the meat lockers if they choose. Frozen stiff to await the stew pots. Actually that is not accurate. They made something that did not even taste like food out of it and low gatherers. I think this is why they were malnourished. Too much low gather in the mix."

"How did you get away?"

"We hid for a long time, but eventually decided we needed weapons to defend ourselves. We were being hunted. They had time. We did not. We found a forge hidden under a display and started to make weapons. The locals saw this of course and asked to participate."

"Then Sali spoke."

"Oh yeah. That really set them going. Some developed a resistance to the head wack and could handle one hit from the beings, but not two or

three. They learned to fake being out. Most of the time the beings would go away. They needed the slaves to work hard, not all die at once. Oh, the beings can see your mind, but nearly all of the people learned to hide things from them.”

“Then?”

“We left before things came to a battle. Still have some survival skills.”

“How did you got here?”

I shrug.

“You are keeping secrets.”

“Not because of what you think. I am not alone and do not have the right to reveal without consensus.”

“Sali and this Pasc person?” I nod.

“Are you like them then? You can see minds?”

“If I chose too. I do not see the minds of friends without permission.”

“That's reassuring. We have been busy as well.” The others are gathered around Trif and Bebe, pulling the 'meat' apart and handing each other pieces to eat.

I pull some 'more' out of my pack and offer some to Oofik. She takes some. I put some in my own mouth. We can eat and talk at the same time as the breathing tube is separate from the eating one. Very convenient.

“Taslt is our best candidate for Lead. He has killed five grumph by himself.”

“That is impressive. I see Leega thinks so too. Well at least he will have some experience before he has to do his duty.” I smile. “Do you think we should stay on this side of the sea?”

“How hot do you think this fight will get?”

“Very.”

“Always wanted to return to the south lines. Would be fun to show the others how we have done.” She smiles.

“Who would expect us to be alive much less two High Fem.”

“I am thinking more about those who abandoned us to the leaper horde.”

“Those grumpf teeth around your eye stalk?” She smiles. I look around. Nearly all of them have full necklaces of them.

She says, “I am thinking a jaw bone might help too.”

“Too heavy. Maybe something made from them?”

She reaches over behind a rock and pulls up a spear made from the jaw with a row of teeth at the top of it like a long ax. Just enough bone removed to make it light enough to carry.

“That should work. Like the detail work.”

She shrugs, “Something to do on the run. Effective when up against bang sticks. Scares them stiff. You make anything?”

“Had to trade it for supplies.” She looks at me stunned. “It was before I was aware of what I was.” Ah.

“They have a lot of burning rock in there, but make very bad cravings out of it.”

“Too brittle. Drop it once and all your work is gone.” I nod.

“They will have a great deal to learn. They have lost so much.”

“Did they lose it, or are we the ones who gained it?”

“Actually it could be either or both. Pasc would know. What is clear is that they were at one time more knowledgeable about metals and other materials than we are now. There were lights on the top of the cave walls in most places that were made. Not of this world normally. Lots of broken ones that were not repaired. No one used fire either. There were metal containers that food was put into to heat. I made a stew near the end and everyone thought it was the greatest thing. I had almost nothing to work with and still they liked it. That is how bad their food was.”

“What did you use?”

“Mostly sneaks. Lots of those around. They fed on the dead when they could, or uneaten food at other times.”

“What happened to Pasc's cover? Wasn't he wearing a white cloth?”

“He was, but left it behind when he did not agree with the clan he belonged to.”

“Their version of a clan flag.”

“Leega was part of a lesser clan and wore a yellow cover. Most of the people in the City also wore covers. Some of them quite elaborate.”

“They carved cloth? How can they do that?”

“Not carved, colored. Every color imaginable. Often all on the same cover.”

“Would scare the food away.”

“Oh yeah. They will learn.”

“So, we once were able to do great things. Or was it these other beings?”

“Who knows. They can't now. They are totally dependent on us bringing them food. Pasc says that the world once did not have running the lines. The time of dark and the time of light were so short that no one was burned or frozen. Something happened. I believe he said burning mountains. This stopped the world from turning fast.”

“And these beings were from that time. I am guessing they cannot run

like we do or we would have seen them?"

"Correct. There was some indication that they were the original intelligent people here. We came later." I do not want to say how.

"We have been from near the long south lines to near the north top of the world. I have seen no burning mountains. Some smokers, but nothing burning."

"Neither have I, but this happened ten thousand years ago, so maybe things were different."

I look over to where Pasc is. He is with the two Fem making sure they are comfortable.

"Maybe they are further south?"

"Or maybe Pasc has not told you everything he knows."

I laugh, "He never tells anyone all he knows. Have some more crafter." I hand him a large piece.

"Thanks, was getting tired of the taste of grumpf actually. We give most of it to the Last Cities, but all the same, we have eaten a lot. With the running easier up here I am afraid we are getting fat."

I smile, "Not too."

"Have you mated yet?"

"Wuf died before I was able to. Trif's egg is his though."

"I am curious. I have been Lead, but never mated. Now it would appear I will experience the other side soon."

"We now have our two Fem back. I will not mate. I have changed too much. Taslt will be ready for you and you could mate him in less than a circuit seeing how much you have changed already. Three Fem for a clan this size is enough to start. How did you figure out how to start the change?"

"Not all fores and afts are blind. By comparing notes we figured it out. It takes some awful stews of low gatherers and metal pieces. Makes you sick, but the only way you can deal with it is to run as fast as you can. Otherwise the pain gets to you."

"I think I like my method better."

"No eggs available for me to cuddle." She sighs then smiles.

"Some people get to go the easy lines I guess."

"Does not sound like you had it that easy."

"We nearly starved to death at one point, but we also got to see the stars without any clouds. It was amazing. None of us will ever forget it."

"When did that happen? When you were on the ice chaser side?"

"Actually at the halfway point. The air currents bring warm enough for us to go outside for a short time. We nearly froze to death because we

did not want to come back inside.”

“Amazing.”

“Roger got the first crafter. Same way he took out one of the beings. When they are raised to do some task he hits them low and fast. Unprepared they roll over on their backs. Can't get up from that position, nor can they defend themselves.” I refuse to call them High Females any more. They used us. They do not deserve honor.

“Soft spot on the underside.” I nod. “Good to know.”

“I don't think we have to worry about them coming outside.”

“Now what? Do we keep feeding the Cities?”

“Better if we don't. It will force them outside faster.”

“I have had enough near fights with the locals. If we don't need to stay I suggest we go south again.”

“You ready to cross the sea again?”

“We have been debating that. If you did not come back within the one circuit we would have gone without you. We know what to do now. We even started drying grumpf meat and keeping all the skins we can. The grumpf skins will protect us from the cold and wet, and lined with leaper skins will even be better.”

“Sounds great. Good work.”

“It was not all my idea. Everyone helped.” I'm sure.

I indicate the Fem. “Do you remember how long this takes? I have no sense of time without the band.”

“Assuming she mated inside the Last City near the time of entering. Which of course she would have had to because Wuf was not alive very long once inside. I think he went straight after the six. She laid the egg a short time before we came here.”

“How long did it take you to get here?” She tries to look serious.

“I can't say.” I shake my eye stalk.

“Others will talk.”

“I doubt it.” I am the serious one now.

“Not good to keep secrets.” She walks off. Guess I deserved that.

I scan the egg. It is nearly done. Any time now is my guess. Certainly has been kept warm enough. Hopefully this means it will be a male.

Warmth makes males, cold makes females. The only reason the Sali's egg was cold was because of the attack of the leapers. She was also conscious from hatching, or even from before. Did she cause the attack?

I scan the south, looking for volcanoes. Lots of dead ones. No active magma tubes. Ten thousand years is a long time. I don't think it was volcanoes.

“Yes, but how do you explain a nine dimensional slip inverter gone critical to nomads?”

“Not polite to read when not invited.”

“Got used to it when you were still dormant. Sorry.”

“Doesn't matter. We both know each other so well we don't really have to.”

“True.” He smiles.

“What happened?”

“This is not their sun. Not in any universe. They were very lucky to find it in time. Pure chance though. They really did not know what they were doing.”

“Trying for a new energy source or DS?”

“Does it matter? I was not there at the time. Just saw the aftermath and pieced it together afterwards.”

“The southern pole?” He nods.

Sali comes in, *We are being watched.*

“I see them. Bang sticks. Interesting. Who is the hunted and who are the hunters? Good decoys.”

I hear the egg crack and a sigh from everyone around her.

That is when they try their attack on the afts or rather the decoys. The problem with bang sticks is that as soon as they go off everyone knows where you are and you are helpless until you reload. Even then you can only hope to hit one target. When outnumbered two to one, three to one if you count the decoys, you can't win. They only get one shot. None of the afts are hurt, though one is a near miss.

Oofik comes up to us seeing our watching the hills.

I tell her, “Every one is fine in our clan.”

“Usually the case, but there is always the possibility they will eventually get lucky. We see this on the outskirts of every Last City.”

“Why don't they learn?”

She smiles, “They never figure out what happened. No survivors. We change the tactic each time anyway, just in case.”

“Why don't they come out in force?”

“We give them the meat cheap. Cheaper than they could hunt it themselves. We are really doing them a favor.”

“They know there is no more?”

“Nah, what fun would there be in that?” She smiles big.

A cry goes up. A cry of joy. A male! Thank goodness. If we had another fem I would be worried.

We still need to find Bug. I cannot sense anyone else on this world at

our level.

“Nor I.” Pasc nods as well.

Oofik sneers, “More secrets. You three are not clan.”

Pasc announce, “I think it is time we let a few others in the club. Safety in numbers. Oofik you want to be more than anyone has been here before?”

“Do I learn the mind seeing?”

“That is just the first gift.”

I ask, “How many others do we include and when do we move?”

South? I nod. Pasc smiles. *I have scanned the south. There is 'thn shield material there in low concentration.*

“How come you did not go before?”

“Let's see. I was waiting for you two. I have no idea where in the universe we are or even which universe we are in.”

Oofik looks at us, “I think I liked it better when you did not share.”

I tease her, “Too late now.”

“Who else?”

“Leega and Gigger.”

“Not Trif and Bebe?”

They don't want to go. They will be very happy to see us leave. They will be very happy here.

I say, “They will be running the entire north in two turns.”

“We can take them back south. Need to give the new ones a chance to mature before being challenged by an experienced clan.”

Oofik adds, “We are barely working a sweat up here. It is too easy. We will become weak.”

“They will become weak. If you are with us, then you are with us. Say goodbye to anyone you want and meet back here when you are ready.”

She smiles, “We are ready.” and then shouts to everyone, “We run with the wind!” Everyone immediately gets up. The ones in the hills come running down as the clan flag is waved. Their decoys abandoned. The Streakers come back to land on their partners.

“Roger comes with us.” Oofik nods. Her streaker lands on her. A fem.

“Then Yeesi comes with us.” She gets it right this time.

I like birdies. They taste great.

I would not recommend it. Roger looks at her sideways. Pasc looks at her sternly.

Oofik laughs, “I imagine that our Sali has just said something bad. Yeesi is digging into my back hard and I think she is growling. I did not know she could do that.”

Pasc announces, "Then it is settled, they get gifts too." Sali looks surprised then upset.

You brought it on yourself. She sticks her eyestalk up in the air and walks away.

Taslt comes up, "Everyone is ready." Normally he would not have to say this. They must be getting impatient.

Oofik looks to us. I look to Pasc.

"I believe it is her turn."

Sali has walked off a short distance.

"I am not going to put up with another one of her tantrums. She can follow when she is ready to join us."

A scout comes up to us and whispers something in Taslt's ear. Who then comes up to Oofik.

"It would appear we have waiting too long. The wagons come. Fully armed and riding high."

I look confused.

Leega says, "That means they have no food in them. The Last City opens soon, that is not good. They will attempt to steal our food and present it as their offering."

"Explains why they have been harassing us." Might.

Especially since the ones inside are trying to get out and are waiting for the gate to open. There will be hundreds here soon under very confusing conditions. Sali comes running back to us.

"It has begun." Pasc announces.

A portal opens. *I did not do it.* Pasc shrugs. I turn to Sali.

You said it was my turn. Come or be left behind.

Oofik looks at the portal with concern, but is willing to follow us. The others are not so sure and hold back.

She tells them, "It is safe. Watch." She goes into the portal turns around and comes back. "See. No problem. Doesn't hurt. Still alive."

Taslt says, "This is not the way of our people." Crab, have they been listening to the two Fem again? I look towards them, but they are concentrating on keeping the young one on Trif's back and do not look towards me. Normally the Lead would be the one choosing the path, but only at the general direction of the High Fem. That should have been Oofik.

I comment, "If you stay here, you will die. They have no reason to keep you alive. The Last City is emptying out."

"We are not staying." He turns and the others follow. He heads toward the ocean.

I whisper to Oofik, "What about the grumpf?"

"We have hunted them out in this area. They fear us now and keep their distance. We have made it easy for the new runners. Only the smallest ones will attempt anything. Only the smallest person is in any danger now."

They are nearly here. We had better see what they intend at the sea.

"Let's go watch." I hear shouting behind me. They are not being quiet about their attack.

"Are we in danger?" I shake my eye stalk no.

Leega asks, "What are those?" She points toward the water. The others are preparing crude boats made from what looks like grumpf skin and ribs. Sort of like the Hu kayaks.

Pasc tells her, "They float on the water. They apparently intend to cross the sea in these. Good, they are at least tying them together."

Gigger asks, "How will that help? It seems less stable."

Oofik comes in, "We have been practicing for some time. Some of the ones who joined us knew of this talent. Once we had enough skins and ribs they adapted them to this form. Works well I think."

I ask, "What about when the waves get high?"

"We can close them up so only our eye stalk and arms are exposed."

"What about the two Fem?"

"They are in double pods. Someone strong is with them and will do the work of moving the pod."

The others are here.

Oofik says, "I heard her this time. Strange."

"Won't be long before you will regret it." Pasc teases Sali.

Several try attacking us with swords. We don't bother turning around. The blades do not touch us. This of course confuses them. Eventually they stop trying and join us watching the others leave. They are quickly beyond all but the best archers. No one tries.

I turn to Oofik, "It looks like you have made your decision."

She shrugs, "Not hard. We have been together since nearly hatching. Besides, I am very curious."

Pasc adds, "That is the reason we allowed you to stay. A calm mind and intensely curious."

I forgot to close the portal!

We all turn and see several enter. When there is no one at the edge Sali closes it.

I scan the other side.

"Twelve went. They are in for a surprise. It will be some time before

the Streaker Clan gets there. They will be on their own for at least two small moons, maybe one large moon.”

“We could bring them back. No guarantee that the Clan will accept them if they survive long enough to be found.”

“Would you after the way they have treated us?” Oofik asks.

“Thirty people is not a large clan. Numbers may be more important than history.”

Gigger sneers, “But they know nothing of being out here.”

Leega laughs, “Neither do we. I know the ice chaser side, but not much of the sun chaser side. I have been given minimal training. I was supposed to join a wagon.”

Pasc tells the bad news, “You will be trained. It will be difficult. Some do not survive. We have chosen all of you. We believe you will succeed, but there is no certainty.”

We have an audience. The Last City people have been listening to our conversation. Sali pretends to be grooming herself.

She turns to the gathering.

“Run with the wind. Run towards the sun. If you don't you will freeze and die. It is unrelenting. The City is collapsing. You are no longer slaves to the High Females and the Council. You are slaves to the run.”

One asks, “You are the Sali?” She nods.

They all instantly fall to the ground. This is getting old.

The pods are well out now and not going straight across. The wind is pushing them sun ward. It will take longer, but it will be safer.

Sali pops out. Great. She has abandoned us to the hoard. I sigh and scan for her arrival location, then pop Oofik, Leega, Gigger and myself to the same location. Pasc arrives a moment later.

Gigger asks, “What will happen to them?”

Pasc tells it straight, “Most will die of injuries, some of the cold or hunger, some from disease.”

Oofik asks, “Is this fair?”

Pasc turns to her, “Was it fair to be held as slaves for countless generations by the Pure Ones and the Watchers?” So that is what they call themselves. We have only ever heard what the slaves call them.

Gigger asks, “You mean the Council and the High Females work together?”

“Yes. The Watchers were cleverly corrupted by the Pure Ones. All they needed to do really was offer them immunity from the 'collection' and to give them an easy life of leisure. This took some time to accomplish though. The Watchers were suspicious of the Pure Ones and

not inherently stupid.”

“Why did it take so long? I would have thought a few generations would have been enough.” Leega asks. Apparently she did not know.

“A hundred circuits ago if the Pure Ones had suggested it they would have easily seen through the offer and resisted. They have been mortal enemies for a very long time.”

I break in, “How long have the ah, Watchers been around?”

“Only about three hundred circuits. But to answer Leega's question, the Pure Ones reached this state by gradually pulling back from their attacks on the Watchers, letting the Watchers get comfortable and even attacking the Watcher's enemies when opportunity presented itself.”

Gigger asks, “Wait, I thought the Pure Ones were the enemy.”

“They were never the real enemy. Both sides were fighting for the largest share of the people to serve them.”

“Then the Watchers were a lie from the beginning?”

“No, they started as a group of people who wanted to be sure things did change for the better for the made ones. To be sure that the Pure Ones did gradually release control to the larger population of people. The Pure Ones argued that the people were not ready for self rule, but this was a lie. You are never ready as long as someone else rules. You gain knowledge through experience.”

“They needed thousand circuit Watchers then.”

He shrugs and then answers, “I told them, but few bothered to listen. Everyone votes self interest in the end. It happens gradually, but it happens.”

“Then are we always doomed?”

“No, eventually a crisis happens and the corrupt system collapses, like it is doing now. It had to of course. So much knowledge was lost just trying to survive the calamity. Now it is time to build again. Surprised it has taken so long though. This abusive system was stable for a very long time.”

“What finally did it then?”

“The tech was very good, but even it eventually had to fail. Their system was dependent on materials they could not replace.”

I add, “Oh and we showed up.” He smiles.

“What happens to them now?” Oofik asks.

“Chaos for some time. Eventually a new paradigm will be tested and work for a time. The cycle will repeat.”

I add, “Only we won't be here to see it.” He smiles.

Leega asks, “Will the Pure Ones survive?”

He shrugs, “Maybe for a time. They cannot survive without a slave force to serve them. There are some who still think the Pure Ones can offer them power. Old ideas do not change in one circuit.”

Gigger asks, “Do they present a threat to us?”

Sali laughs and nearly chokes.

“I guess not. This could be fun.”

We get solemn and I answer, “There are good times, but for the most part it is not fun. Having the fate of so many in your thoughts is not easy.” Oofik smiles. Not unlike being Lead or High Fem. She knows.

I ask Oofik, “Why you? You were doing good in the clan. You make a good leader. The people needed you.”

“They walk a different path. Pasc was right. Change is difficult for most people. The clan wants to return to the south and return to the way things were. They never wanted to go on this journey. They definitely do not like the three of you. Nearly two circuits ago I was an aft with Razzel. Now I am nearly Fem and with the four most interesting people on this world. I am not going back.”

“What about finding the clan we were hatched into? The ones who deserted us?”

“You said we would be trained in your abilities?” Pasc nods.

“Afterwards will be the time.” Sali, Pasc and I smile. They never learn. We had to learn the hard way too.

They come.

“Who?” Gigger asks, looking around.

I sigh, “Just over the hill are the twelve who went through the portal Sali left open. At least they are smart enough to run with the wind.”

Gigger asks, “And if they hadn't?”

Sali shrugs. I shake my eye stalk. Pasc looks away.

I then explain, “It is not our purpose to save everyone from their decisions. We are not slaves to make life easy.”

Oofik asks, “Then what is our purpose?”

Pasc bows, “To answer The Question.”

She smiles, “Then what is the question?”

“Why?”

She looks confused, as do Gigger and Leega.

I sigh, “That really is The Question.” I wave my hands around, “Why is their life? Why are we aware of it? Why does existence exist? What is it we are supposed to learn?”

“Is that all? One circuit max.” We all laugh.

Pasc, “And we have fun trying to figure it out.”

They come over the hill and see us waiting. They come towards us faster.

When they arrive the largest male asks, "Who are you and how did you get here? We saw you on the other side of the ocean. How did we get here?"

I ask, "Do you want to go back?"

"Back to where? The Last City? No way."

"How about the ones who went across the sea by pods. They will be along in about a large moon. Think you can survive till then?"

"What do we have to do?"

"Run with the wind. Eat anything you can catch and don't get caught yourself."

"Sounds like the inside." They smile.

"Running is harder out here. You can never stop."

Stop playing with them.

They need to figure out life themselves. Keep the north and south separate for a time.

I agree. Your turn.

I pop them all back to the north. I watch and see that they are disoriented for a moment, but then they see the others and join them.

I sent them a warning not to come south past the sea. Sali of course.

"That won't keep them for long."

Pasc shrugs, "Maybe a few tens of circuits. They need to rebuild almost everything. That will take time. By then the warning will seem a myth or superstition. It will be enough."

"I don't know." Oofik says, "They are so stubborn about the way of the clan. I don't see anyone changing in the south."

"The north knows there is tech beyond the way of the clan. They will not sit and wait. They will seek it out and learn."

Then they will come south.

"Oh yeah. They will come."

"The clans of the south will be slaughtered."

"That is normally what happens."

"Embrace change or die. Especially when anyone else is changing. Only takes one clan."

I ask, "I know where the ones who abandoned us are. You still want to meet with them?"

Pasc looks concerned, "They need to be trained first."

"After proper training of course."

Oofik looks at Gigger and Leega, "When do we start?"

Pasc laughs, “You already have.” He starts to run. We start running to keep up with him.

When did he become Lead?

“When was he ever not?”

Running

We run with the wind, making our way slowly south. The ones who decided to cross the sea in pods are on their own. I do scan once in a while to see how they are doing. They are going too far into the sun. Not everyone is going to make it. It is even possible that none will. It was their choice. I feel bad because it was Sali and I who convinced them to go north, but we also gave them a safe easy way to return. Change or die is often cruel.

What I don't quite understand is why they are abandoning Sali. I thought they thought of her as a prophet at least. A savior even? How do you abandon your savior?

It has been written before. Once the savior tells them something they don't want to accept they leave.

Probably right.

Training the three follows the usual course. What has been interesting is seeing what the progression of the abilities is in this species. Mind seeing is the first and not too surprisingly given the few who show it naturally, north or south. It does not fit my theory of need though. Most people speak one of two dialects. Not much need to understand others. The Hu on the other hand spoke thousands and should need TP, but it does not show until six or something. Cats all understand each other.

But no one understands us. We needed it to finally make all the stupid monkeys hear us.

That must be it.

You can't believe how hard we tried. They are just so stupid. Even the most obvious requests are met with confused looks.

Pasc throws a stone in Sali's path and she trips over it. He smiles. The stone suddenly shoots off towards Pasc but disappears before it reaches him.

“Hey, stop it you two. Not a good example for our students.”

The second level was scanning. The ability to look into the sun and then look behind you is not easy. Scanning helps tremendously which will improve as they progress.

Scanning also improved their ability to hunt. Seeing the crafters, leapers and sneaks hiding in burrows and under ledges then combined with TP to hide our approach really made it too easy. We never lack for food.

Level three is telekinetics. Now once they 'see' the sneak they can use

TK to remove the poor creature without even chasing it. There is a lot of grumbling over this. Somehow using deception was acceptable, but not even having to chase food is deemed unfair. It is decided that TK cannot be used to chase food. Acceptable for finding and retrieving metal and other non-living items of need or interest. Pasc makes everyone do the glass dye bubbles and moving themselves over creeks right side up and up side down. Height was a big problem. People suffer from fear of heights.

Roger and Yeesei follow a different path. Their level one is DS. No bubbles like the Ceph, but dimension slipping like the Cats and Hu. They love it. Reminds me of the Cats when they gained the ability. Streakers are even more of a nuisance now. They can really sneak up on you now and scare the freep out of you. Even Pasc wonders if we made a mistake and should continue to advance them. It was promised, but maybe a slower pace would be a good idea.

“I pray the next level is not PS. The only thing more creepy than what they are doing now is if they could pass through us as well.”

It was not. It was worse. TP. Now we can't get them out of our heads. There is serious discussion of issuing limiters.

“Please no more until they learn to behave.” Was a common expression. Pasc just smiled. Our three were not without their own teasing and attempts to get one of us. I can't complain. I suffered from both of them when I was learning the levels.

Half of the people on the pods did not make it. The two Fem did of course. They will sacrifice themselves to save the two no matter what. They learned nothing from their experience with us.

Pasc tells me, “Let it go Razzel. They made their choice.”

“I have a confession. I offered to save them twice during transit.”

He smiles, “You two huh? So did Sali and I. They made their choice.”

I don't think it was a choice. They felt compelled to follow tradition, even when it no longer made sense.

Leega comes up to me, “What is it with Sali? If you dangle anything in front of her she goes crazy.” I smile. “Lots of fun. We are all trying to distract her from our lessons now that we have TK.”

“She can't help it. The last life form she used was prone to this behavior.”

“Ah, the ah, last life form. Snow leapers. You people are strange.” Something else to contemplate.

“The Streakers are quiet. I wonder what they are doing?”

“Good question.” She looks around and up in the sky. Not visible. I

scan and find them in a large flock. Oh crab, they are coming this way.

I yell, "Incoming! Streakers, lots of streakers!"

Pasc tells everyone, *Now is a good time to practice your shielding technique.*

Oh yeah. They are not coming to attack us though. Roger and Yeesi are in the lead. They slow down at the last moment and attempt to land, but end up slipping off of our shields and nearly falling to the ground confused. There are hundreds of streakers on the ground looking up at us.

Want up! Roger shrieks into my mind.

"Fine. Come on up." He pops up without effort. All hell breaks loose as the others all try to claim a person as their own.

Sali says, *I told you it was a mistake to raise them up the levels.* She looks like one sad kitty. Amazing how that can come through in a very different looking shape. I make a cat toy and dangle it in front of her. She reacts and then figures out it was me and pretends not to have noticed.

"Leega told me they have been teasing you. They won't stop until you do."

I know. It's just so hard.

"Imagine how I felt when I first saw the Pure Ones? Crabs, I hate crabs."

It's worse, we are derived from them.

"Thanks, I had not really thought of that." But of course it's true.

Pasc asks, "How far are we from the home line?"

"I won't know until I see it. I did not have my abilities then and we were already off course by the time pest became sentient."

"I thought you might recognize some land mark by scanning."

"A lot looks the same in the region. Vast plains with small creeks and ravines. We have just reached the plain, so I would say we have a few more moons before we get there. Assuming we are still trying to avoid the locals yet."

Would be a good idea. They are not ready for a confrontation.

Pasc adds, "They have not made it part of their reflexes yet. It is taking longer than with the Hu or Cat. They adapted quickly."

"That is because both cultures are used to change. Changes in the Hu environment at least. If you are used to adapting and using your imagination to solve new problems it is easier. They weren't that bad really."

"Some positive traits. Too bad the end result is so negative." I nod.

Here everything has been the same for ten thousand years. Imagine if our past cultures had been that way. Oh, I forget, yours is that way.

“You are repeating what has already been said.”

“We run!” Pasc announces.

This upsets the flock of Streakers who chase after us. Roger and Yeesi are comfortable on top of us and the rest are still trying to find a perch on the empty people who are shielded like their lives depend on it. Does not stop them from trying. It has become a sort of contest. The one who can stay on will be the winner and claim their personal slave for life.

All Streaker want gifts.

I figured that one out thank you Roger.

“Last time the Streaker picked the person. This time I think it might be best to go the other way around.”

I agree. Listen up Leega, Gigger and Oofik. Pick one Streaker you want to partner with. And you do want to partner with one. No exceptions.

Given that we can live a long time, it also takes them a long time to decide. Roger and Yeesi help in the interview process. It goes amazingly well considering the players and the chaotic start to the process. Still it grows cold by the time everyone is satisfied. The rest leap into the air and squawk their disappointment, but don't bother us further. Sali refused to have a Streaker on his back other than Roger. Thus we welcome Purp, Wassah, and Anag to our clan. Ah, a further request was made not to give them TP just yet by the four legs.

“We run” Pasc announces again finally. Good to stretch. Of course it begins raining, hard. Oh well, good practice extending our shields over our partners.

“Ice, it is beginning to hail even!”

“Finally, something I can relate to.” Leega has been lonely for the cold I think. She does not shield and Purp gets quite a beating.

“Hey, Leega shield Purp at least. Not fair to a sun chaser to endure this. You don't want to have to find another Streaker less than a small moon after bonding with her.” She pouts but shields appear. Most of her body is still exposed. I have not seen her this happy since joining us.

Oofik is the quiet one. Gigger we can't get to stop talking. He wants to know about everything. I go up to Oofik, “You good?”

“Quite a run. Even you have to admit that. I feel like we are getting close. Hard to tell since we did not spend an entire circuit on any of these lines. Don't those mud flats look familiar?”

“You worried?”

“We have changed. I like that.”

“But they probably haven't.” She nods.

“There is a saying among our kind. You can never go back to your home line.” She sighs.

“I am just curious to see who survived. There were so many dead. Most already half eaten and unrecognizable.”

“I did not see any Fem, we know they survived.”

She sneers, “They always do. They would not be so special if there were an equal number of males and females.”

“Ah, but then all the lines would have to support an ever increasing number of people. They can barely support the current numbers.”

“Which explains the occasional confrontations. Accidents and old age do not do enough.” I nod.

“There are no easy solutions. Usually the first thing you think of is in fact the worst choice.”

“But not always, so sometimes it is the right choice, but you never know until a long time after wards.” I smile at her conclusion. Given enough time in most cases it does not even matter what the choice was. I don't want to give them that way out of the bag this early in their training though.

They did it! I can't believe they did it!

“What Sali?”

Haven't you been watching them?

“Who?” I look around us and go a quick scan out a few K. No one around.

They buried the two Fem. The pod people did it!

Oofik looks at us, “I can't believe it.” She walks away shaking her eye stalk. I don't know if this a good thing or bad. I scan for them. Takes me awhile to find them. I have not been watching them. They have made good progress in this direction, but are one third what they started with.

I go up to her, “If you had staid you would have been dead.”

She looks up at me, “I know. One decision. Life or death.”

“Scary isn't it?”

“Only now we make those decisions for others.” I nod. The moment every TK stresses over.

“This can help.” I hand her a staff.

She looks confused.

“Take it and you will understand. Our secret. It will only work when you grasp the area here.” Confused Oofik take the staff and her eye stalk rises when she understands.

“We all have to go through this Oofik. You are fine. It is a necessary part of the learning. The rest will have their time. If they don't they will

not progress.”

“Then it is possible to undo the abilities?”

“Yes. Most of the time this is done voluntarily, but occasionally it becomes necessary. Everyone is different and try as we do, we still can't predict with certainty how someone will be affected by the changes.” She nods.

“Thanks. Nice to know.”

It is another large moon before Oofik and I are sure we have arrived on our home line. By then the threes are fours. Life reading and healing this time. A useful skill considering how many times someone is injured, but also hard to understand given our natural abilities to self heal. I will have to ask who set this species parameters when we get back. I am guessing Pasc had something to do with it. Just a gut feeling.

Killing Field

I would rather not have found this place. We were looking for the home line, but it is the one we have burned into our minds forever and therefore easy to recognize. Sali does not really remember it, being in egg at the time, but Oofik and I do. Not a nice feeling.

“This is where it happened?” I nod. Oofik and I stand to one side as the others go in. We can both scan will enough from here to know we really don't want to go in. Bones and carapaces scattered on every surface and in every crevice, both people and leaper. In those rare moments we do get to rest a favorite past time is to carve designs into each others carapaces and spines. Finding a design you have added to another on the dead remnants is not a nice feeling. Two circuits ago these were living beings. Running, joking, sharing with us. Many grew up with us.

“Any idea why it happened? Why so many leapers decided to come this way at just the wrong time?”

I turn to Sali, “No idea. Fem have their own reasons for choosing a hatching location.” Sali looks away. I am certain she engineered this somehow. What does not make sense is how she was conscious of being TK from before hatching. Especially given how long it took me.

Pasc calls us over, “Come here you two.” Indicating Oofik and I. We look at each other and then slowly make our way over.

Sali is already there looking down at something. I scan not wanting to be surprised, but see nothing unusual for this location.

When I arrive I see what must have been a depression for an egg.

This is where I was laid.

“How can you know that? There are other depressions.”

“But all of them have been trampled. This is the only one which has not.”

I sense metal below the surface and brush aside some of the loose dirt to find a small metal knife.

“This was mine. My first knife as a young one.” I drop it back into the depression.

Leega asks, “So where is the clan from here?”

Oofik answers, “This site was only a little way off the main trail. Once we find the main trail we run to the sun's edge and then wait. They have to come to us then.”

“If we don't find them on the way there.” Oofik nods to Gigger. Both Gigger and Leega have had to develop a lot of muscles, learning to run as

much as they have to do this far south. They must be sore all over, but do not complain. Of course now being able to add healing to their list of gifts helps, but that was recent.

There is a clan of sixty a short ways away.

I whisper, "I know. Let the three find them though. Good practice."

I look to Pasc, *Stealth or open?*

Let's wait and see how they react. They have become too dependent on us.

I notice a stick poking above a crevice and go over to investigate. It is the remnants of a clan pole. Not a big one. The kind some clan might carry to make a portable presence. I try and make out the heavily eroded markings. I think it was from a rival clan. Our Fem must have chosen this spot to try and make it part of our clan and take it away from the rivals. Once you hatch a clutch the ground become sacred and rights can be claimed. Probably some aft scout found the stick, reported to a fore watcher who reported to the Fems. Classic response dictated their actions. Traditions are not always good.

We leave the killing field and make our way to the main line and begin our run sun ward.

Their aft scouts have seen us coming and are running back to their main group. Our three have not said anything. Just outside their range. If they had used their eyes instead of their ability they would have possibly noticed them. A common mistake. I am especially upset with Oofik. She should have noticed.

Pasc calls a rest stop in a horrible location that would be very hard to defend.

I don't want to lose them. I tell him.

Nor do I.

A good scare will do them good. If Sali had a tail it would be up in the air.

I look to Oofik who is rummaging in her pack and smiling. Ah, she knows this is a bad location. Good. She pulls out several weapons. Not something I have seen before.

I ask her, "What are those?"

She looks at me smiling at the same time the objects rise. A tri-bladed dart with hooks and serrated edges. Nasty.

"Naja root. Don't touch."

Gigger asks, "What did you bring those things out for? We are alone here. As we have been since running south. Never thought a place could be so empty."

Oofik calmly states, “We are about to be confronted. Best to show we are not easy prey.”

Leega wakes up from looking at something on the ground. She looks around and scans as well.

“She's right. They are coming. Looks to be about sixty people. Ten of the largest in the fore.”

Gigger is frantic, “I don't see or scan anyone. Where are they?”

Oofik shakes his eye stalk and Leega points to the hills around us. All around us. It takes some time before Gigger finally sees them.

Leega takes up her staff, but does not touch the limiter area. She got hers soon after Oofik did. She then gets up, stretches and starts to prepare a fire pit from the loose dried material close by. She sets a fire going quickly using a lens. Lucky the rain has stopped and the wood is not saturated yet.

We have each been assigned to one of the three. I have Oofik. I would normally not chose a friend, but it was felt she would accept no other. Pasc has Leega for the same reason, though they have not known each other long they were both part of the Watchers and share a common language and understanding and finally Sali has Gigger because she likes the rebellious types. We do not talk about each others students to give the student some sense of privacy. Normally there is no privacy in a clan, but being TK is not normal either.

Here they come. Just the ten and two smaller ones. They must feel we are not much of a threat.

Oofik comments, “Two to one is normally enough of an advantage.” She smiles.

Don't forget the other forty eight. They have surrounded us just in case.

Gigger is nervous. Not a good sign, but he has not been in many confrontations yet either.

“Normally no one is hurt. Enslaved, robbed, and told to leave, but not beaten or killed. Just keep calm.” And be prepared.

Gigger notices, “They are not risking their Fem. Not all are converging on us. There is an honor guard staying with them. So the odds are only four to one instead of six to one.” He calms down and looks to Sali, Pasc and I for reassurance. I don't want him doing something stupid so I try to look reassuring.

“They are close enough to see now, but I don't recognize any of the lead group.”

“These would be fore watchers and I was never close to any of them.

Might explain why we never became fore and were left behind.” Might be right. I just wanted to avoid pain.

“They must have merged with another clan. How many survived the leaper rush?”

“No way of knowing. We were a pretty good size clan before and we know four of us survived for a time at least. Five if you count Sali, whom they don't know about.” Now just three of us left.

Gigger asks, “I would like to try an experiment. Sali would you get up so they can see you?”

I just look like a small Fem to them.

“Not if you talk to them.”

Fem do talk.

“Ah right. If they don't know your history, they don't know what you are.” Leega smiles at Gigger's conclusion. She is becoming more protective of Gigger. I wonder if they have mated, though I do not pry.

Pasc starts roasting some fresh caught leaper on the fire that Leega built. Sali starts to roast her chunk. The rest get the idea and bring out their portions and start to roast theirs on sticks next to the fire.

The clan leads arrive and stand next to us.

I offer one my food stick. He accepts it and takes a bite then passes it onto the others. They each take a bite until it is finished. A respect thing, not because they are hungry.

So far we have seen no clan flags or other identification markings that tell me who they are. Oofik and I were part of several clans as the clans we were with merged and split. The latest was Broken Sword clan. It had been awhile before everyone could get to a forge and fix their gear.

Finally one asks us, “What clan are you?”

Pasc tells them, “We are a split of the Streaker Clan and have not determined a new name yet.” He raises his hand and signals the six Streakers to come down. With a sudden rush and nearly silent approach they arrive and perch on us and then glare at the strangers.

“Streakers are not worth the trouble to eat. Don't you have to worry about them taking the young?” Good question as we have no young with us.

Gigger answers, “If you don't eat their young, then they don't eat yours.” That brings looks of surprise from the twelve.

Leega calmly adds, “Make good clan members. They give us advance warning of the surroundings and help us hunt. No slackers.”

“No slackers,” one of them automatically responds. It is easy to tell they are not excited about the idea of mortal enemies being friends. It is

then that I notice that Oofik's Yeesi has metal spurs and a protective metal beak as well. That might be seen as a threat, but I am guessing Yeesi asked for them so she could still hold the edge with the other streakers when they are raised to the same level. Or maybe she got them when they were alone in the north.

Oofik asks, "Seen any sign of the Broken Sword Clan."

"Friends or enemies?"

"They left five of us for dead. Three of those are before you. The last three we picked up on our journey."

"Does not sound friendly to me." Oofik shrugs.

"Just curious what happened."

"Four Fem and two males, one old and one aft. Not safe for travel."

"One Centurion, One Quarturion, One Fem by egg hatching, One fore watcher's nightmare, One Fem by bassic root and one norm Fem." Oofik.

Gigger adds, "We were over thirty when we started. We have been over the north sea to the Last City. From there to the City north of there, nearly at the top of the world. We have killed three High Females and returned. It is high praise that any of us are here." Killing High Females might not be thought of as a positive trait. Most try and protect their Fem. How would they feel about Females?

"I am thirty circuits and my friend here is hundreds of circuits. This Fem killed two High Females by herself. The most evil despicable creatures ever to walk this world. The second Fem, well, look at those teeth around her neck. Those came from fish in the north sea so big they ate several of the clan and countless northerners. She killed the first one without training or help and then later many others. Collected those teeth personally from her kills. The last, the little quiet one is faster than an unseen streaker when provoked. You really don't want to provoke her."

Gigger goes last, "I am no aft. I am a free person who chooses freely where I go and who I go with. Any one of us could kill all of you before a sneak sneezes twice." How did he learn to boast like that? I am impressed. I would have gone softer though. No need to provoke just yet.

"I don't know about Females. Myth if you ask me. You two look like underfed Fems to me. And you," indicating Gigger, "could be felled by a two circuit." He huffs up his size to look bigger.

Without looking behind him and not making a sound, Gigger TKs twelve stones in perfect trajectory just past the eyes of each of them and then accelerates them to near supersonic speed. The stones make visible clouds of dust in the hillsides in every direction some distance away. The two smaller ones flinch and move back. The ones on the hill, watching,

stir. He could easily have hit them, or even their Fem hidden behind everyone else. He was insistent on constant practice. I think it was because of Sali, and because he had the least fighting skills among us.

“If you want a more direct demonstration I would be happy to give you many times what I just did. Oh, and I am the slowest one in the group.”

“You did not even move.” He is shaken, but trying hard to hide it.

“You did not see me move. There is a difference. We did not come all this way by being death eater food.”

“Stories are easy to tell, especially when confronted with a superior force and no bargaining position.”

Oofik says, “That what is your story? It had better be good. We are not patient people.” A more subtle boast.

Without our help it is unlikely the three could take on a clan this size just yet, but of course the clan does not know that.

“No story. Just passing through. Anything we can do for you?” Too sudden a reversal.

“The Broken Sword Clan's position would be a start.” I add. I really am not patient. I would never have made a Lead.

One of the others spills it, “Ice art is my guess.” Meaning they know exactly what happened to them and probably were a part of it. Or they are trying to take credit for it to make themselves look more fierce.

Oofik gets up fully, throws his bones on the fire and starts to dampen the fire. “We run with the wind.” In a loud voice. The rest of us immediately gets our things together.

We are well into the band. If we are not the last band I would be surprised. These people came back to see what kind of threat we were. You don't want an enemy at your back. Going sun ward is the only way to see if Broken Sword clan is still on this line. Letting us go first also means we will always be in their sight. Or so they think.

My thoughts exactly. Triple time Oofik. I see her smile at the thought. Oofik likes to run and TK enhanced running is a wonder to behold. Sali goes without saying. Once a Cat always a Cat.

The Streakers alight and shriek before disappearing ahead of us.

The twelve move aside to watch us pass before taking a stance to follow us. The ones on the surrounding hills prepare to run as well.

We run!

And we do. It is not possible for any normal person to run this fast and the three are not even sprinting yet.

We leave the others in dust and we quickly reach level with the ones

in the hills above us on either side, including the Fem. When they realize we are nearly even with them they begin their descent to the line to intercept us. Of course we just run faster and get past them easily. I scan behind me and see the twelve have dropped from exhaustion. They will lose status for letting us get ahead so far.

We visited one killing field and avoided another. For the moment.

Gorge

Oofik asks, "You know where they are?"

I smile, "Am I allowed to say? You don't want to cheat at your training do you?"

She smiles back at me, shakes her eye stalk and does not say anything.

I don't know where they are. I scan one clan near us, but I don't know if any of them are from our clan or not. I just don't remember well enough to know someone from a scan alone. I even check out carapace art. I carved some of them, you would think I might recognize something, but I haven't yet. So many of the shapes are the same. Classic themes repeated endlessly.

I do remember the line though. I ran it fourteen circuits.

Oofik does too.

"The group behind us is catching up, but keeping their distance. You remember what's ahead." I nod. A large gorge. A larger clan can assist each other getting across, but a clan of six. Not possible.

"They are going to try and trap us against the gorge." She nods, but smiles too.

We reach the gorge soon enough and simply float across. We are on the other side enjoying a snack when the last clan arrives to see us waiting.

Oofik shouts at the top of her breathing sack, "Let us know if you need any help."

"I hope you are enjoying teasing them. Making enemies is not our way."

Ah, but teasing bullies is. The only reason they did not take us back there was because they were not sure of their advantage. They will try again when they think they have the advantage.

Oofik adds, "They checked us out, then let us go, knowing what is up ahead. Even with our speed they knew we should have been slowed down or stopped here. Then we would have been facing all sixty, not just the twelve."

Leega adds, "Now we have given them several reasons to wonder about us. Gigger's stone throwing, our speed and now how we got across so quickly."

Gigger adds, "The ideal would be if other small clans did strange things as well. Then they would begin to wonder about themselves. Like they were left out on a secret." Pasc smiles.

Fantasy is not reality.

“Oh and that is why Cats spend so much time in dream time.”

What's a Cat? She pretends not to know.

“I want to know why they were not upset by either Sali or Leega. As an aft I was not aware of the prophecy, but surely those fores and their Fems would have heard of it.”

“Could be because we were further north when we heard of it. Besides, it really only affected the City people, not the people of the lines. Who cares out here what happens to the City people?”

“They why didn't they wonder about me? I doubt very much they have seen an ice chaser before, especially below the Northern Sea.”

We sit watching them on the other side of the gorge. They appear to be making camp and are not attempting to cross. Of course they will have to eventually. The sun waits for no one.

Oofik announces, “Another clan ahead of us has spotted us. Their scouts are reporting back.”

“Good eyes Oofik. Glad you are in our clan.”

“Squeeze play. They are waiting for the second clan to drive us into the gorge. Probably share in the spoils.”

“For six people and streakers? We aren't worth it. There must be some other reason.”

“Something is happening on the other side.”

“The Fems are coming to the edge it looks like. Wearing covers. That is strange. I thought only we northerners were that wasteful.”

“The covers are coming off. Look like Fem to me.”

“Not the last one! She is pure white!”

“She scans a Fem, not a Fem.” Leega announces.

“There is a difference?”

They all turn towards Sali and I. I can feel them scanning us even though they know that is not polite. I growl at them and they stop.

“There is a difference. So, they have their own Sali and so are not worried about our poor little one. I don't sense any TK though.”

Leega asks Sali, “We know you are special, but I thought that part of the prophecy was that the one born Fem had to have at least the mind seeing ability.”

“We have been to the City. Not all the Females have it. In fact none of the Females in the City had the ability. Only ones like you who somehow were saved and recruited by the Watchers.”

“So, is this just a normal Fem then? And why all white?”

“Or one who has learned to hide her TK well.” Pasc adds.

Leega grasps her limiter and briefly blinks out of TK space. Yeah, that could do it too. It takes at least a five or a six in this life form before they could build one though.

The sun ward ones are coming back fast. They have done this before.

“Why so much effort for six lost people? We are hardly worth the effort.” I ask again.

Pasc says, “This has gone beyond normal training. We could just go skyward and evade them. Or . . .”

Or we could start to fulfill our mission.

“Our mission has nothing to do with the people here.”

Consider it good practice.

“You three are keeping secrets again.” Oofik is angry.

“This goes way beyond us. Way, way beyond.”

“Well, if the level four solutions are no longer our limit. How about changing us all to white. That ought to confuse them up.”

Pasc says, “Excellent. Make it so White Clan. Throw off your covers and let them see us tall.”

I make myself and Oofik white all over. Gleaming white. Sali does Gigger. Leega is already white.

“At least I have people who look like me around. Feels much better.”

Let them see us.

We go towards the cliff of the gorge so the Fem can see us.

They notice right away. There is a lot of scrambling on their side. I notice the ten large ones talking with the Fem, who then talk with the white Fem.

Roger and the others take off. They fly across the gorge towards the Fem encampment. The four not raised yet hold back and Yeesi and Roger go in, popping all over. This confuses the archers trying to shoot them down.

Bad People. Bad People die!

This is repeated over and over. The white Fem seeks cover and is surrounded by her guard, both fore watchers and the ten. Roger and Yeesi pop right into them. Right next to the white Fem herself.

“We need to pop her out of there before Roger and Yeesi kill her.”

Pasc nods and the white Fem appears before us, very heavily shielded by Pasc. Anyone who can count can see there are now seven of us on this side. One several lengths west.

I told the birdies to return.

“I would not call them that. They look nothing like birds.”

They act like them.

“And you know why. Don't push it kitty.”

“Now you are talking, but I don't know what you are talking about. Maybe it was better when you kept it to yourselves.” Oofik looks confused.

Roger and Yeesei return and head straight for the white Fem.

“Hey you two. Stop! Or I will stop it for you. I still have higher status. She will not harm us. I promise.”

The white Fem has been watching us, but has not said anything.

Sali goes up to her. I can tell he is talking to her, but does not include us. The Fem bows down to the ground.

Then Sali says, “Just so we understand each other I am a full Fem who can see minds and talk. Swallow that one.” Sali turns back towards us.

She is a mutant. That's all. Nothing special about her at all. Fem even. She hatched white and they made her special. Made her Fem long before normal time. That is why she fooled everyone.

“Fooled me.” Leega says. I can see her scanning the Fem. Sali is right. Just an immature Fem. Never should have happened. Maybe that is why they kill all the strange ones. These people are too apt to think something different is something special and worship it.

Gigger laughs, “Well if we can be white, then she can be . . .”

I shake my eye stalk and change her to a normal looking, but small Fem. Pasc pops her back to her people. They immediately move away from her. She will have a hard time now, but it is better than having clans prey on each other because of the delusional instructions of an immature one.

The other clan is here.

We are surrounded by at least a hundred. They are heavily armed. We are heavily shielded and have nothing to fear from them. I sense no TK abilities at all. And I am good enough to sense them no matter how well they hide it. Just to be sure I put a nano limiter on each one. No one moves when I do this. A sign they really are not TK.

“How many times have we seen this setup?” Pasc looks disgusted.

Too often. I was hoping when we chose this world that things would be different.

How could it not be? They are made from the same thirteen. There is limited variability even with infinite combinations.

Gigger asks, “What do we do now?” Good, he is not showing nervousness this time.

Finally a large Lead comes forward.

“You serve the White Fem?”

Gigger steps forward acting very much the part of Lead, “She is neither Fem nor White. You have been deceived.” Just as he says this we all change back to our normal pattern. Well, except for Leega. She now looks like one of us, dark that is.

“Thanks.” She says quietly. Pasc nods.

“The gorge people are gone from the rim.” Oofik points down though. I scan them. They are coming across. They have to sooner or later or die.

“Her followers will be here soon.” Oofik tells the clan surrounding us.

The Lead sighs, “Run with us. We run with the wind.” As he turns, the clan turns. They run.

Pasc shrugs, “We run with the wind.”

We still have to find the Broken Sword clan.

They may be dead.

Maybe.

Deceived

Five are not coming up the gorge and one remains on the rim. Easy enough to guess who that is.

Leega turns her head back briefly. Her color has changed, but her eyesight is still set more to the ice side. Her healing ability will eventually correct that. Though there have been blind TKs who never needed sight. I still enjoy both, even if these eyes are very different from the sets I remember. Multifaceted and very durable. Melanin in the cornea means that when you face the sun they darken automatically to prevent damage.

“You and Oofik make your way among them. See if you can recognize any from your previous clan. I sense no one ahead of us and only the gorge clan behind. If they are still on this line, then they must have merged with this clan.”

Oofik says, “If they merged, they merged when they were weak. They will be in the subservient positions.”

Gigger asks, “Could I help by asking people if they were part of the Broken Sword clan?”

Oofik and I both turn to him and say, “NO!” at the same time. Leega smiles.

I then explain, “You can be a member of only one clan at a time. You are never to mention any previous clan associations. You are dead to the past. And NEVER mention intentions of joining another clan. That is a fast line to the edge of a cliff.”

“Then what are we? Are we part of this clan now?”

“We are still our own clan. We are merely sharing the line for the moment. Only six, but they have seen us do things they cannot do and we did them a big favor I am guessing.”

If we had not done them a favor, they likely would have made us slaves. We can't push it too far. They are talking among themselves about us.

“Ah.”

Streaker egg eaters. Do not trust. Roger looks directly into my rear eye.

“I know Roger. I know. We can't fix everything in one circuit.”

Big advantage have Streaker in clan.

“I know Roger. We do appreciate you and the others.” I hand him a scrap of leaper. That quiets him for the moment.

Pasc announces, "Split up. Stay shielded. Find out as much as you can about them. What we are is not to be shared." That should be understood, but I am guessing was said for Gigger's benefit. He tends to act first, think second.

All the same, Gigger and Sali go off together and Oofik is staying near me. Leega eventually decides there is safety in being with Pasc. Even I don't like being alone among strangers, though I have certainly done it enough times. Well, not on this world. Crab, stay on task.

You find the lowest people either at the front as sword bait, or in the rear picking up what people have dropped and being sword bait for whomever is following. In a clan this size as many as twenty percent can be slaves. Usually this is temporary. If you prove yourself loyal and reliable, then you are eventually accepted. You will rarely make Lead, but being with a clan is better than being alone.

This makes the most dangerous time is when two clans meet. If there is a group of disgruntled slaves, they will attempt to join the other clan. If a scout sees another clan likely to intersect, orders are given to pass out extra food rations or longer rests are allowed. A feeble attempt to placate at the last moment is usually seen through. Of course there is no guarantee that the next clan will be any better. Could even be worse. You don't convince anyone you are loyal by jumping clans.

We run for some time checking out the front runners, but see no one. Trouble makers end up in the front, so I guess it is a good thing that we find no one there. Also have the shortest life expectancy.

Once we fall back to the trailing edge the people start to look more familiar.

"I see someone." Oofik gets me back to present.

"Who?"

"Isn't that Fehrer? Crooked eye stalk and that gash on his side that never healed properly." He points to a group working to carry a large cooking pot. Running with three others is very difficult when carrying something that heavy and fragile.

We go up to the side of them and try to get noticed, but they are concentrating on the ground before them.

"If we carry the pot, then we can talk with them." Oofik suggests.

"Or we can wait until the next rest stop and not draw attention." She nods.

Two Fem next to them is likely to make them very nervous. Best if we back away.

We fall back. Several other groups of low enders go past us.

“That's Hass I am sure of it.”

“And that must be Arah.”

“I am not seeing any others. Just three? From over forty to our four and now three more. That was an effective way of eliminating competition.”

“And they thought they had gotten rid of us. These three were just out of the slave line when they were with us. To end right back in it is cruel.”

“Also explains why we did not recognize them right away. Who bothers to learn the names of slaves. If we weren't low end afts when this started it is unlikely we would know them either.”

We run for some time, nearly to the sun edge. Finally a rest is ordered. Of course that is rest for the full clan members. The slaves still have work to do, setting up cook stations and filling pots with water and edible materials that are handed to them by everyone else. I would rather hunt that cook too, so I guess that is why they end up doing it. A latrine is marked off. Very efficient operation.

As guests we are expected to fend for ourselves. We have plenty of food in our packs and have no need to hunt. We hang back with the slaves and other low enders. This means we lose status, but we also don't intend to stay. Last thing we need is for them to start fearing or worshipping us like they did the white Fem.

Gigger comes up to us with Sali sensing the food pots anyway.

“I never noticed before how many scars and imperfections everyone has.”

“And we don't.” He nods.

“Effect of the abilities. Once at a higher level you can learn to fake scars and such, but yes, for now we stand out for that reason alone, if anyone is looking carefully enough.”

Pasc comes up with Leega, “They are looking. Trying to decide if we are an asset or a liability.”

“It is what we would have done in their position. We found three of the Broken Sword clan.”

Leega offers, “The clan following us are called the Death Eaters. Very nasty group. I won't go into details, but everyone fears them, or used to. The ones we are with now call themselves the Sweet Water clan.”

“Coerced by the Death Eaters to assist them.”

“Yeah, and everyone here hates them.”

Pasc asks, “But they don't know us and wonder if we are as bad or worse? A little shy around anyone who is all white or can make themselves that way.”

Gigger looks humbled, “My idea turned out to be a bad one.” He is almost trembling.

Sali, have you given him a self limiter yet?

I saw no need until now. I will take him aside and explain. I really thought he would be one who would never need one.

Silly kitty, we all need one climbing the levels.

You didn't.

I had very good instructors and went through a great deal before I become TK. In a sense I did go through it.

Sali TPs something to him and they go off a short distance.

Oofik says, “We had better talk to them while we can.”

“Always bring something to share.”

“I have some extra teeth that would not fit around me.” She smiles.

“One each. We only want information, not buy them out of their current position.”

“Why not?”

“One, we are not adding any more to our clan. Two, we don't know what part they played in leaving us behind. Three, we don't know what they did to get evicted from their previous clan. Need I go on?”

“You could look into their minds.”

“When you can do that, then you can decide if it is right to do so.

Until then I say it is not right. We have all done things we are not proud of. They are attempting to start over. Let them.”

Oofik looks thoughtful, “Understood. Good thought.” What did you do during the circuit when I was gone? I do not pry.

They are assisting serving the stew. We all have our own bowls, but since we are guests we do not eat with the rest, but there is nothing that says that we can't help. Oofik and I side up next to the three.

“Hass, Arah and Fehrer.”

They look at us and freeze. I scoop some stew and serve the next person. This thaws them enough to go through the motions of serving people.

“You're ah, Fem. You should not talk to us. It is forbidden.”

“We are not joining the Sweet Water clan. We have no status here.”

“We were hoping you could tell us what happened.”

“It has been two circuits.”

“Quick version is fine.”

They look at each other and somehow Hass is chosen.

“Someone found a clan marker. The Fem decided it was time to lay eggs and it was the perfect spot. They broke the maker and threw it into a

crevice. Everyone formed up as usual. We were assigned to bring food and water to them as they sat on their eggs. We handed it to the fore watchers who tasted it and then handed it to the Fem. Most of the time we were going back and forth to the fresh stream or stew pots. While the three of us were there filling sacks with water the leapers attacked. We watched in horror as it happened. We have never seen so many. In our positions we are not allowed any weapons, not even to defend ourselves. There was nothing we could do but watch.”

Arah continues. “While we were watching we were attacked from behind by the Death Eaters. Avoid them if you can. After beating us up some they took us to a gathering area. There were several others from the clan already there. Scouts I am guessing. They killed those while we watched. They were not nice about it, if you understand. We were immediately assigned to helper tasks and we did not ask questions.”

“When this clan met up with them a deal of some sort was decided and we and ten others were given to this clan. They still ignore us, but at least we are not beaten as much.”

Oofik offers, “We figured out about the trap after we got back, but did not know they were taking people also. Four of us survived for a time. But there are only the two of us now. As you can guess from our current ah, physical form we have been through many adventures. I brought you some gifts.” He hands each one of the a large grumpf tooth. I noticed also she did not mention Sali. Just as well. No need to make this complicated.

“These are teeth from a very large fish that lives in the Northern Sea. It eats any creature it can catch near the shore. Yes, they eat people too. Lost two people that way while I was nearby.”

“How did you get these then?” They look on in shock while at the same time we all continue to serve.

“I managed to kill a few.” Thank goodness he has put his trophy belt away.

“We can't take your kill trophy. That would not be right.” Arah says.

“I don't need them. No one here has any idea what they are and therefore have no real value. I can only carry so much in my pack and I would rather carry leaper meat.”

They look at each other, “We are only allowed sneaks we hunt ourselves. They tend to seek out the food stores and we get them then.”

I laugh, “We have eaten our fill of sneak stew. Lots of sneak stew. Mix it with any lie flat low gatherers and pound it flat, then roll it up. You can even cook it near a fire on a stick if they let you. Either way, it is much better than sneak alone.”

They smile. Hass answers, "Thanks. We are finished serving. We will clean the pot at the creek now. You should not be with us. Run with the wind."

"Run with the wind."

We make our way back to the others.

I have to ask, "What did the Death Eaters have on a clan over twice their size?"

"That is curious isn't it."

"There is the White Fem, or fake white fem."

"Not enough. If they believed her, then they would have done anything to merge the clans. If they feared her, then they would have run."

"Hostages."

"Yes, a definite possibility. We know the Death Eaters attack or have others attack when a clan is most vulnerable, during hatching."

"Then why did they not tell us all this when we came to be with them."

"Not all one hundred and twelve are of the Sweet Water clan."

"Some are Death Eaters."

"That name suggests they kill and then eat their enemies."

"And therefore would have no second thoughts about eating the Sweet Water hatchlings."

"It sounds like we can do a second favor of sorting out who the spies are."

"Wouldn't they know?"

"They were forced to take in captives. Which ones were spies and which were innocents?"

"Ah, I see."

"Maybe your three could tell us?" Gigger suggests.

"Maybe, though they are given almost no time off to talk to the others."

"Stay with people you know. Don't take chances." I nod.

A fore comes up to us, "It is desired that you come with me to talk with the ruling council."

We all start following him.

He notices, stops and says, "The aft must stay behind."

"Then we all stay behind. We have no secrets in our clan." Oofik nearly laughs when Pasc says that.

I TP him, *Don't worry. When you are ready you will be told.*

The fore looks confused, but when he sees we are serious he allows us

to proceed. Of course we are stopped again at the outer circle and again at the inner circle. He does not take it well, but we left him no choice and we make sure everyone understands we are the ones confusing everyone.

It might be best if Gigger keeps quiet.

Already told him. Stupid monkeys. I smile.

“Yeah, Cat society makes so much more sense.”

The council consists of eight Fem. One is clearly the High Fem. Her ornamentation is much more elaborate. Lots of shiny copper bits. I always liked the color of tarnished metal better. Ceramics still in my mind. There are a double complement of fore watchers and of course their Lead.

He is the one who addresses us, “We would have your intentions.”

Pasc takes the Lead role for us as usual, “Passing through. We have what we came for and no need to bother you any further.”

“What was it you came for?” Curiosity not good.

“Information on a clan that is no more. It happens. No revenge sought.”

“You were a member of this clan?”

“No. Friends of mine were. But they aren't any longer. Happier where they are.”

“Clan jumpers are not tolerated.”

“They thought their clan was dead. Now we have proof. No clan jumping involved.”

“What did you do to the Death Eater clan?” Ah, the real reason for the questions.

He plays innocent, “Did we do something to them? If I remember right, they were on the other side of the gorge.”

“We saw what you did to the White Fem.”

“She was neither white nor fem. Just a small Fem before her time. They made her out of a two circuit male is my guess. Part of the game to intimidate other clans. Doubt she had any status other than slave. As I understand it, the five nasty Fem who were serving her did not make it across the gorge.”

“You did this?”

“They did I believe. Once they understood they had been fooled, they administered justice. Simple really.” He smiles.

“Do you seek retribution against us?”

“For what? For being victims of the Death Eater clan? Were not your own kidnapped by the clan and held hostage to make you do their bidding?”

The fore nods.

“If you feel any guilt about it, then do better now that the threat is gone.”

“There are still members of the clan alive.” And you want our permission to kill them, or did you want us to?

They want us to. They are too scaredy cat.

“Are they not victims too? Was not the entire clan deceived by the five and one?”

He goes up and talks with the council. Beyond his authority to answer the question.

Before he comes back, Pasc addresses the council directly. Not allowed and bad form. They are visibly shaken.

“We have come from across the Northern Sea. The Cities are emptying out. They understand metals and other materials much better than any of the people below the Northern Sea. Once they cross the Sea they will rule everyone they meet.” That gets their attention.

“You can continue to play your games. Collecting revenge points above what is owed and thus encouraging them to collect revenge points against you. It can go back and forth like this until the City clans arrive and make you all either slaves or meat.”

“How long do we have?”

“A few circuits.” More like fifty circuits.

“How do we prepare?”

“That is the hard part. You have to change. More than you can imagine.”

“It would be better to be slaves or meat then.”

“Your choice. I just felt a moral obligation to warn you. I have done my task and I am now free to leave.”

The Lead signals the others. We are surrounded by archers and swordsmen.

“And now what is your intention?”

“You will teach us what we have to know and then we will not have to change.” Simple logic, wrong people to try and force.

“And if I knew what you needed to know would I not be able to defend myself now?”

“Then you will be slaves like the rest of your clan has become.”

So stupid.

I feel Roger pop out. I look and see Yeesi has as well. Sure enough a moment later I scan and see a huge horde of streakers coming our way. They outnumber the clan five to one at least.

The Streakers on our students take off and scatter in all directions. A few of the archers take aim, but the fores hold them off. We are surrounded, they are likely to hit one of their own. They return their aim to us.

Three, two, one, now!

The streakers and Streakers hit the clan from all directions.

I send out the command, *Don't kill anyone, just scare them and take off again.*

A few make a couple of passes anyway.

“Impressive show, but not much of a threat. We have the young secure.”

“They are adept at killing adults.” He looks straight at them without emotion.

“Many would die.”

“You have already suffered much. Is it worth it for six?”

“We only have your word that the north is coming.”

A person pops into the space between us and the council, facing between us.

“Oops, wrong direction.” The frightens the council. The fore watchers take up the space between.

“Ah, there you are. Commander Pasc, Sargent Whip reporting as required.” I smile. They are good. I have not sensed any TK activity outside of our group and the occasional level one TP. Left over Watchers.

You trained them well.

Not really. They have been hiding in slow time after Sali was born. Sensed her right off. She got enough of a glimpse though to know to come north.

True.

“Sargent Whip, this council does not believe the north represents a threat to them.”

“Sorry to interrupt. Just reporting that those strange ants have arrived on the Southern Plain. They are building a gate Sir.”

“How far along are they?”

“Hard to say. Not used to our ah, day night cycle here.” He smiles. Half these words are not going to be understood by the council.

“Very good Sargent. Carry on. We will be there shortly. Start setting up the complex around them. No one enters the gate until we arrive.

“Understood Commander.” He sort of salutes Pasc. Well, as best he can in this form.

So, the real game begins. Wonder where Bug is?

Yeah, it would have been good to be complete first. I answer.

Pasc turns back to the council.

“Your answer? Fight us or let us go?”

The Lead goes up to the High Fem. There is a discussion. A heated one. Hard to accept change.

Finally the Lead comes back.

“Go.” He turns his back on us.

Pasc announces, “We run with the wind.”

We pop out some distance south of the line we were on.

“Give them something to think about did you?” Gigger smiles.

“Maybe.”

Leega asks, “What are ‘thants?’”

“Pests we will make use of to complete our assignment.”

You have said too much Razzel.

“What assignment?”

See.

Pasc intervenes, “There are two assignments really. One for you and the others that I have assembled and one just for the three of us.”

“What is our assignment then?” Oofik is getting frustrated again. I can't blame him. But how do we tell them we are really beings from beyond existence?

“First, our assignment takes the three of us off this world. We are experienced in this area. To train you would take more time than we have available.”

Gigger is confused, “Wait, didn't you say that you saw Razzel hatch? And didn't you see Sali hatched? How can you be experienced off world?”

“Existence goes beyond this form and this life time. We are specifically trained to retain past knowledge.”

“Or remember it after a trigger.” I shyly admit. Pasc smiles.

Leega is curious, “So, we were once some other creature and had entire lives we don't remember?”

“Sort of. It gets more complex than that, but basically that will work for now.”

Sali has gone to sleep, but Roger is listening intently.

He finally asks, “R'gr too?”

“Definitely.”

“R'gr pee'pel?”

“Possibly.” He puffs up and stands taller on my back.

What happens with the Streakers?

Pasc looks at me.

“You hid your TKs well. I should have seen them even in slow time. Have I lost so much?”

“No, I have learned much in my time here. I have built on what I learned before.”

“Apparently. Do you think this clan of yours could benefit from Streaker assistants?”

He nods, “Most definitely.”

Oofik asks, “We have been able to make some contribution!”

Definitely. She is listening at least.

I ask, “I sense groups scattered all over the southern bad lands.”

“They will condense in a moment to one location. Let's run for a bit while they set things up. There will not be much time to run once things get started.”

“Wait, what is our assignment?” Gigger asks and surprises Oofik that she had not asked.

“Not much, just rule this world.” He starts the run.

Oofik runs with me. Leega catches up to Pasc and poor Gigger has the task of trying to get Sali moving.

“What did he mean rule this world?”

“You are being given and trained by us in abilities that normal people do not have.” She nods.

“I knew there would be a responsibility. This is it?”

“Yes, but not as you know ruling others. Forget everything you know about ruling a clan. The best TKs are those who are not noticed.”

“Then how can you rule?” She is shocked.

“That is where the training comes in.”

“If that is true, then the examples I have seen so far are far from this method.”

“Very true.”

“How come?”

I shrug, “Everything is happening too fast at the moment. Several concerns. We have to get to where the 'thants are working so we can begin our own assignment. We need to get all of you trained before we go. We also need to begin the process you and the others will complete.”

“How many others?”

“I count three hundred and twenty six at the moment, counting the three of you. This is likely to change. You will be able to add more to your number as needed.”

“You mean as we die off.”

“Well hopefully that won't happen.” I smile.

“We all die. I accept that.”

“Yes well, one of the gifts of joining our clan is that unless you are in an accident because of a lack of attention it is likely you will live a very, very, long time.”

“How long?”

“I think Pasc put in over twenty five million years last time.”

“What's a million?”

“A hundred, hundred hundreds.”

“Crafter waste, that's a long time.”

“And he was not the record either. Some lived four times that or more.”

“Without the fear of death, how can we rule effectively?”

“That is a very wise question. You are doing well. Scary huh?”

“I should have died at the hatching ground, at the grumpf attack, at the sea crossing, and who knows when/where else. That is scary.”

“Yes.” Crab this is hard even to watch.

“You said you will be leaving us. To do your assignment?”

“Yes.”

“You will return?”

I shrug. I don't know and I don't want to make a promise I can't keep.

We run for awhile.

Later we hunt leapers and sneaks and have a good meal. It will be our last in the 'wild' for some time.

South

“We need to open a portal to the southern side.”

Gigger looks confused, “Why can't we run?”

“At the center of rotation you would have to run too fast.”

“We can run fast.”

“There is not much meat to eat.”

“We hunt very well now.”

“I am in a hurry.”

“Hiding our abilities and not learning about new lands is less important than being in a hurry.”

Pasc looks at him with some anger, “In this case yes. The three of you need to be properly trained. That means being with others who have already been trained or are in training. Your assignment is not an easy one and time is short for it as well.”

Leega says, “You mean the Cities emptying out.” He nods.

Oofik asks, “You don't expect the Northern Sea to hold them back long?”

“No. They will be very hungry for the numbers that are coming out. They will be inefficient and wasteful. They will not be caring of the land and life. And, remember, some of them saw how the Streaker clan got across. Some will be desperate enough to try it. Some will succeed.”

“How long?”

“I expect an attempt to be made one or two circuits at most. Only a few at first, but all it will take is one person returning to tell the story and then thousands will come.”

“But why? The north has lots of life.”

“They will strip the land bare because they don't know any better.”

“Then they will come here and do the same.”

“And kill everyone in the process.”

I add, “That is why you need to be trained now.”

“What will do? I mean, how will we prevent them from destroying the world?”

The High Females have already done that. Now it is just survival.

“Her highness is awake!” Gigger bows and Sali gives him a swipe.

“A wise evil person taught us that conflict is necessary for growth.”

“Otherwise we become fat and lazy.” I nudge Sali as if by mistake.

She growls at me. Again.

Pasc shakes his eye stalk and opens a portal.

“It looks the same on the other side. I thought you said the south was a wasteland?”

“Oh it is. This is just far enough south that when we run we won't scare everyone.”

“We scared the last clan.”

“And why was that? Think.”

Leega answers, “Because you wanted to impress on them the importance of being ready for the northerners by scaring them good.”

“But we lied. The northerners can't do all that.”

“Are you so sure that by the time they get that far south they won't be able to?”

I add, like I am always having to qualify his thoughts, “They may not be able to do the exact things we did, but they will be able to do things that the southerners have not seen before. Remember the bang sticks? How much different are those from what Gigger did?”

“And not all of the Streaker clan is dead. That part will match.”

“We run!” Pasc announces and starts to run.

“Oh well.” I go after him.

The rest slowly follow, then use TK to catch up.

Watch it. There are locals about. Don't show them what we can do. We are just passing through to the south.

Won't that be seen as strange?

We will be seen as strange no matter what we do. How many have seen a northerner, which we are from their perspective.

Do they talk differently? Do we have to learn another way of speaking again?

The chatter goes on until Pasc runs fast enough that we are all panting to catch up. No energy left to talk.

I TP Pasc, *Aren't you worried about the Portal?*

The pattern is that it opens at sunrise and closes a short time later. Here that means once a circuit. Add to that the time it will take to build the structure with the hot and cold cycles disrupting things.

So you are not expecting anything for at least a circuit.

Correct. It may take more.

Pe'ple come! Pe'ple come! Both Yeesi and Roger announce and return to us with a pop. They are within scanning range.

Oofik puts his tooth necklace on and carries his bone staff and his TK staff. Yeesi has her full metal ornaments on.

Leega has her yellow cover again. Pasc must have made it for her.

Gigger has nothing extra, but is very clean and proper. Every spine is

perfect: erect, sharp and shiny. Even his eyes seem brighter and crystal clear. He has his sword, made in the City and it gleams. I also notice that his pack is perfect as well.

Me, I look as I always do. Half dead from exhaustion. I am trying to blend in, not stand out. Sali, like Gigger and Pasc, looks more like me. We each made our choices.

Who wants to play leader this time? Pasc asks. Strange not being him.

No one volunteers at first.

Finally Leega does, "I will try. I need the practice. Everyone full shields. I do not sense any TK in them. They should not be able to sense it." Good for checking them out first though.

"Do we know anything about them?"

Pasc just smiles.

"Scan and evaluate everyone. They will be here soon. Do we offer them gifts or food? How are they sorted out? Genders? Males, Fem, Females, and young ones."

There are only five of them. Sali shakes her eye stalk.

"I sense hunger. We should offer them food."

"Negative. It will be proof we have been hunting on their line. Best if we avoid them completely."

"Not if we offer them dried grumpf. They don't have those around here."

"Unless it tastes like something that is around here."

"Gifts? Oofik, do you have any more teeth?"

"Did anyone scan them around here? They are covered in teeth."

"If you had done that then you would know they are nothing like us."

"Stop!" Leega understandably is getting upset.

"Sit. Now!" Everyone sits.

"Sitting is about as non threatening as we can get. Oofik put your hardware away. Gigger mess yourself some." She throws some dirt at him. She then rubs her own yellow cover in the mud and shakes it off before putting it back on. Pasc smiles and does the same. I shrug and do nothing. Yeesi complains about having to put her shiny things away. Is she with egg? I scan. Yep. Looks like three. Ouch!

The five, two males, two females and one young fem, I am guessing a one circuit, pass us by with wide distance. They never even acknowledge us.

Pasc starts laughing.

Then he explains, "In the south it is rude to approach uninvited."

"How does one invite another?"

“Start a fire large enough to be seen from some ways away. If you don't want company, then you make the fire very small, only large enough to barely cook the food.”

Gigger looks around, “There is almost no dead wood around us. How does one gather enough wood to make a big fire?”

“That is why most people are not invited, nor expect to be.”

“If someone comes across a lot of wood, say from a dried creek dam, then a party ensues?”

“That is pretty much it.”

The three start concentrating. They must be scanning for wood. At least it gets quieter. The Streakers take off. I am guessing they are looking too.

“We need to go south people.” Pasc turns down a line angled to the south. The others come back and follow us.

I can scan much further than they can. No wood of any amount for quiet some distance. I am guessing the best way would be to collect as you go and eventually, maybe after a large moon or two, you might have enough for an all clan meeting.

As I collect pieces I tell Roger to arrange them on my back, sort of woven into the spines and each other.

Of course Roger tells everyone else and soon he and the other Streakers are seeking out pieces and adding them to their respective piles. It becomes a contest to see who can build the largest pile.

“Hey, are they trying to break our backs?” Gigger complains and everyone laughs.

What would really be nice to go with all this wood is enough meat to make it worth while. Sali of course.

“Trust me, the wood is the important thing.” Pasc says.

Within a few small moons we come across another clan line. Not as many lines as in the north. Again, it is a small clan. Seven this time. Same number of adults but a two circuit and two new hatchlings.

“Quick start the fire!” Leega is very excited.

They already know how to start a fire using TK, so we have a roaring one soon enough.

“They don't see us!”

“Roger, you and the others go up above us and make lots of noise circling around.”

They shriek at high volume and we see the clan pointing at them obviously confused as to why streakers are gathered at this spot. Leega goes to a spot where they can see her and waves to them holding a stick

with flames. They get the idea and come towards us.

Within moments it seems, for we were all excited about meeting them, they are before us. They too have stacks of wood on their backs, though not as large as the piles we had now set beside the fire. They brought forth meat they had collected as did we. I admit some of it was duped, but they would not know the difference.

They do not say anything, though we are free with our speech. They seem not to mind, but I have to wonder if we have offended them.

They do not understand anything we have said.

“Not polite to pry Sali.”

I can't help but look our guests over. They are different from us. The spines are less pronounced with lots of softer almost hair like growth. I am guessing that it helps keep them warm. We have all noticed it was cooler, but as it was still within our normal tolerance nothing was done. Pasc had said that the south was an ice wasteland further along. Not surprising then that it begins here. In fact this might even be the upper edge of their range. They would feel as strangers as well. They may think we are the normal ones for this area.

Leega moves towards one fem, male, young one group, then sits in front of them. I am not sure what she is doing and apparently neither are they. They watch each other for a bit, waiting for someone to move. Finally the young one struggles to be free of the parents. It then becomes obvious that it is seriously damaged. The upper carapace has been crushed and the right foreleg broken and healed badly. Too big to be still on a back, it looks out of place. Surprisingly the parents have not abandoned her. Is she someone special? I scan her but sense nothing TK wise.

The parents let the young one down to the ground and it slowly moves towards Leega, who does not move a finger.

Ah, I feel psiotic energy flowing. The carapace begins to reform to it's proper conformation. This takes time, especially for someone as new to the healing ability such as Leega.

I sense a second and then a third energy flowing. I turn to the others and see both Gigger and Oofik concentrating. Leega starts to look nervous. I shake my eye stalk.

Let Leega. She will not be able to control what happens if all three of you work at once. Later we will teach you how to work together.

They stop, but continue to watch closely. Leega sighs and concentrates again.

I am sure Pasc is giving her instruction and guidance, so I stay out.

Too many voices would just confuse.

The fire is low by the time she is nearly done and exhausted. There is a little bit left to do, which Pasc quickly finishes. I always recognize his TK signature.

The young one gets up and literally bounces around the dying fire to the delight of the parents and the appreciation of the other parents and young one. The other young one investigates and soon both are running around the our temporary camp.

The fem parent gives a sharp whistle and they both scramble back to their parents. The healed one looks at the male parent wondering I suspect if she needs to ride any longer. The male bows to us, then the others do as well. They begin their run, with the newly healed one running beside them.

“That felt good, even though I could now rest for a large moon.”

“It gets easier with more practice.”

I tell Pasc, *They need practice working together.* He nods.

He then tells them, “If the young one had been harmed they would have been honor bound to harm Leega to the same extent. Had anyone interfered with that, then an all out war would have taken place.”

Gigger, “Whoa. Scary thought. Almost better to leave things alone when you don't know what is going on.” I smile.

“I still would have done it.” Pasc smiles at Leega.

They saw how much of yourself you sacrificed. If one of the three of us had done it quickly, then there would have been much fear, not appreciation. You did well.

“I think I am going to die. A complement from Sali.” I feign collapsing.

Sali shakes her eye stalk.

“Let's run.”

Running with the wind does not seem exactly right here. The air is cooler, but the wind is less too. We maintain a respectful distance from the natives to this area. They go at an easy pace, letting the healed one get her legs. The mind will take time to adjust to the new strength. She could break it again easily if she is not careful.

“It is so humid. I feel the cold seeping into my bones.” Gigger complains.

You want cold, try crossing the Northern Sea at the ice edge.

“I like the cool air.” Leega announces. Her coloring is more like us, but her shorter more numerous spines make her almost like the people here.

Oofik announces, "We are coming to a lake. I can smell it."

Of course all of us have already seen it with scanning.

When we arrive we see several groups spread out around the edge of the lake. I have failed to notice where the group we spent time went. They could be missed it, or gone ahead. I scan more widely and sense small groups throughout the region.

"How come they only gather in small groups?" Gigger asks.

Oofik looks around. "Either limited resources or dangerous to be in larger groups."

"Or both." Pasc says. Crab.

Be on the alert then.

Oofik purposely wades out into the water and then stands there waiting. At least he is shielded. Even so, it does seem to be a risk.

The groups closest to us are soon seen to be watching us. Probably wondering why we are doing something so stupid.

The danger is not large.

"Stay shielded Oofik. There are death eaters in the water that will attack living flesh if they can."

He comes back out, "If I can't kill and eat them with a spear. No point in wasting time."

Leega notices, "There are no fish or anything else in the water that I can see clearly. These death eaters are small and thorough." I nod.

"Water is nice and warm though. Explains the mist near the edge."

I notice Pasc with a small box held to his eye stalk. I scan it.

"Crab Pasc, you have to bring one of those here?"

"I have always had it oh observant one. Have images of our entire adventure."

It has the typical carvings all over it. Would easily fit in as a good luck piece in the north. Well disguised.

We decide not to stay, having just done a camp a short time ago.

They watch us go, but do not interfere.

"A novelty in an otherwise dull existence."

Oofik rubs Gigger, "You would not have said that a circuit ago."

Gigger laughs, "No I would not."

Pasc starts to sing, "There once was a fore from far north of here."

Oh please, not singing. Sali howls or more likely yowls, but they would not understand that.

Everyone starts laughing.

"Gorge ahead."

We follow the edge of the lake to a set of falls that release water into a

deep gorge that veers to the north. I scan and see it goes north north west for some time. Finally it comes to an open plain where the water quickly evaporates under the intense sun. Soon, with the failing light, it will turn to an ice plain.

Pasc asks, obviously already knowing the answer, “Anyone near by who could see us?”

“Won't they wonder what happened to us?”

“People come and go all the time. Accidents happen, they move to a line north or south of the current one, or another clan absorbs them.”

“I doubt there is any clan absorbing here. All the groups were small.”

Leega builds on Gigger's comment, “I am guessing plague. People are afraid of each other. Of getting too close to anyone who might be sick. Being in a minimal group improves your chances. It must have been fairly recent. They will go back to larger clans once they feel the danger has passed.”

“It was over a thousand circuits ago. People change too slowly even here.”

“Are they in danger from the north as well?” Oofik asks.

“Eventually. The band that cannot run fast enough to survive is wide. But after a few hundred circuits or a thousand circuits, they will find a way. Balloon or airplane or something.”

Gigger of course, “What's a balloon?”

“What's an air plain?” Oofik asks.

“That kind of training comes later.” I inform them.

Just accept that they will come. And the people here will be eliminated or absorbed.

“Their lives are quiet and peaceful. Seems a waste.”

“It is a natural progression. Intelligence reaches a critical level then one group gets ahead of another in their material understandings. This gives them an advantage for a time. They force the lesser groups to join them. Eventually another group comes up to topple the first. Finally they reach too far and their entire species collapses to await the next.”

“Any way to avoid it?”

He shrugs, “For a time, but time is like the sun. It runs out no matter how fast you run.”

“Even for us?”

I answer that one, “Eventually.”

“So the fear of death is only postponed.”

Such wusses.

“Oh the great brave kitty!”

Pasc TPs something to Sali, but does not include me.

“Without the fear of death there is no point to life.”

“Does this mean you know the answer to The Question?” I ask teasing Pasc. He shakes his eye stalk.

We float across the gorge. Only a few see us that the three have missed. Good to start a story with. Their lives really are quiet dull.

Suddenly Oofik turns and goes down into the gorge. I guessed wrong.
Come on down I need help.

Strange. I go down after her. The walls are nearly straight up and down. Lots of low gatherers peeking out of rock crevices. Oofik is about a third of the way from the bottom hovering near the cliff face. I go down to be beside her. She is a complete Fem now. The healing seems to have sped things up. I look to where she is looking and see a Fem and two hatchlings. Two?

“I have been trying to explain that they need to come out if I am to take them to the topside.”

“They don't speak northerner.”

She looks at me like I said the most stupid thing.

And they are afraid of mind speak too if that makes it even more obvious.

“I could pop them out.”

“That would be helpful.” But at that moment we hear the most horrible snarl. I look below and see a very strange creature looking up at us about to spring.

“Shield now!”

“Ahead of you. I only pretend to be fearless.”

The creature jumps and runs right into our shields hard. Stunned it drops to the ground, shakes it's head, no eye stalk like us, circles around and jumps again far faster than I thought it could. This time it collapses on the ground and is not moving. I don't know for how long. I pop all of us to the surface.

I set them on the ground gently.

You are safe now.

Oofik is looking over the edge.

“It is waking up. That is one tough critter.”

“Did you see the razor sharp teeth on it?” She nods.

“Makes grumpf look like kitty cats.”

I am stunned, “Who told you about cats?”

“Sali of course. Says they are the greatest creatures to have ever walked a world. I don't believe a word she says.”

I laugh so hard I think I am going to pass out. Soon everyone is laughing. I finally am able to reach into my pack and remove some dried meat to hand to the three.

“They need water more than food. I think they were there for some time.”

“They are very lucky.” I pull a bladder of water out of my pack. No, it was not there a moment ago. I improvised.

Pasc and the others finally notice we weren't with them and come back to see what is going on. Oofik is still watching the creature. I scan. Apparently it does not know the people are gone. It jumps up and claws the opening repeatedly.

“A vohg. Nasty isn't it?”

“How many of those things are there?”

“Enough to keep the people here afraid most of the time.”

“They would be better off in larger groups.”

“They normally hunt in packs. They like the gorges because it takes people time and energy to get across. Very vulnerable time.”

“They could follow the gorge north to the plain and then come back south.”

“We are near the northern edge of the ability to run fast enough. Not a time to veer north. Faster to go into the gorge.”

Yeah, if you feel lucky.

“What's south?” I ask, already knowing.

Gigger wakes up, “Ah, waste, that gorge goes on forever. As far as I can scan anyway.”

“Level four is, ah ten clicks.”

“What's a click?”

She is saying you can see further than that. Sali points south.

“Never forget your given senses.”

Pasc then turns to the three, “Ahna fa leas. Patriss enoy.” They bow and start their run.

Leega laughs, “I should have known you would know how to speak southern.” He shrugs. Of course he does, even if he just read their minds to learn it.

Only one of the hatchlings is hers.

“That happens.”

“Makes me wonder what happened to the others.”

I look at Oofik, “Do you really need to guess?”

Cute little vohgies.

“Everything needs to eat. Let's run.”

“Wait!” Gigger yells. Pasc stops and turns around.

Gigger goes over the edge and disappears. I mean I can't even scan him. Anag shrieks and flies in circles around where he disappeared.

“Did you raise him without my knowing?”

Pasc shakes his eye stalk.

I did not sense a DS incident. There must be another explanation.

Gigger comes back up over the edge. “You have to see this!” He goes back over the edge. Anag lands on the ledge looking at us.

We rush to the edge before we lose him again. I see him disappear into the short cave where I popped the three from. Oofik goes next and he disappears as well. Yeesi now shrieks and joins Anag on the edge.

“Curiouser and curiouser.” Pasc says. “All Streakers stay here. If we don't return get the others south of here. They know about you and will call you down.”

Rabbit Hole

The hole does not go in a short way, it goes in a very long way. Once we get in a short way I can no longer scan beyond our surroundings except in the direction of the entrance.

“Have you ever seen something like this before?” I ask.

No, and I have been all over the universe.

Nor I and I thought I knew everything until you arrived a couple of K ago.

“Ha, ha. Wish I had access to the Directory right now.” Pasc nods looking very concerned.

I can only scan the surface of the obstructing substance. Very interesting. Solid metallic hydrogen? At room temperature? That's not possible.

It also means that if something goes wrong this side of the planet is gone. Lots of 'thn shield material as well. It is like the walls are made of some sort of super non sentient 'thn. I feel no psiotic mind though.

“You are hiding from us again.” Oofik of course.

“Believe me, if you knew you would die on the spot from fright.”

That quiets everyone.

Looks just like carved stone on the surface. Definitely made, not natural though. Lights come on, but the strange thing is I can't tell from where. Everything appears to be illuminated evenly.

“Best adaptation of ray tracing tech I have ever seen. Beautiful.” He pulls out his box again to record it.

TK seems to work fine, just confined to within the walls.

“Won't your clan be worried about you? You have disappeared from their perspective.”

“I warned them before I came in when I told the Streakers not to follow. I drop out when I go slow time as well. They are used to it. The location where I disappeared will be recorded.”

“And won't come to rescue us for a very long time if something goes wrong.” He shrugs and smiles.

“It changes ahead.” Gigger and Oofik compete for Lead position.

We come into a chamber and freeze.

Empty, but the walls are carved with a very intricate pattern. A half dome in shape.

“Hey, I can't TK any more.” Leega announces.

“I can't either.”

“Nor I.” They all turn towards us.

Behind us is a sound. I turn towards it.

A crab comes out, a Pure One. I quickly scan it. Male this time. Not like the males we saw in the north though. This one looks intelligent.

He plays with a device he is holding and out comes sound that changes, starts and stops and then finally comes out as a voice.

“I don't understand. Three of you are near the top of my ability to read and the other three do not register at all.” Good. I have not lost it.

“We are in a limiter field.”

He looks up, adjusts something on the device.

“Yes, sorry, but I have to be careful.”

“You can turn it off. We won't hurt you.”

“We have heard that before.” Before? How many fours has he seen?

Have you lost any of your students over the years?

Yes. Three. Assumed they went rogue. Never found any traces. Only three in the last three thousand years is not bad.

This explains them then.

Found it. Sali announces. The limiter field goes down. This freaks the crab. I hold him in place.

“He is going to die of a heart attack. Let him go Razzel.” I do.

“Not possible. This is the best neutralizer ever made by anyone.”

He drops his instrument and it shatters on the floor. Yep, carbon and gold innards.

We can all see minds. Just tell us what you want to say.

Abs! The three of you burned out my instrument. What are you?

We are either your worst bad dream or your salvation. What, is up to you.

I don't understand.

That will happen with time. It might help if you told us your story.

I sense others here. This is a colony. The strange thing is that we are not where we entered the cave. We are several thousand kilometers away. A near perfect portal implementation.

He looks shocked at this.

No, not possible. You can't know where we are.

We are still under an invisibility cloak.

Don't turn it off. Allow them their privacy. I don't want the rest of the clan appearing here trying to figure it out before we do.

I can still show them we know where the weak spot is. Sali reaches down with his right foreleg and it goes into the floor and stops about mid joint.

The male comes scurrying over and looks carefully at Sali's leg as she pulls it out again, wondering what is so interesting.

So it IS possible! I knew it.

Some chattering occurs. I scan his mouth. The sound is hard to localize, but it matches the vibration of the mandibles. Interesting. The Females never made a sound.

He has called others.

An invisible panel hidden by the intricate pattern opens and two others enter. One male and one fem.

Do it again please. They are both holding instruments.

Curiosity. Give them something new, but don't do PS again. I don't want them figuring it out. Private TP from Pasc.

I have an idea.

Both instruments dissolve into water and rain to the floor in a gush.

This makes them jump back with much chattering.

Good.

Thank you.

All three are now looking at us.

If you will begin again with your story.

They look at each other, then the fem answers.

We are the descendents of the Steering Council. It was our ancestors that brought our world to this state. We share in the shame of their wrong doing.

May I ask why it was done in the first place?

Our sun was about to go nova. It in fact has. We were able to confirm this three hundred and six original year units ago. Approximately three hundred and seventeen circuits.

They were trying to save your world. No one can fault them for that. The fact that it failed, or nearly so, just means it was impossible, but not that it was not worth attempting.

Thank you for understanding.

I am curious. *Why are you still here? Your abilities are clearly enough to have left this world.*

They look at each other.

A male answers, *You know far more than a normal ab would know. Your abilities surpass all that we know. We have many questions as well.*

We will not teach you our ways until we trust you, if then. We won't trust you until we know your story.

You are correct. We could have left. There are many among the stars who left before the tragedy. We did not have enough, ah, transport, to

move everyone. We had to try and save them. We are still trying to save them. We too can leave any time we wish, but choose not to.

You do realize that very few Pure Ones remain?

There are only nine of us here and one other. The rest are dead.

We left a much larger number in the north.

You have been there recently?

Less than a circuit ago.

There is only one Pure One, the rest are an abomination. If we were only concerned about the Pure Ones, we could all leave. We are concerned about all sentient ones.

And you are very curious about the ones sun ward from here setting up a City without means you understand.

I did not think that thought. He turns to the other two who apparently also deny it.

But you cannot deny it either.

No. Your abilities would help in defeating the One who is determined to destroy us all.

The one responsible for the abominations.

Yes. They call themselves Pure Ones, but they are not. They are no different from the abs.

We were all made by genetic manipulation.

Yes. But their evil side was enhanced in order to prepare an army to attack us.

Why are their abilities so much less than yours?

A device beeps and the fem looks at her right most leg.

The analysis is complete. It is projected that these three are capable of completing our project by themselves without any help from us.

This entire room is a sensor! This is not the way to engender trust!

We had to know. We suspected it might be true. One of you is the one seen teaching the others. She points at Pasc. Sali growls.

"If you are going to exclude us from everything, then please send us to the surface." Oofik asks.

"You heard everything."

"Hearing is not understanding."

It is not safe for them. They should be with the others. Sali and Pasc look at me.

"Fine." Their shield prevents me from seeing clearly in this dimension. I enfold space around me, figure out where we are, and send the three to the training camp being set up near the Ants.

You three are very scary people.

Glad you are calling us people now instead of abs.

We are sneaks compared to you.

Close.

“They are ramping up the power to the dome. Do it Roo!” He screams

I twist all of us out to a dome of my making. A now hallow of granite.

The granite that was here is now filling the dome completely. I then pop us to the camp.

Camp

“You did not stay long. Why did you bring them with you?”

I shrug, “Not willing to kill them outright. The dome is now full of rock. They would have been crushed by the displacement.” A group of fives leads them away by TK push, not daring to touch them.

“Granite to be more precise. Good call Razzel.” Pasc is much calmer now. He calls after the fives, “Be careful with these two, their ancestors killed three of our clan. Strip them of all tech and scan them to the quantum level. You would not believe the tech we found with them.” Their leader nods.

I told the Streakers where we are. It will take them awhile, even with their short range DS to get here. They are pairing up to bring the non TKs with them.

“They are smart.” Oofik smiles.

“That was only two of them. What about the others?”

“I am not too worried about the ones in the complex. We need to find it all the same though.”

“It is not where we were?” Gigger looks confused.

I explain, “No, we saw the dome of course. Only a little bit of support area in addition to that. They used DS portals to get around. They seem to be a very suspicious and paranoid group. The complex is likely to be very spread out and in non obvious locations.”

“Which brings me to my one worry.”

“Who is in the north?” He nods.

“I have been here a very long time and I did not know of them. But what is it about the one in the north that scares even these Pure Ones?”

“If they didn't want to be found, why the cave entrance?”

“A cave entrance watched by the vogh.”

Pasc says, “It was a trap. The people needed to cross the gorge. The vogh were placed there to frighten them to the cave entrance. Once in the tunnel the curious would go in further as we did.”

“Where they could bring them to the dome and examine them. Why?”

“They have been underground unchanged for ten thousand circuits. They would need to sample the population from time to time to determine fitness. My guess they were worried about the decline of the people on this line. They may have had to step up their schedule.”

“What schedule?”

“They were planning on trying to adjust the spin.”

Sali looks up surprised. *Yeah, they could be about to kill everyone. I do not trust their abilities.*

“I have a question. You have explained the idea of the multiverse. So why didn't you just move us to an alternate world to escape? Wouldn't that have confused them even more?”

I shake my eye stalk, “No. They know of the dimensions, but more importantly, there are no other worlds running parallel to this one.”

Pasc explains, “That is because this world is not where it is supposed to be. Their sun was going nova. They needed to move it to an entirely new star. Chances are every sun in their multiverse was likely to go nova at or near the same time as their own.”

But then something went wrong. They were not intending to end up here either.

“Not to mention the lack of spin. This sun is not so bad, a little on the red side, but otherwise fine. The problem is that they either forgot or did not know how to compensate for the spin. Even if they could not get an exact day right even a few dozen days per circuit would have been enough to prevent the need to run. It would have been annoying, but we all could have lived with it.”

“Ah, except there would have been no need to make us this shape then. I far prefer this form to the crab form they are.” Pasc extends his arms and legs out. Much better in my mind too.

I need to go. He pops out.

“You mean if they had gotten it right, we would have all looked like them?”

There are three waiting for us to finish. One of them must have told Pasc something.

“Yes, what is it?”

“We have rooms prepared for you to rest.” That is not what caused Pasc to leave.

Gigger laughs, “We don't need rooms.” Leega smiles and Oofik looks horrified.

“The sun is high now. We do have some time to rest. What about your 'thants?”

They look very nervous.

We then hear a monstrous roar, “What!!!” Apparently Pasc did not go very far.

Escape

“We are too far behind.”

“We lost too much time avoiding the vohg.”

“What choice did we have? You try running fast enough with a yearling on your back.”

“I did for the last small moon. Now it is your turn.”

“I'm hungry!” She says weakly.

“I know, but we need to get warm first. It won't be long now.”

The snow is getting worse. I can barely see the sun in front of us. Running from the vohg by going this far away from the sun may have bought us time, but death by cold is only mildly better than death by claw. They will still be ahead of us somewhere. I hope we have gone far enough south to avoid them. Good thing they avoid the cold by staying closer to the sun. Takes a lot of food to keep their huge bodies fed. Trying to stay warm only makes that harder.

I check the belly of our youngest. She is getting colder. She has not developed enough body fat to stay warm. The only good is her body is helping to keep me warm for the moment. I can't think about her now. I need to keep moving. Some of my heat may save her.

“Why are we running? The sun will be here even if we stop.” The three circuit is such a whiner. Was I that way when I was his age?

“But not in time. You are succumbing to the cold. Keep moving. Keep moving. If you stop you're dead.”

We are going with the wind at least. Feels wrong, but we will never get warm if we don't get back into the sun. I just hope the vohg will not be waiting for us. I hope we have gone far enough south.

“I think we have gone too far south. No matter how fast we run the sun does not appear to be getting any higher. Look at it just sitting there.” I don't bother. I am so tired and hungry. The one circuit on me slips off my back and thumps to the ground. Both of us kneel down to check on her.

“She is not moving. We need to keep going.”

“I know, but can't I mourn even for a moment?”

The three year snidely talks back to us, “If you stop you die.” I want to hit him hard, but I lack the energy even for that. Instead I cover her body with snow and dirt. Maybe it will keep the death eaters off of her until the sun does it's work.

I cannot tell you how far we have traveled. It seems endless. I have

stumbled so many times my legs are in constant pain and are heavily bruised. Healing cannot occur without food and we can't stop for food.

"Angle to the north. This is not working." I suggest. He does so. He must be as tired as I am. Neither of us is thinking much.

We only go a short distance when suddenly he disappears. I see his tracks suddenly stop in front of me. I look around carefully but do not see him. Then I hear his voice.

"I am down here. Some kind of cave. It is warmer inside. Come on down. We can wait in here until the sun returns. Might even be sneaks or others inside if we look.

I see his eye stalk come up through a small hole in the snow and then his arms brushing aside more snow. The three circuit and I begin to help. We soon have a wide enough opening to see what is a strange looking cave entrance. I don't care. I scramble down. Even just outside the cave I can feel a difference in warmth.

Once we are inside we all fall asleep instantly.

I awaken to a vicious growl of a vohg!

"Quick, further into the cave."

"We will be cornered." I whisper.

"Maybe we won't be seen or it won't enter. Outside we are a meal for sure." I nod and the three of us slowly make our way further in, being careful not to make any sound.

"There is light up ahead. Must be another way out, though I did not see it before."

We round a bend in the cave and see a bright sunny patch of rich low gatherers with lots of small leapers and other creatures.

We all freeze.

"How can this be? Surely we would have noticed it before?"

"We were asleep for some time. Maybe much longer than we thought."

"I am going in. I am hungry and tired of this cave and the vohg." The three circuit pushes past us into the clearing to begin to eat everything he can put into this mouth. We soon follow.

"These taste strange." I nod agreement, but I am so hungry I don't care.

Sometime later our bellies are full. I turn back to the cave to be sure the vohg has not followed us and there is no cave!

"We must have wondered off some. I am sure it was around here somewhere. But what does it matter. There is food, warmth and no vohg about."

“But we need a line or the sun will soon burn us. Look how high it is already!”

Camp

“Okay, where is the gate now?” Pasc is furious.

A male pulls out a map and lays it on the ground.

“We are here. The gorge here, the dome you came from is here, and this is where the sensors picked up faint sAnt activity.” It is further south and east of our current location.

“Do we move the camp there or send out an away team?” Away team? Sounds like Rachael.

“No team. Too dangerous now that we know of the Pure Ones in the area. Who knows what other tech they have or how adaptable they are. Why would they set up a gate there I wonder?”

“I assume from the reason I do not sense it is because it has shut down?” I ask.

“Given our experience with the gorge dome I am now thinking that the gate is under one of their domes. It was probably much further along than the sensors said.”

“How would the sensors pick it up at all?”

“I am guessing that there is a tunnel or something just like with ours. They may always have tunnels for all we know. Paranoid species always want a way out, either for themselves or to drive a nasty creature away from themselves.”

“And with all the 'thn shield material to work with, the sAnt naturally flowed the scent to one of them to begin their work. How come it took them so long. Surely they had 'thn material for some time even before the disaster.”

“Ah, I have a theory that the disaster blew out a lot of circuits, including any the 'thants may have set up or were setting up. I am guessing that this is a re-infestation, not the original one.”

Probably an initial. I don't remember this species before and I scanned the Bug world well.

“May not have happened yet. Getting here was not an exact undertaking. As much guess as anything.”

“Do you mind if we join the others? I want to be useful not sit around trying to figure out what you three are talking about.”

“Sorry Oofik. Yes, go with the others. They will move camp to keep warm soon. You will want to see that happen.” Pasc calms down when he says this.

There is only one left with us.

Pasc introduces him, “Razzel and Sali, this is Hala. He is in charge of the sAnt project. I am sorry I snapped at you. Not every circuit that we find out there is technology we were unaware of.”

“Hard to accept being fallible?” I laugh when Hala says this. If you only knew how much we have all wanted to say that to him.

Pasc counters with, “Ignorant is not the same as fallible.” Close in my opinion.

“The four of us will check it out. I owe you that much Hala.”

“Thank you sir.” Sir? No salute this time at least.

We arrive to frozen, star and moon, lit field. I raise a shield to protect myself from the cold.

“No TK for the moment. We need to see with our normal senses first. They are likely to have sensors as well just to find us.”

“Right. Sorry.” Crab, how can I forget so quickly? I don't like being frozen or cooked though.

You did not play Cat and Mouse with him for twenty five million years. Takes practice for your kind.

“Thanks Sali.” I shake my eye stalk.

“There is the cave you expected.” Hala announces shivering.

“And here is the sensor. It is inline with the cave entrance.” Pasc points to it's location. I pulse scan the sensor. Hidden well in an ordinary looking rock. Appears to be functioning.

We walk up to the cave entrance. Several sets of foot prints are clearly entering it.

“I estimate four total. Two males, a fem and a younger one of indeterminate gender.”

“Could be a second fem. That would make sense if this was a small clan.

Hala pops away from us. We go outside to see where he has gone to see him nearly a click away up a small rise.

He TPs, *A dead one circuit fem here. The death eater did good work on her, but I think this was recent. Less than a circuit. The flesh is not totally dry yet from the sun side.* He comes back.

Pasc growls, “No TK. Come inside to get warm at least.”

I add, “Be very careful. We did not notice the portal last time. Very subtle.”

“They stopped here for some time, but did not leave by the entrance. The footprints only go one way.”

Hala, “The gate not only opened, but it appears four have entered it as well. They will know of our kind.”

Sali announces, *Here is the gate. The 'thants are here too. A few were stepped on. They did go this way. The prints stop at the gate.*”

Just beyond the gate I sense the Pure One's portal.

“Good location. When the gate is off they enter the Pure One trap and when on they end up at Bug Central. Either way, they are not going back.”

“But which Bug Central? There are far more Class M sens in the universe than can possible fit on the one world, even spaced over millions of years.”

“The more important question is when will it open again and for how long?”

“And can we protect it from the Pure Ones. No doubt their sensors have picked up something. They will investigate.”

Not if we are around. They were humbled by the last encounter and will be more cautious now.

“Especially since we have two of them as hostages.”

“We need a more reliable way of finding them.”

That is easy. I already know where they are. Sali looks smug.

Pasc plays it up, “Oh wise one. How can this be?”

Simple my stupid monkey. Scan down. Their shield is only above them. They never expected anyone to be able to scan through the entire planet.

I laugh, “That is good.”

“The angle will be important.” He makes a device and hands it to Hala.

“Take this back to the camp. Have them make a world grid of them and link it up to the central array. We will know soon enough exactly where they are at all times.”

“Until they sense the sensors and counter them.”

“I am guessing their shield material is not exactly easy to make or move. If I was them I would disperse so we don't get them all at once and then shield only those ten locations.”

“We will know where they are by the absence. We have won this round. But I would not count them out. They likely know exactly where we are at all times too.”

I look in the cave again and do a quick pulse scan.

“They have shut down their portal.”

“Back to camp.” Pasc says. Thank goodness. It was freezing.

We are in time to help with the move. It is warm here at least. I thought my skin was going to chip off at the cave entrance.

“This was supposed to be so simple. You said it would be.”

“I was the one who was here for ten thousand years before you two decided to show up.”

What, not up to dealing with them alone?

“Couldn't. The 'thants are recent too from my perspective. I am upset about the hidden ones though. One of them could be Bug.”

My vote is the one up north.

“I disagree. Bug was always a, by the shell, team player.”

“I understand now why the rest of your recent clan abandoned the three of you. I have been a TK for over a thousand years and I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“You knew from the beginning there were two missions. We are talking about the second one. You still have the first to deal with and it has now gotten a lot harder. Best get working on it.”

He salutes Pasc and pops out.

“Don't take it out on them. Not their fault.”

“They need to know there are consequences to failure. There is this expectation that once you reach six or seven you are immune from failure and death.”

Good lesson. I had to die many times before learning.

“And it looks like we will be leaving soon. They are not ready to take over.”

“First we need to know if any of the ten are Bug.”

“Sali was the only one to be conscious at hatching.” And I suspect before.

“True. We may need to stress them to know for sure.”

“If you used semi Pure Ones to stress me, what will you use to stress them?”

Gee, I don't know. What would scare the poop out of a crab? Maybe your natural form? Didn't you eat crabs?

“No, I ran from crabs. Even as a named one I could not eat them alive.”

“They won't know that.” Pasc continues the teasing.

“Well a Cat or Hu might do the trick just as well.”

Sorry, but a giant Ceph is way scarier. Monkeys just look stupid and creatures don't fear Cats until they have experienced them. Assuming they survive the first experience. We're just too cute.

“Cute. Try it here and the people will scatter. You don't look that different from a vohg.”

“True. But it also means that they will be prepared for that form and have counter measures. They do use them to entrap the locals.”

She has a good point. Ceph it is. Sali smiles. Me and my breathing tube.

“I will need more mass to be scary.”

“Lots of it around. But remember your hydrogen measure. Measure how big you are already please.”

I do, “But it is still a comparison thing. They are the size they are and I need to bigger than they are to be effective.” Does explain why we have both internal and external skeletons though.

I do a few quick calculations.

“It just isn't going to work here.”

“Not without TK it won't. It does not have to be real, just look real silly.”

Sali perks up, beak open.

“I have an idea. Where are they?”

We pop to the shelters.

Hala notices us. “They are in there.” He points to one of the shelters.

“Considering that they like being underground, it appears you are making them quite comfortable.” Hala freezes.

“You're right. We are the opposite. Takes new recruits circuits to get completely over it.”

“We need a nice large open area with no hiding places.” Pasc says.

“Better, put everyone else on the outside looking in. We need a battle pit.”

Excellent squishy. Truly excellent. I like you better already.

“We would have done anything to avoid being thrown in the pit. Add lots of people watching and they will understand very quickly.”

“Having lots of TKs at the ready is an asset isn't it?”

“Your TKs don't know what a battle pit is.”

“Oh, they do. We train all of them in one. I did learn something from you.” I see Gigger, Leega and Oofik near by listening. They watch as the pit is formed. Dirt rapidly turns to air. Stone siding is formed. Very slick. That will give me a real advantage.

“Time for me to change.”

“Here? Wouldn't it better if you did it in the pit?”

“Just the first step. I don't want them to know who I am.”

I turn myself into a very fat old shaky stupid male.

Pasc laughs, “Sure you don't want a walking stick?”

“Too much?” I say in a soft voice pretending to be out of breath.

This will be fun. Sali looks over the edge into the pit. *It looks great.*

“Be careful. We don't know them either. They have been scanned, but

we already know we have missed things. Do not assume they have no TK.”

No guarantee they will follow the normal person progression either.

“We know the semi-Pure had TP and all of ours start there as well. No reason to suspect they are different at the lower levels at least.”

“They called them semi-Pure abominations. There has to be a reason other than their great personalities.”

That is enough for me.

I stop playing and pop to the center of the pit. I then put on my act of looking confused.

“Okay folks. Lets make some noise. This is the most entertainment we have had in circuits. Lets enjoy it.” Pasc yells.

I look up and several people are serving sneaks on a stick. I can guess who started that one. Good idea though.

Thank you. I will save one for you.

I scan and sense the two being led with eye covers on to the edge of the pit. A ramp is lowered into the pit. I try to scramble up it with as much noise as I can keeping in character.

“Hey, what kind of fight is this? She is going to die before it starts.”

Some start throwing things at us. Once they have slid down the ramp it is removed and they are able to remove their own eye covers.

Their mandibles start chattering. I back away from them and more food is thrown at us.

Attention combatants. You are in a fight to the death. The one who comes out alive will be allowed to leave. We eat the other two. Begin.

Nothing happens. They don't believe I can do anything and they are waiting to see what Pasc or the others will do.

“This is no fun. You promised us fun.” They start throwing rocks at us. They separate to make less of a target. I pretend to get scared and run to the center. I let a couple of rocks hit me. I scream horribly.

It must have made them think I was an easy target. They rush to attack me from opposite sides.

Instead of screaming I roar very loudly and begin my change. I suck in a lot of air for both extra mass and for effect. The crowd goes quiet. The air throws off the crabs. They hesitate and I finish my transformation. Still hurts, but I am used to it. Or rather I was used to it. Never done it from this form. I am now the largest Ceph outside the old Hu monster movies. Those were very amusing to watch in the archives. I wave my arms about like they did and make grabs for the crabs. I open and close my gigantic beak making very loud snapping sounds. Just for

fun I reach over the railing and make passes over the crowd. They roar ducking at the same time!

I make my move and grab both of them at the same time and raise them very high into the air. Most species who can't fly are afraid of heights.

Of course I am not wearing my lucky charm. The Streakers use this moment to come into play with us. They go after the crabs in spite of my ominous size. I try and hide their soft undersides from them, but they are fast popping about. I bring them towards my mouth as if to eat them. Roger clamps on to one and rides it towards me.

Roger, get off. It is me Razzel.

“R'gr!”

“You can stop Razzel. They have fainted. Neither is the one.”

I carefully set their limp bodies on the ground. Their legs do not support them and splay on the stones.

As I return to my now normal form I use the extra mass to make a source of water to splash them with. Nothing happens and I scan them. Their hearts are still going. There is brain activity.

Just for fun I make a big iron pot and place them in it with some water and low gatherers. I take a place with the others on the railing.

When they wake they immediately notice where they are and the chattering begins. What did they expect? They are the losers. My character was granted freedom.

First one claw and then another reaches the top of the pot and tries to get out. First one and then the other scrambles over the top and plops down on the stones to quickly make for an edge. The sides are too steep to climb up, though they make many attempts. They finally tire and stop to stare up at me.

It is interesting that they are clearly looking at me and no others.

You made a lasting impression.

An enemy more like it.

Just repayment if you ask me. Remember, they attempted to entrap us and did kill three of my clan.

Sali and Pasc join me at my side.

What do you want?

Pasc dismisses the others, who moan disappointment at the fun being over.

Portage in five count. Hang on folks.

Pasc pops the two up next to us just as the entire encampment pops to its new location. If they had not been brought up they would have been

left behind and cooked by the sun. Everyone begins to set things up again for the stay at this location.

“You two stay with me or you will end up in the stew pot for real, understand?” They nod, sort of.

A runner comes up, “We have telemetry on the others. Seven here in the south and one in the north, just like they said.”

“Show me the one in the north.” Dust comes up from the ground and a model of the world forms in front of us. Continents, oceans, etc. all form.

“Too much information, just show me.” Pasc smiles though. He has trained them well.

“Right. Here.” A blue light blinks.

Even I recognize that location. The nearest Last City to the narrowing of the Northern Sea.

“It is where we went in. He was under us the entire time and we did not know.”

Pasc says, “You missed one kitty.”

And you missed nine and had ten thousand years to notice.

“Yeah, that really burns me. I should have seen them. All the trips back and forth to the north. I should have seen them.”

“The unexpected.”

Pasc announces, “I have a lock. I will place him in the space between us. Apply limiters as soon as he lands. I want no more surprises.”

He arrives. We cover him in limiters, inside and out. Nothing happens at first, then the two next to Pasc attack him with all the strength they have remaining.

We pull them off, but they have managed to inflict some damage. I concentrate and heal the wounds. This enrages them more.

They chatter rapidly.

Angry.

“No kidding.”

“Commander, do you want us to gather the rest of them?”

“That would not be wise. They likely have fail safe tech that will make nasty things if someone is not there to prevent it. Besides, with all of them here they will think they have the advantage over the northern one. These two have seen our abilities and are humbled somewhat. Evens things out a bit.”

“You want their story.” I suggest. He nods.

Oofik asks, “How do you know this is the one from the north? Anyone could have been in the hiding place. Someone of lesser authority.”

“He does look the same as the others and the same as the Pure Ones we saw in the City, though we were never this close to them there.” Gigger offers.

“Let's listen in.”

Bastard! Evil one. These strong ones will defeat you once and for all. Your reign of destruction is over.

He ignores them and looks to us.

I am going to silence the first two. Their thoughts recede.

You are on trial for deceiving the ones known as 'abs' or impure ones we don't care what you have done to the southern Pure Ones.

I did what was necessary to survive and save this world. If I had not all would have been dead at their doing. Sacrifices were unfortunately necessary. Now that you have shown yourself, that will no longer be necessary. The Cities are emptying out. Supplies and knowledge are being distributed to help the chances of survival.

“What is it they are accused of doing?” I say this in the northerner dialect. No one complains. Makes sense that Pasc's clan has learned. Probably had to spend time in cover operations.

It is not obvious?

“Assume we know nothing. We want to hear your version.”

Of course. It has been a long time since there has been a court of law. It has been approximately a hundred generations of Pure Ones since the fall of our kind. The time the ones before you sent our world nearly to destruction and plotted to finish the task.

“And your role?”

I am the last in a long line of leaders for the northern contingent that have opposed their plan. We are the only ones preventing their attempt. What I don't understand, given your apparent abilities, is why you did not join us to help prevent them.

I defer to Pasc.

“As embarrassing as this is, we were not aware of their group. Yes, we knew of the Cities, run by the Pure Ones, but did not know that their purpose was to oppose the actions of the hidden ones.”

“It seems to me that saving all of us from a super nova was a good thing. What were they attempting to do that was evil?”

You know more than you would if you were limited to common knowledge. Good, it will be easier to explain. Do you understand how this world was moved out of position of the exploding sun?

I answer, “A thirteen dimensional enfolding of immense power and precision.”

Your understanding helps explain how you were able to extract me from my chamber. Good trick that one. I really thought at first it was them. Glad it was not.

“It would have meant the end of us you mean.”

Yes. You understand how it was done. Unfortunately, they were not satisfied with 'saving' us and nearly killing us on the first attempt. It was difficult, but I, or we, blame their dimensional specialist. It should have worked.

“So, the present condition is acceptable to you?”

Of course not, but being alive is better than being dead. It is not paradise, but we can live here. Granted our population is less than one percent of what it was. Technology will eventually take care of that.

“You mean the adaptations you have inflicted on all of us?”

They have kept you alive. If it weren't for them, he points to the two, I would have let our kind to die out and given the adapted ones their chance.

“How good of you. I would imagine that you were not expecting us though.”

Not to the obvious extent you have become, but we did start the prophesy and have been actively working to ensure it would eventually come about.

“And the High Females?”

I am not proud of them. It was necessary to play the role in order to induce the necessary response. We all knew the consequences. Could have easily have been me in my earlier years.

I thought the 'normal' Pure One males in the north were those pathetic mindless drooling idiots.

We have been having some trouble with inbreeding. I am glad you came when you did. It would not have been too much longer till we were done for. We did not have access to the life extending abilities of the southern population.

“They are down to nine individuals.”

I was not aware of that. They hid themselves well from us. Good. Then the threat is nearly gone on it's own accord.

“I would not say that. We might agree with them. You did not treat us very well when we visited your clan. Not well at all.”

I would say they are about even at the moment. Let's hear their side.

“Good call Sali.” We turn to the two. It starts snowing pretty heavily. The one from the north is preoccupied watching and feeling it.

Sorry, I have never felt snow before. Cold.

I turn to the two, “So, why should we let you two go back to your hidden cave?”

If you don't this world dies. Already the population dwindles.

“You mean because the northerners have eaten everyone.” We give him a dirty look, but he is still trying to figure out the snow.

No. It is because the diversity is not high enough to sustain the population. The north miscalculated how much would be needed. The food items are failing. Clans struggle against each other to live.

“It is far worse in the south. But maybe of the vohg eating everyone they can.”

It was necessary or everyone would die.

“Seems I have heard that argument before.”

“Both groups feel it is okay to hide the truth, kill the 'excess' population as if they were simply a herd of leapers and then claim the population is in trouble.”

We could not reveal ourselves. We are too few. We would be overwhelmed and prevented from accomplishing our task. We are nearly ready. We must finish.

Fem, I am too late. He presses something on his body and dies.

“Oh no you don't.”

I hate cowards! Sali does the honor of bringing him back. A simple poison, cupric cyanide.

Too late. Once I died someone else took my position. They will assume I was compromised. I scan him carefully and find a microtransmitter. How come the fives did not find this? Probably thought it would cause no harm. Have to talk to them about it. Of course had they removed it, then the north would have thought he died even sooner.

“And begin whatever doomsday scenario you have set up.”

Another crab pops in facing the wrong direction.

“Well, they won't be able to enter the secret chamber. Anyone who tries ends up here.”

“Commander. The southerners are awakening. Robotics are emerging. They are killing everything that moves, mostly wildlife at the moment.”

“Take them out. Have fun.” Pasc shakes his eye stalk.

“They never learn.”

We still have to feed. You will starve us!

“Not in a few small moons we won't. Should be over by then.”

I thought we were going someplace different this time. So far all I see is stupid monkeys.

“You said it pussy cat.”

“They are talking weird again.” Oofik says to a confused Hala.

“Pasc did not do that before. Must be the two who have taken him in.”

“Razzel, it was getting weird even before they met. It just got worse when they all got together. You will hear them say something about a fourth they are looking for.”

“Which is why they have been testing everyone.”

“That was fun at least. The look in their eyes. Must have been how I looked when the grumpf nearly got me.”

“The big fish? We heard about that in one of Pasc's reports.”

“So you know everything about us?”

“Pretty much. No privacy in the clan. Welcome to ours.” Oofik smiles and goes off with Hala. That's good.

The four are taken off to two different holding areas. Last thing we need is them killing each other.

Another crab arrives and is taken off as well.

“You think they would learn.”

Desperate.

“As to those in the south.”

“Metallic hydrogen pretty much prevents us from acting too rapidly.”

“I would like to know how they did that.”

“And what else do they have? We have two warring clans. Both technologically advanced. More than we know about anyway. We could use Mandhi or Ron.”

Not part of the plan.

“We know.”

A four comes up running. Why don't they send a six who can pop?

“Incoming. Missiles have been launched from the north. ETA thirty minutes.”

Another comes up, but I have already scanned them, “Missiles from the south going north.”

“Must have quite a sensory network. Again, something we missed.”

Pasc sighs, “You two DS the missiles to another dim. Can't hit anything we are alone on this vector. I suspect the 'stars' we see are actually quite a ways away. We are orbiting a naked sun. I am going topside. I don't trust them. I have more sensors on the station.”

“What station?”

He smiles, “The small moon of course.”

Moonbase

He pops out. I have to wonder what the large moon is now. How did it get here? If they popped in from someplace else, did they take the moon with them? There is not enough local psiotic field this far away from a galaxy to do that. Or did they capture it somehow after they got here?

Concentrate, they are getting closer!

We spend the next two small moons clearing the skies of everything outside the air envelope.

When it appears they have done trying to launch more I relax.

A short time later Pasc comes back, "They shielded some with their invisibility cloak. I captured one to study it." It pops in beside him, but it looks like it could not possibly travel through the atmosphere. Too many exposed parts.

"Defused or we would not be able to see it. The entire shell was the bomb. Once the control circuit for the mH quit it goes off. Had to DS the inside out of the shell to examine it. The shell going off is equivalent to a bomb about the same as if it were a chemical explosive. Seems like a hard way to do it. I really expected something more."

"So is there much danger in taking out their huts?"

"Would probably cause a cave in underneath, but they are buried so well I would not expect much else."

What about the DS generator? One powerful enough to move this entire world could cause problems.

"Not necessarily. It is not power so much as understanding. Any one of us could do it. Well maybe Razzel and I."

I was never much for the dimensional stuff. So, you are saying that psiotics does not make for a good explosive.

"Not in and of itself. You would have to use it to set off something else."

"What about those coming from the north?"

"Standard fission weapons. They spent a lot of time burrowing and learning metallurgy. Not too surprising they would stumble across some uranium."

"Why didn't the south have them then? The certainly understand metallurgy too."

"Who knows, different research directions. Check the Library some time. Not all cultures go down the stupid path. Yours didn't. The Ceph certainly understand ceramics. That should have led to fission work."

“We knew of it. Just did not see any safe use for it. Just a curiosity. Nothing more.”

Do we take them out or not?

“There are only seven left.”

As far as we know. What about our own project?

“There is that.”

A chunk of earth suddenly disappears.

“Who did that?” It is TPD as well.

Hala pops in, “Sensors says it came from just outside of one of the southerner hidden places.”

“Makes sense they would have the tech if they can move the entire world. They are hunting for us.”

Pasc is scrambling towards the rest of the camp, “Abandon camp. Skyward now!”

Sali and I raise ourselves. I see Gigger and Leega rising too. Oofik grabs his bone lance and nearly gets eaten by another hole appearing. I pop him closer to us.

Thanks. That was close.

No spear is worth your life. Shield well. We are going to the small moon. I will assist with your internal needs.

Pasc TPs, *The moon should be out of reach of them at least. Their accuracy suggests that they never intended to use this tech for small close objectives.*

If they can envelop the world, they should be able to reach the small moon.

Not quite actually. Their generators are based on being at ground level or slightly below according to the information we have been gathering recently. Still, I want to move the moon to a higher orbit once we get there. We should have a good safety margin to be sure.

A small group of eights has the five 'guests' we have taken. The ones on the surface just might be trying to get their own back. Dangerous method if true. Just as likely to get only half of one back. Maybe that was the true intention. The dead tell no secrets.

Pasc, *We need to move faster. Razzel if you will. The moon is now on the other side. I want to do this in one jump. That should confuse them.*

No problem. I do a simple three layer enfolding and take us to within a few hundred lengths on the opposite side, so they can't see us. Hey, we are not going to the other end of the universe. From their perspective we are gone though. I scan the moon. Less mass than a real moon. Mostly hollow. Looks like a moon on the surface though. Only someone with DS

is getting inside here.

If we move it to higher orbit won't they notice the smaller size and slower orbit time?

They are likely too busy at the moment on the other side of the world looking for us and trying to figure out what we are doing. I am more worried what it will do to the rest of our kind. They will likely take this as an omen.

When in doubt, blame it on something.

Inside the station Pasc's clan spreads out to their positions. Apparently they have drilled on this.

Gigger comes up to us, "That was the strangest experience so far. Not breathing, yet still alive. Floating up over the world was interesting too, but not breathing." The 'moon' does not have enough mass to give any gravity, but everyone but the guests has TK and can get around fine. Leega and Oofik have set off exploring. I am surprised that Gigger is not with them, but he seems to be content staring at a view screen of the world below. Someone comes in and shows him how to adjust the magnification.

"Thanks."

An eight then comes over and does an overlay of the current locations of the seven remaining ones. They are spread out in a sort of hexagon with one in the center.

"Crab! They are going to make an attempt. How long until they have enough power?"

Pasc pops in and answers, "No idea. I have certainly never seen anything like this before."

"Commander, their invisibility shields have gone down!"

"ATTENTION ALL HANDS. ATTENTION ALL HANDS. WE ARE GOING TO MOVE TO ORBIT AROUND THE LARGE MOON. PLEASE STAND BY TO ASSIST."

"I can do that for you if you want."

"Let them. They need the practice."

Gigger asks, "What do they mean assist? Can't exactly go outside and push. There is nothing to push against."

"Sign him up for the astronomy section. I am surprised you understood that right away Gigger. Good for you." Gigger smiles, but is unsure of why.

"I hope they time this right below. We want the large moon going in the right direction when they disappear or we are sun food."

The northern leader comes into our chamber by grabbing things on the

wall and pulling himself along. He sees the pattern on the monitor.

Is this real?

“Afraid so. Not enough time to attack them now without hurting everyone else below. Once they started charging, any disruption from the outside would likely tear the world apart.”

You have just condemned everyone to death.

“I am not willing to concede that yet.” Pasc says.

“TIME TO PUSH!”

I start to join in but Pasc holds me back. Sali is asleep floating in the middle of the space. Still a Cat.

They do a pretty good job of it. I can sense over two hundred eights, about fifty sevens and a scattering of the other levels down to our three fours. Makes sense that eventually everyone would max out at eight.

“Not worried about 'thn? They should see this as baby making heaven.”

“I programmed them to stay away before we ah came here. I want us to remain off the grid. This world, from our calculations, is over a hundred light years away from any other suns. No one is likely to find us here if we don't want them to, especially once the world itself is gone.”

“Hopefully no one found this world orbiting the sun and then notices it is gone you mean. That would cause someone to investigate.”

“Really? I noticed that there are actually very few TKs who would bother. There always seems to be some kind of trouble to get into with others instead.” I smile when he says that.

“Oh crab, I forgot Roger!”

Pasc just shakes his eye stalk and continues his work.

I concentrate. Roger is not that big and a very long way away right now. Not sure I can do this one, even now. Technically there is no longer any limit to our abilities. That was an artificial game limit. We are really no longer in the game, still it takes time and effort all the same.

“Got you, you little Streaker.”

He pops in with Leesi and the others. They were all together at least. The chamber is filled with fluttering and screeching, sending everything into chaos and disrupting the push effort.

Pasc immediately bubbles them and attaches the bubble to the wall. They are complaining inside, but we can't hear them at least. Sooner or later they will figure out how to get past a 'thn shield though.

He turns to me, “Impressive, but don't do it again please.” I nod.

After a concerted second push we are in orbit and the pushing stops. Everyone is exhausted. Pasc, Sali and I make food and distribute it. We

use the core mass to do so. Also known as the waste area. Everything gets recycled up here.

“You have an impressive amount of tech up here. How did you remember it all?”

“Didn't. Most of it has been figured out by the clan or from what we could glean from the Cities. Besides, knowing that something can be done is half the run there. Ten thousand circuits is a long time to wait.” True.

“Using psiotic power supplies helped.”

“Of course. Speaking of which. The psiotic background tastes funny. Never felt something like this before.” He is right.

We come out from behind the far side of the moon to be basked in sunlight and find no world present.

“That explains the sour taste.” Must have disrupted everything for a very long way. Will that bring investigators?

“Now comes the fun part.” Pasc goes to the monitor and it changes to diagrams and some sort of written language. “Telemetry report!”

“We have telemetry. They are still in transit. Must have happened just before we cleared the moon.”

Should only be a moment. Well for something small like one of us it is only a moment. How long does it take to move a world?

“That's very strange.” He points to the readings on the screen.

He looks at me, “They did not just take the world, but every dimensional parallel one with them. No wonder they messed up the first time. That would have stopped the rotation for sure. All the instances would have canceled each other out. Surprised they did not zero their momentum as well and fall into the sun.”

“Where are the other worlds then?”

“Maybe the original was really the only one too.”

Only one in the universe then. You had to pick it too. Sali scowls.

“I try harder.” Pasc smiles, but does not stop looking at the screen.

He finally sighs, “They are back in normal space. We need to go see what it left.”

I turn to the northern leader, “You want to come with us? I feel we owe you that much at least. To see what happened.” He nods, sort of. Not the same in crab form, though similar. We did come from them and were probably taught by them, at least at first.

I am staying here where no one is trying to kill me.

“I think it really should be just the three of us until we are sure then.” He says to Hala.

“Understood. We will maintain vigilance here.” He goes back to monitoring the screen. Images and diagrams flash by as he checks various things. Mandhi would love it here.

Stop thinking like that.

“Yes kitty.” I turn to Pasc, “Where are they?”

“You will like this. They are on the opposite side of this sun in our current dimension.”

“Actually that makes sense. They used the transit past the solar mass in the ninth dimension to induce the spin they wanted. Question is, did they get it right?”

“There is that isn't there. Could just as easily torn the world to bits. Can't tell from here, the bits would travel together for awhile. We have no sensors out in that location that can tell us. Just have to go see.”

Return

Pasc hands Hala something.

“These are the latest images.” He makes another card and inserts it into his camera.

“Just in case we don't make it back.” He says to no one in particular.

“Just remember we have another mission.”

“I have not forgotten. I want to know more about their tech. We might be able to use some of it.”

“I believe you are right Mr. Holmes.”

“Indubitably Dr. Watson.” We have confused the northerner.

I finally turn to him, “Do you have a name?”

We don't use names.

“Gee and I thought the High Fem were the only nasty ones.”

Pasc smiles and says, “I hear by give you the name of. Hmm, let me think. Something appropriate yet not exactly flattering.”

“Oh crab, let's go.”

“Crab it is.” We pop out.

We don't take mass from the small moon. They may need it. Instead we swing close enough to siphon off some from the large moon in a huge sweep of dust lit up by sunlight. Beautiful in its own way.

We make a modest space ship. We don't really need it, but it does make our guest a bit more comfortable and I want something around me if they have psiotic weapons.

“I will finish the ship, you get us there Razzel. Crab, you can strap in over here.” He makes a chair like the ones we saw the Pure Ones use and TK pushes him into it.

“Sight seeing or express?”

“Smuggler. I don't want them to know we are coming. However, I need to make one stop. Park us at the limit of your range.”

I look at him, “There is no limit to my range.” Why did he ask that?

He smiles and looks at Crab. Oh.

He then holds up a device of some kind. Looks like a box, but definitely is not. I scan and find it highly enfolded. He has learned at least a little bit from me.

“I want you to place this in orbit. It will give us an advanced look at things. No surprises. Being enfolded will make it harder for them to get a fix on it.”

This gets Crab's interest.

But that is too far away for even a level nine. That is the highest any life form or artificially made device can attain.

We both look at him. Yes, it was probably a level nine construct that moved the world, but still.

“Exactly how would you know that?”

It is written on the Law Stone. The holiest object on our world. We stole it from the south. Without it they have no legitimate standing. He smiles.

Without looking at the device I send it into orbit around the world.

“Let's go. It's there.” I smile at Crab.

He emits waste to the floor of the cabin. Pasc cleans it up immediately.

“Now he is scared?” Pasc then turns to a monitor he has set up.

“You can remember all that?”

“Nah, I copied one on the small moon just now.”

“Oh, and how far away is that?”

“Gee, not as far as the world we are going to, but far enough to make a nine nervous.”

“One step still?”

“He might not believe it was real. Take it slow, say only two times the speed of light. Why push it?”

“No indeed.”

We arrive in quick order and make for a high orbit. Far higher than they can see.

“Oh, just for fun, the outside of this ship is now coated in that metallic hydrogen they are so fond of. Remarkable stuff. Can't be seen by visible or invisible light.” He just added it right now. Would have made our trip hazardous, not impossible, just riskier. We do have another mission.

The screen becomes active. The entire world is shown with data appearing along the side and bottom. I can understand it now that I ah, learned from the others on the small moon.

“Is all of this going back to the small moon?” He nods.

“Six arm delay though. Can't use subspace for everything. No need really. They aren't coming here yet and I don't want them to attempt a rescue is we get into trouble. They are aware of the delay, so won't act on impulse.”

“A lot of damage down there. Evidence of fission scars on both north and south.”

Crab overcomes his fear unstraps and swims crudely closer.

“I thought we got all of the missiles? And why would the north hit

themselves?”

“We did, but where did we send them?”

“Another dim, oh. They brought them with them. All the dims at once.”

“That would be my guess. Okay, those aren't fission or MH bombs. Guess someone was pissed at the result of the barrage and started a new effort.”

“What about the seven?”

An overlay comes up showing where they were when we last saw them, or rather sensed them.”

“Five are holes and dust, or close to it. Could have been a result of the transit though. These two appear to be intact, at least partially. No MH evident or we would not know this much. No life forms registering.”

“Rachael really got to you.”

He shrugs, “Habit. Easier than making up new terms for everything.”

“Of course our language does not sound like anything ever heard before.”

“Not at all.”

“Are they alive or not?”

“Assemble the away team and meet me in the transporter.” I shake my eye stalk.

It is not safe down there. The radiation levels. You destroyed everything anyway, just as I said you would.

“Won't hurt us or you as long as you are with us. Besides, I think it was all of your doing that did the destruction. The world is intact other than the damage you did or attempted to do to each other.”

“Telemetry is in. They have spin. Orbit distance is the same, as would be expected from the type of travel they did. Not ideal, but livable. About three times a normal day. There must be a lot of people exhausted from trying to outrun the sun or cold.”

“Ice does not melt that fast, nor does rock loose heat quickly. Likely to be hundred of years before it stabilizes.” I can use the term years again. No one will be running a circuit ever again.

“A lot of hurt toes. Between the temperature effects and the weapon use they probably lost ninety plus percent. Not much to begin with.”

I am not sure to be happy there are survivors or sad that we were wrong.

“Nice guy. Now I know why he is named Crab.”

I don't understand.

“Inside joke.” He still looks confused.

“I suppose we should return Crab to his chamber. Not much left. Both sides tried their best to insure the leaders were hit it looks like.”

I am not the leader any more. Another will have been chosen. I am dead to them. I have a question. What is a day?

“A length of time measurement. The time it takes for the world to rotate once on its axis.”

He does a steady tap on the wall while clinging to it. Learned that being weightless is a pain for staying in one place.

How many taps for one day?

I concentrate, but it is Pasc who answers first.

“Just slightly longer than an origin day night cycle. They are amazingly close to where it should be.” He TPs me, *I read his mind.*

I TP back, *Cheater.*

Pasc asks, “So, if you were to show up with several hundred of us with special abilities and with directions to rebuild you would be turned away?” I smile.

Why would you do that?

“There is one catch. We help all people, not just the ones in the north. We won't be making weapons either. You will find all of those gone before we land.”

He does not say anything for a moment, then starts to chatter with his mandibles in rough, but understandable, “That would be acceptable.” A concession at last.

I TP Pasc, *What about the 'thants?*

Their chamber is intact, but who knows what happened to their link. We may want to wait a few 'days' to let them re-establish it.

“That was a good trick you did with the Streakers.”

“Yeah, I am surprised too. Makes me wonder if we really needed the 'thants.”

“You were not ready, I was curious how this would end and it has been interesting.” I nod. Depressingly similar, but interesting. I can remember some pretty remarkable times on the line running together.

Fist

Why is it again we are back on chaos world? Cats don't like sudden rapid change. You never know what you will see here and that scares them.

No it doesn't. We fear nothing.

I give them both a dirty look.

Well almost nothing.

I smile.

Okay, most things.

“Well, it is a bit much here.” There must be hundreds of sentient species here at Fist Three, one of the four central stations. Fistians are not very creative with names. Guess it makes sense, every species can count. The Centers are all at the equator, evenly spaced. Each has different color accents. That was a trick, as not all species can see the same colors. But, all that was needed was that the colors be different to all species, including the color blind ones. I smile as I think of a native Cat. These two are enhanced of course.

Seeing red is not that big a deal.

“So says the one who immediately went to the Red Zone on Ba-Eden after wards.”

I meant to do that trip for a long time. I, ah, was meeting someone there.

“Sure Nipper. A fine bag of Mr. Catnip you mean.”

Please, I haven't done that since Hu-Eden. And that was only because it was my cover.

“You did pick a hard way to get into TK school.”

Who is our contact?

“Didn't you read the brief?” They never do, so I have to be sure I have memorized it. This is supposed to be a kibble run anyway. Nothing serious expected.

We show our credentials to the official. We are waved on.

Nice carapace on the Bug. They have been learning from other cultures.

“Don't even think about popping there. Low key.”

Me?

Me?

I don't believe them for a nanosec.

“We are agricultural experts looking for any new information on

methods not heard of before. We are third in line for talking with newbies. Don't mess with the other officials this time." Right after weapons and trade. Weapons can be mean. After us come prepared food followed by art and music. Last is science, since most of this is already covered by weapons. Or so they think. Every once in a while we actually meet a peaceful culture.

We take local transport south. Sort of like a travel tour. There are these audio devices with adapters for nearly every audio sensor type. You pick up the one for your species and you are presented with a travel log as you go. The enclaves of new species are pointed out. Enclaves whose members have been accepted often put up simulations until the space is needed for a new arrival. Fresh arrivals are barricaded to prevent possible contamination and so forth.

As to why the three of us are here? Well, they said we were next in rotation, but the rumor of a cat like species sort of meant us anyway. At least we are away from village watching. Nip and Pu spent most of the time on the outside looking in whereas I had to blend in and participate in silly ritual goings on.

You did look funny with the taphig head dress and nothing else. Hu really are better with clothing.

I agree. Ugly creatures without clothing. They both look up at me smiling. That can mean they thought they were smart or they are hungry.

Well they did not feed us on this journey have they?

"You don't need to eat every five arn."

We don't? All this time I thought we did.

"Your species is actually designed to only eat a couple of times every eight day and you know it."

That was when we had grand and glorious feasts. Now all we get is kibble. Just does not fill you up.

"It is TK chow and I eat it too. I will take you to a nice Ku place afterwards."

We always have to go to Ku places. How about something different?

"They won't let Cats in anywhere else." They will, but that is the standing joke. Probably because the Ku don't judge the client's eating habits. They have to behave themselves everywhere else.

We can behave. The two try to look like kittens.

Besides, the last place was not our fault. We didn't start it.

"You walk into an all Ba bar licking your lips and you didn't start it. Right."

Ba don't even taste good. They were in no danger.

“Your tummy growls did not say that.”

We can't control that. It is a sign of respect, that the food smells good.

“It was a bar. There was no food.”

They even had to pay a fine for disturbing the peace. We cleaned out the waste facilities. Ba guano is not a pleasant experience.

At least you don't eat birds whole. You only had to put your hands on it.

“I don't lick by butt either, but I don't envy you.”

You should. A lot less wasteful than using water or leaves.

Besides how else are you going to know if everything is working right?

“I am not going to answer that. We are here. Behave.” Back to the kitten routine. One cat is bad enough, but when there are two of them they defer to themselves and only tease you.

One of the few true joys in life. They both sigh at the same time. A Hu trait, but they learned how to do it to bug me.

Well, we weren't there actually. We had to walk down a dirt path for some five kilometers to get to it. If the species proves interesting I hope they put in closer transport.

Registration is a small hut just on the other side of the barrier. There are three Fistians inside. Usual bureaucracy. They use old pupal cases flattened for paper, but the concept is the same.

They have put up a stronger barrier than normal. The two of them stand proud.

“As they should for anything like you two pests.”

How can you tell if a Bug is bored.

His eyes are glazed over. They always look that way of course and they are incapable of being bored.

“Be careful some of them can TP now. Behave.”

They back away when they see Nipper. That must have been breed deep. Seven hundred years is a long time to remember the one Nip killed.

I ask politely, ^Honored ones, are we on time?^ They speak Ba most of the time because it is one of the easier ones for them to pronounce and it is possible for most of us to learn it eventually too. Separates the curious from the experts as well.

^Weapons and trade have not arrived yet.^ Great, that means a long wait. Our patches tell them we are neither and so have to wait.

^You are welcome to partake of the surrounding area for your needs until then.^ A small area at that. Most of Fist is deadly poison to most species. Only small corridors and patches near enclaves are kept

relatively poison neutral. Don't eat anything though. I turn around to find the two of them already asleep. The officials relax some. Actually hard to tell. You have to learn to read their very subtle body language.

They just sit there like someone has turned them off. I do a quick pulse scan to be sure they are in fact still alive. Once I had one die on me and it was days before a replacement came to taste the corpse and decide it was okay for me to continue. Our packs are heavy with food supplies. The Cats strongly objected so I filled my pack with their least favorite foods. They got the idea quick. I don't even want to know what is in theirs. I am sure it is something that I would find very repulsive. The fact that the packs move once in a while does not reassure me.

Eight by eight and finally two Di come casually down the path talking up a storm. Hmm, more like cursing up a storm. Whoa, that is pretty raw stuff. This has to be weapons.

When they come into view I recognize one of them as White, but feign ignorance. My thoughts wake up the two sleeping ones though. They go into their usual big long stretch and yawn routing. They are careful to point their open maws in the direction of the officials who can see us from the open doorway.

I shake my head. They can't help but get into trouble.

If I remember you were trouble in the prison. Kept stepping on everyone's tails.

Before I can answer the Di growl at us.

!What are you three doing here? We have this time spot.! They are not weapons, but trade. Great.

Trade is a bit behind us. Two Dia and a Ceph. The Ceph is holding them up. We are acting pissed for show.

Thanks. Do we know the Dia or Ceph?

No one I know. Was surprised to see you here. Normally only one TK crew is called.

Mix-up at central probably.

“We are waiting patiently. Our transport must have gotten here earlier than expected.” Total fabrication. Fist have a different sense of time and it is never early. Surprising considering their brief life cycle as adults.

Who is your partner?

She turns and gives me a dirty look for effect.

Synthia, meet Oz, Pu and Nipper. Oz and Pu spent time in Cat Hell.

More like Hu hell. I heard it was horrible.

Not really. I don't even remember most of it now. I shrug. She is a five, so must be a student of his.

*How is Pushy Doing? All the Cats adore Pushy Paws.
Same. Still in slow time. Outdoing Buddha in patience.
Synthia asks, Know anything about the Pink?
No more than you do. Nothing.*

The officials get up and come to attention. We hear a wheeled cart. Too bad that they did not put in transport to the entrance. This must be a little used enclave and it was thought it was not needed I guess.

I don't recognize the Dia, but the Ceph is clearly Mandhi. White should have known her.

I bow to her, ~You honor us with your presence.~ Everyone else has bowed as well. Not often we get to meet with a Council member.

I have to put in grunt time same as everyone else. You're just the unlucky ones to be here with me. The Dia are norms. Be nice. And clearly her aids, or rather part of her cover.

She hands one of the Dia and it translates for her. The Fistians never bother to learn the complex grammar of the Ceph. The Ceph are never without others, so there really is no need.

^Honored ones. We are weapons. Please assist us in opening the portal.^ Her Ba is atrocious. I can barely understand her, but the officials don't seem to care. They recognized the badges and the ritual. All that was needed for them.

The outer barrier is opened and the three of them enter, then it is closed. There is of course another level. Can't have some species rushing the portal.

Pu'thn pops in and quickly snuggles into Pu's pack. Of course his 'thn would be named after himself. Narcissistic Cats. Glad she came in after the Dia could see her. The officials don't care and don't move.

I am going to wait a while longer before I take on that responsibility. Nipper does not seem too eager either and rolls his eyes at Pu.

A mini me.

Just what we need. Nipper gives Pu a gentle swat.

The large portal opens. Strange, that does not usually happen so fast. I thought we would be here for days.

~Come on in. Primitive metal weapons and a few assorted toxins that should not hurt anyone here expect maybe the Fistians, though even that is unlikely. Might itch like crazy.~ I'll say. We are already on one of the most toxic worlds known. What could hurt them?

I had not bothered to pulse scan the enclave so am unprepared for what I see. The place is a total mess. Nearly every bush and tree has been trampled down and scattered.

!That means trade will not be interested.! He turns to leave. He won't actually leave, just go a short ways away to await any needs we might have. We are a careful lot. Surprised there are so many of us on this one though.

Had to. First report showed that during their quarantine period they nearly killed themselves trying to get out. They are not gentle creatures.

“Where are they?” There is a clear ceramic shield for the interior barrier. Most of it has been covered up, but there are peep holes at regular intervals and heights.

#!They covered themselves with branches and such when the sun rose. They seem to be afraid of the sun according to initial reports.!#

“Then when did they do all this damage?”

#!At night. They are apparently afraid of the dark as well.!#

“What? That does not leave many options.”

Suddenly one is right in front of us staring through a hole at us. I think so anyway. I pulse scan. The two Cats back away.

“That is the ugliest creature I have ever seen and I include Cats in the mix.” I hear two hisses.

Damn fast too. It is gone again. I pulse scan and it is already at the other end of the enclave nearly five kilometers away. There are three others even bigger.

“How much do they weigh?”

#!Records show they arrived weighing 256, 390, 501 and 553 kilos. All have gained substantial weight in the last three days.!#

“They can eat that stuff? And gain weight? Not just roll over dead?” I am impressed.

~We need a blood sample.~ She takes out a narc rifle, loads it and sticks the end through a whole near ground level. Suddenly it is wrenched from her arms and pulled through the whole. The metal is severely deformed by the action.

“You are lucky you did not go with it. That would have hurt.” Torn her beak clear off is more like it.

Unless they can be tamed they are not likely candidates.

“You two were never tamed and we let you in. Maybe if you were neutered. I hear that works wonders with male Cats.”

We could serve yours up for a snack if you wish?

Mandhi goes to the official with her two assistants to ask them something.

~This is something strange. Usually the portal would open every day of the home world like they all do. So far it has only opened once. The

ground also froze near the opening.~

“Is it too hot in here for them? I would have thought the 'thants would have picked a more southern enclave if that was so.”

~I can't explain it. Until the portal opens another time we will not have coordinates on their home world location. I would love to investigate this one.~

“I bet Rachael, James and Q would as well. I can see them now racing all over the place.”

#!One tore the rifle apart and darted themselves by accident. It has fallen over.!#

We rush to the holes.

It almost immediately gets up again, shakes it's whatever that thing is on top of it and starts to run. A moment later is it breathing on us and we back away.

“That is one tough hombre. Are you sure weapons is not interested in them?”

~What, as enforcers? I would not want to be on the world that necessitated sending in a troop of these.~

Nor I.

“Well, agriculture is not interested either. At least until they calm down some. I thought the 'thants only opened portals on sentient cultures?”

~So far. Everyone has had to achieve a high level of tech or psiotics to qualify. These apparently show neither. Their tech is a million years behind Ceph standards.~

Or about ten thousand behind Hu. Nice insult.

I have to play my part. She looks annoyed with me for not seeing the obvious.

She hands one of her assistants.

#!We will remain for observation purposes. You may go.!#

Really go, or just pretend to go? Asks White.

They are not going to hurt anyone as long as they are behind the barriers. I have had to reinforce them in several spots though. Warn Fistians command that this area should be watched for possible escapes. They can eat the native plants and gain weight. They have a breeding pair. We don't want them out.

We leave our packs for them and the Dia thank us. I have exchanged the contents for food that might interest them more than TK chow.

Anything is better than that. Fortunately our food is liked by all true sens.

“At least the Di type species you mean.” I laugh. Did I just equate them with dinosaurs? Yes, I think I did.

Stupid monkey.

“You lower yourselves by using that old one. Who wants Ku food?”
They both yawn and pretend to look bored.

Ba Luna

“Remind me again why we have this duty?” Spider says to me.

“Our time on rotation. Nearly everyone else has been here for a time. And remember a year for a norm is a lot longer than for one of us.”

“But this is a dump.” Spider has become downright dumpy herself. We have been bored for so long that we don't work out like we used to. Of course our TK should be taking care of it, but we are even lazy there. Besides we fit in better looking like everyone else.

There is dust everywhere. No one bothers to clean up. Remnants of food, long decayed, litter the plasteel table. There are dents in the table from someone having beaten it in several places. Initials carved in on the surface.

“Now that is just rude!” Spider exclaims. I come over and look at what she has seen. Carved into the wall at her eye level is 'S+R'.

“Could mean anyone.”

“This is fresh. We were meant to find it. Who was on rotation last?”

“We passed them when we came in. They did seem to have a smile on their faces. I have to wonder how many more surprises are waiting for us.”

“Don't look for them now. We have a year to find them. Might be the only excitement we have the entire time.”

We check the array. It is largely self maintaining and we aren't needed most of the time. There will be three false alarms during our stay. If we don't respond within fifteen seconds a call will go out to Luna City for someone to come and get us. The most humiliating thing that can happen to any of us, but especially for us. We don't sleep. We can pop to the array controls from anywhere on the surface. We of all people do not have any excuse.

“A round of golf anyone?”

“Super golf or norm golf?”

“We have not played super golf in a decade. Super it is!”

Just then the alarm goes off. We bump into each other then simultaneously pop to the array chamber and scramble to the controls.

I make it to the button just before Spider and hit it hard.

“Beat you!”

She ignores me and stares at the control. The alarm sounds again.

“All three on the first hour?”

“Not a drill. This one is real. Saddle up cowboy. We have something

more fun than hitting a sphere into orbit.”

“Yee-ha!” We say together.

“How big is it?”

“Does it matter? It's something to do.” Spider types in a command saying we are on it.

We make a ship with two side cars out of lunar dust and pop to it. We could use the missiles that the norms would use, but why waste them. Besides, it is much more fun to see them closeup. Watching by remote is not the same no matter how high the resolution.

At the last second I remember and grab the remote receiver. Last thing we need is for a second one to get through while we are out playing.

Strapped in we launch and swing around Ba Luna to see Ba Eden below us.

“Is this still part of the same storm that threatened them from Fa'lan's time?”

“Could be. Coming from a Mars direction.”

“How far out?”

She sighs, “Not that far. We probably should slow down.” We are already going several times the speed of light. Warp factor two. Don't ask me how fast that is.

“I want to get this over with and get back. I have a bad feeling Spider.”

“You always have a bad feeling. Try a new script Ravi.”

But I can't get over it. It eats at me.

We approach Mars. Phobos rises over the edge. A little bitty asteroid passes us.

“That was close. Better go get it.”

We like to play with our food. Part Cat I guess. At least I understand why they do now. Just so bored.

We pass it several times in every direction when the alarm goes off again.

“Where?” I ask.

Spider lets go of the receiver and his head turns around quickly.

“What?” I turn around too and look out the aft port.

“Oh shit!” We both say together.

“That thing is as big as Phobos and coming fast.” Our radar peeps confirm size and speed. I hit it with a laser and analysis comes in.

“Oh boy. I want this one. There is enough iron, nickel and cobalt to build a thousand ships the hard way.” My mouth salivates. Of course we could make it easy enough, but it is so much more fun if we can bring it

in for real.

“Zap the small one first. Going as fast as it is, it could still take out a small village.”

We are all business this time. On it and evaporate it in quick order. Still has the same mass, but dispersed as nitrogen it can do no damage.

“Now for the fun. This thing weighs more than our combined abilities can handle. So, we will actually have to think about it some.”

“We have two objectives. Prevent it from hitting Ba-Eden and harvest it for Ba-Luna.”

“We could let it hit Ba-Luna.” Spider suggests.

“Wouldn't that be cool. Most fun we have had in a thousand years fun.”

“Yeah, but they would probably notice.”

I am about to make a smart remark when the receiver squawks, “Okay you two sky devils, report back to base ASAP. This one is for us. Over.”

“Did you remember the transmitter?” I ask.

“Nope. Did you?”

I shake my head, “Did not think we would need it.”

“How long do you think we have?”

“Only a few minutes is my guess.”

“Psiotic jet pack!” We both yell.

“Think we have been together too long?”

“Nah.” We pop straight to the asteroid and begin our effort.

A psiotic jet pack dissolves part of the asteroid and accelerates the resultant particles at close to light speed resulting a very big push. We rest the mass driver on a meter thick 'thn plate to distribute the force over a square kilometer area for each jet. I finish my first and rush to my second. Spider is already ahead of me and well into her second. I have chosen uneven terrain whereas she has a nice smooth surface.

Once we finish we rush to the other side of the asteroid, make a 'thn bubble observation lounge and chairs.

“One, two, three!” I yell and Spider pushes the button that activates the jets.

“Yee-ha! Ride em cowboy!” We are slammed against the surface of the asteroid. If we were not protected by TK we would have been squashed flat as neutronium on a collapsed star. Well, not that flat. We tend to exaggerate some.

We steer by modulating the array of jets. Side jets will turn us when we get halfway and then the aft jets will be used to slow us down. That is when we have to be careful. The ion trail is hundreds of thousands of

miles long by turnover. The ions are traveling nearly the speed of light and even though they are still essentially plasma and gas they can cut through anything in their path like a sword though gee.

Turning to port. We don't want to leave a scar on Mars. Bad form and we would get into so much trouble.

“Would be tempting to leave a mark on Phobos don't you think.”

“The last time we were before the High Council for a prank we spent a month in a limiter field on Hu-Eden. I am not doing that again. Steer straight.”

“No fun at all.” I smile though.

We don't play with something this big. We are both sweating by the time we bring it into Ba-Luna orbit.

“Ah oh.”

“What ah oh? I hate ah oh.”

“Did you leave that many lights on?” She asks me.

“No way. You know me. I am obsessive about turning off lights. It is you who always leaves the lights on.” Then I see below us. Every light in the place is lit up.

“Ah oh.” I sigh.

“Excellent piloting Captain.”

It does not help.

Then it strikes me.

“Spider. I have an idea. We make this into an orbiting observation point. We could put it on the other side of Ba Eden from the Ba Luna. Then we would always be covered. No blind spot.”

“Shit, we left the receiver in our ship.”

“Which is probably orbiting Mars right now.”

“Worse. I think we annihilated it with the stream.”

“The evidence is gone anyway.”

“They must be pissed as all hell down there.”

“They did tell us to dump it in a safe place. This is a safe place isn't it?”

“We had better get down there.”

“Hold up. There is something coming up to us.”

“A small ship. Single person, male. Not someone I remember.”

“Nor I. Someone got the short piece of wire.”

The ship comes up quick enough on a small psiotic jet. It is sputtering. An old style one only used for short distances on account they drive you nuts from the vibration. Advantage is they are much less temperamental and easy for even the lowest tech to trouble shoot and service.

It comes up our backside looking us over. Finally it comes around to our cockpit. We wave. She does not wave back. She brings it in closer. An arm reaches out and attaches an acoustic coupler. Sound does not carry in a vacuum, but does through most solids. Not 'thn shield material though.

We wait. Curious as to what she will do. She gets on her com. We can see her shaking and nodding. She points a vid at us, then back to talking. I could read her mind, but that would really put us in cold storage.

Finally she types something into a slate and holds it up. It scrolls a message to us.

“The council has decided. You have put us in danger for the last time. From here on out you are banned from all Luna and Mars worlds.” She shrugs and backs away. Soon she is going back to the outpost. Without us.

“That sounds better than a limiter for six months.”

“Yeah. Would have been nice if we could have been at this supposed trial to defend ourselves. All that work we did for them.”

“Now it's over.”

“Nice rock we have.”

“Could make a lot of things out of it.”

“Got a lot of time now. At least until the TK council finds out and comes looking for us. Probably end up on some garbage planet pushing slugs to sentience.”

“Speaking of slugs. Maybe we should try and solve that one. Where did the pink go?”

“Sounds good to me. Must be, oh, a hundred TKs working on that one.”

“I'm going to miss them.”

Pink

“This place looks the same all over Simone.”

!There are differences. Concentrate.!

#!Jake, Simone, come over here. What the freep is that thing?!#

I turn around and refocus. I am slower and more cautious now. Maybe because I was a Cat for so long. Long time ago, but I remember it like it was yesterday.

“Saint Darwin. What is that it?”

Just ahead of Bernice is a strange shifting pattern of multicolored lights.

We draw closer. It does not back away or move.

Greetings young ones. Young?

#!It's sentient.!#

!Wish we could say the same thing about ourselves. This must be one of those transdimensional beings we read about.!

Hello, my name is Jake.

Pleased to meet you Jake.

Oh, ah, my name is Bernice.

And I am Simone.

Hello Bernice and Simone. My name is Messles.

How may be help you Messles?

It is I who can help you. It is not safe to remain here.

I don't understand. The Pink, as we call them, are part of our group.

I know. But right now it is not safe here for you.

I try, Can you tell us why?

I had heard you are a curious species. Do you know the one called Ron?

Simone answers, *We have all met him. He is fine. He is currently off this froth set at the moment. Should I say you inquired about him?*

He does not know me. He knew a few descendents of mine.

Descendents? Knew? How transdimensional are they?

The 'Pink' go through a cycle. A normal part of their life. Every few thousand years they senesce by everyone coming together and forming one gloriously large sporophyte.

Benice answers, *And when the spores sprout. . .*

Simone finishes, *The young are exceedingly hungry.*

I add, *And high level TKs at the same time. We would not be able to stop them.*

I have a question. *Where is the sporophyte? We have been all over this planet. Nothing. The plantimals are all here, and even overgrowing everything. Oh, food for the young.*

Messles slowly fades.

“Where is the sporophyte?”

Benice points down, #!Deep, very deep. Must be for protection.!

!Mystery solved. Post buoys and put in on the TK net.!

“Well, that was fast. Just got here a few days ago. Good thing that Messles came along.”

!I am guessing the s/he came when s/he did because time is close.
Let's move it folks!!

“Yes boss.”

#!What's this stuff?!#

A pink fluid is coming up from the rock crevices near us.

!NOW! GET OUT!!

We pop to orbit on reflex. Tendrils reach up from the planet and nearly reach us.

Shit, that was close!

Council

!!First order of business is Pink!! She sits down and Silas gets up.

~They are a tetraploid plantimal species. Each member is a part of the whole in many ways. They gather information and share this information at near perfect transmission by consuming part or all of each other. It is considered a great honor to die to transmit important information and they do this willingly. They are capable of rising the levels and transmitting this information to each other without the usual steps, checks and balances we endure.

They are also clones, as a result of asexual reproduction by fission. But the clones do not fight each other as with many species. They cooperate. In a sense they are one large super organism as well.

They feed both by sunlight and by eating simpler forms. They can ingest animals and plants from other froth earths, but it appears this is more for information gathering than actual nutrition.~

^What is known of their sexual reproduction?^

~This is a taboo subject they do not share with outsiders. Those who have tried to find out either disappear or come back with their memories gone. Apparently they can also permanently extract information by ingesting parts of others as well. These sens all had body parts missing.~

#!Do they accept us as sentient? It would seem our lack of understanding might make us less than equal in their eyes.!#

~It is not known what they truly think of us. They do see us as handicapped and don't understand why we have not been consigned to be food for others. An interesting aside. Cooked food does not have any information in it, only nutrition. To offer cooked food is therefore an insult. They believe we should be served cooked. Though there are rare exceptions.~

“Silver”

~Yes. Silver is the only one of us to share as they deem it.~

A fem Di comes in, Simone.

!I have information to share on the Pink.!

~Please come forward and share.~

!Pu, Nipper, Oz and I were just on Pink. I believe we know what happened to them.!

There is a hushed silence in the room. Those who can suck air, do so.

!They have gone deep underground and assumed a new form. We were warned to leave by one of the transdimensional beings known as

Messle. When we did not heed the warning, Messle left. When we left soon after, a pseudopod followed us into low orbit and nearly took us down. Under no circumstances should anyone go near Pink at this time. They seemed to have formed on massive organism with one mind.!

She removes a sample from a pouch. A small stasis sphere. She sets it down on the stone floor.

!Take this to our best. Find out what they have become.! She leaves.

I step forward, "Our best is Edwin on Brown." I check my database. "Brown 2475 at the moment. I volunteer to take the sample to him and accompany him on any mission."

!Any opposition?! There is none. Who else would want to go there? The Director motions for me to proceed.

!Next item of business is the new life form that has appeared on Fist. Mandhi will be presenting.!

One problem at a time. I exit.

Brown 2475

I arrive in quick order. Getting better at these jumps. Garfield is asleep on the rug in the only open area visible. Books, of all things, are piled up everywhere. What does an essentially immortal being do with books?

I reach down and gently scratch him behind his ears and he starts to purr.

Did you bring any treats?

“Would I forget you? How about some fresh raptor steak dripping in blood sauce?”

That would be great. He sniffs around trying to find it.

“I didn't say I had any, just wondered if you would like it. Not all Cats like raptor steaks dripping in blood sauce.” I draw it out and making slurping noises at the same time.

He looks at me with the most horrified expression on his face.

“Here you are.” I pop a stasis bubble with his raptor treats.

“It is true though. Some Cats far prefer fish.”

Too long with the Ceph. They will be our undoing.

“I think you are doing fine on your own. I saw Nipper and Pu at the Council meeting. Along with Oz and Simone.”

I like Simone.

Are the rumors true? Is there a new Cat species?

“Didn't stay to find out. Have a rush project for Ed. Know where he is at the moment? I don't sense him here.”

He does not update the position log very often. If you wait here, he will return.

“And you never move. Back to his old projects then. Must be a relief to be done with the Catastrophe.” I emphasize the Cat part of the word.

Never again. I will hurl myself into the sun to avoid that one again.

We have this exchange every time we meet. Sort of a ritual.

Garfield finished his treats, stretches, circles three times and curls up again. Guess I would too if I was stuck here all the time.

I go over to a random pile of books and take the top one off to to look at. A Doctoral Thesis done on the lichens in the Di Arctic region. Guess with this many sens there are a few working in fields interesting to Ed. I find the date. Only a few eight days ago. He must print out each one as it is entered into the database. The old ways die hard.

I hear a jostling of glass and papers in the next room. I go in to find Ed rummaging around in his stuff.

“Ed, we have a . . .” but he is gone without noticing me. This time I have a trail and follow his DS scent. I get a little confused a couple of times, but finally come out into a searing desert. He is a hundred meters ahead of me heading for a cave of some sort.

“Ed wait up. We have an emergency assignment.”

He waves over his shoulder, but does not stop.

I follow him into the cave and wait for my eyes to adjust. Finally I get impatient and make the necessary chemical changes with TK.

All around me are glowing patches. Different colors even. Mostly the expected blues and greens, but occasional yellows and a few reds as well.

“Beautiful.” I exclaim.

He looks up to apparently see me for the first time. I point to a particularly bright patch.

“Those? Nothing strange there. This is what I came for.” He holds up what looks like snot from a sick Dio. If you have ever seen this you know what I am referring too. Very gross. Smells horrible, just like this stuff.

“Sulfur eaters I assume?” He nods excitedly.

Finally, having collected his sample he looks up at me.

I pull out a the stasis bubble. I had taken the precaution of putting two more bubbles around it. Don't need this getting loose on another live world.

He looks at it, but does not attempt to touch it.

“It moves. Something alive in a stasis bubble?” I nod. That creeps me out too. Hence the triple bubbles.

“From Pink?”

“I don't do sens worlds. Only browns and blacks. Occasional light green.”

“The Council has asked for your help on this one. All of the Pink have disappeared from all known worlds. When Simone, Pu, Nipper and Oz went on rotation there, something weird happened. They were met with a transdim named Messles or something like that. Anyway, they were told to leave immediately. They hesitated and barely got away in time. A pseudopod rose from deep underground to rise to low orbit in an attempt to catch them.”

“The Pink like their privacy. We should respect it.”

I sigh, “The council wants to know if it is dangerous.”

“Any of it show up anywhere other than Pink?”

I shake my head.

“Not dangerous then. Leave them alone.”

“We were asked to investigate anyway. At least let's do something

from high orbit. Then we can say we went.”

“Waste of time and could constitute a diplomatic mistake of the first order. Knowing what the Pink know about all of us, do you really want them going to war with us?”

“Look as far as we know there are no Pink sens there at all. They have never forbidden us visiting. If they wanted us to stay away now, they would have said something.”

“Maybe they did, only no one was listening.” He continues to examine his prize.

“You are being a stick in the mud Ed. Would not hurt you to help once in a while. You are on no committees, no patrols or rotations.”

“Three hundred Cats.”

“And it was mostly Garfield and Pushy Paws who took care of them. You left as fast as you could.”

He sighs, “I had to try.”

We are suddenly back in his workshop. Garfield is actually snoring.

“When did he start snoring?”

“When he got over three hundred kilos. He says he prefers being fat. I could not do it. Thin is much easier.” I nod. Even TKs can die Garfield.

Garfield wakes with a start and assumes a defensive stance. Ed grins with his back to him.

What did you do?

Took your suggestion and planted a dying dream in his head. It worked.

You are evil Ed. But I am grinning too. Trying not to laugh out loud. What did you do to me?

“Sorry Garfield. Important mission. Council orders. Have to go.”

We should not go direct.

I got that. Pick up some mass. We make a ship with full shielding.

He is very thorough. I can see why he saw this as a big imposition. The ship has multiple rooms and a level six containment area on a long pod sticking out from the back. There are nuclear warheads positioned around it in triplicate.

I finally ask, “What do you know that I don't know?”

“Don't want my mind wiped. Rather be dead.”

“I don't have a say in this.” He does not answer, but continues to work. Guess not.

All the latest equipment appears as we shift between froth Edens collecting duplicates of what he thinks he needs.

“I thought you never used anything newer than a 19th century

microscope?"

"Don't for my work. That and TK are enough. But in this case can we depend on keeping our TK abilities?"

"You are beginning to scare me Ed."

He turns and looks straight at me, "Good. You should be."

Shit.

"Should we be calling in others?"

"You want to risk even more lives?" He looks at me like I am some kind of serial killer. He turns and goes back to work stowing all the gear. He carefully crafts perfect resting places for everything.

"I am not going to do everything. As long as you are here, work on life support. I want it to be self contained and be able to work without psiotics if necessary. At least a month. After that start on shielding and finally propulsion." Shit, I am going to be here a year. The Council said immediately.

I am ready to strangle him when he finally announces it is good enough.

"Good enough? We have been working on this thing for eight days and now it is just good enough?"

He looks at me amazed, "You really want to work on it more?"

I just break up laughing hysterically, shaking my head.

"I am sure none of the previous patrols took these cautions."

"I'm positive they didn't. If they had they may not have had to run for their lives."

"I am setting a course for Pink 0529."

"One off from our objective. There are no sens on Pink 0529. Strange how that happened. Are they really that recent?"

"Thirty five million years is a long time. We were not much more than lemurs that long ago ourselves."

"Rats according to Sauron. What do you hope to find there?"

"A control population. If we understand the closest non sens we might better understand the Pink themselves."

"Makes sense. Wait, we all split recently. Aren't the Pink on the sen shell on the Rooi plot? Shouldn't they have split recently too?"

"Maybe they are the last ones to go?" He shrugs.

"Do we want to be there when it happens?"

"Maybe that is what they are preparing for." He offers.

"I have a hard enough time trying to understand the other sens."

"You're the doctor there. I stick to simpler forms. Normally." He growls. I don't dare tell him I was the one who suggested him. I do want

to survive this experience.

Pink 0529

Captain's Log Frothdate 727.36. I always grumble about that dating system. Why start when the three disappeared? I have known Silver for a long time. Nice enough guy, but to start an entire dating system from their departure? Now Jesus I could understand. Not religious mind you, but his impact was huge by comparison. Ask any normal sen about whether or not they care Silver, Rooi and Owa ever existed. None will say yes. Only us TK cared about them at all.

Now Doc. What a character. As curious as a Cat and can't stop talking. Almost as bad as having the three hundred around. At least Garfield has the common sense to keep to himself. Self maintaining too. Rare in any sen.

"Orbit established." Now why say that? I can tell as well as he.

"Do we go down?" He asks.

I must have given him the look. He shakes his head, "Guess not. No reports of their going weird."

"No reports does not mean they haven't." I counter. Actually I don't expect trouble here. I just want to have a look at their closest relative.

"Concentrate your scans on the region near 36.1789 by -118.2215."

"Why there?"

I sigh, "Because that is where they are."

"Good reason." He chuckles. That laugh is going to kill me. Too long running alone I guess. He does not seem to be disturbed by me at all. Even when I get mad at him he just bounces back. I am really missing Garfield.

I look at the scans on my monitor as he does them. A second set of eyes can catch something the other misses. Nothing looks out of the ordinary. Lots of different plantimals as would be expected. Not the barren strangeness that Pink itself has become.

"Captain. Found a patch of barrenness." He chuckles at that for some reason.

"Show me."

The view zooms in. That is what I am looking for.

"Suit up. No surprises." We take our time checking out each other's suits and triple check the emergency beacons. If we lose TK, I want a way out. No one would know we were here except for the beacons.

We take a shuttle down for the same reason.

"A bit paranoid aren't you Captain?"

“Not at all. Let me know if you still feel that way when we are stranded on Pink itself. Think of this as a practice run.” If it will quiet you down.

We set down in a live section. I want to start there. We are suited up before setting down and immediately disembark.

We make our way to the periphery of the zone. I look behind me. There are footprints in the pink lawn of plantimals we have crushed. This is normal at least. I take a few samples all the same. Up close I can see the characteristic shape that the larger version is the Pink themselves. Scanning their interiors shows the same internal structures as well. They probably had a distance ancestor in common. I have found the ones I am looking for. Thank goodness the journals were thorough and accurate. Sometimes a sen will fudge the exact location to keep a study site to themselves.

Now the edge of the zone is unusual. It is very sharply defined. I set up a holographic recorder. The results indicate a near perfect circle. A circle predicts a center. A center indicates a starting point. I reach into my back and remove a balance weight. I have used them before to give an indication of deformation strength. I place it first on the living side. It sinks nearly to the rock surface below. I wipe it off and let the alcohol dry. Then I carefully place it on the new surface. Nothing appears to have happened. I remove the weight to a new location in the zone. I will leave it there. I do not want to risk bringing something back to the ship.

There is only the slightest impression and it is slowly turning black. Necrotic tissue. I remove a small shovel and dig into the surface. It is a mix of soil and rock. Nothing at first. I dig deeper. Finally at thirteen centimeters I reach what I suspected. When the sun hits the bright pink life it quickly retreats into a small crevice.

“Break out a food ration.”

“Why?”

I give him a dirty look. He quickly gets one out and unwraps it. Why do we wrap food items? It does not make sense.

I take it from him and hold onto it. First I drop a piece of the native wildlife onto the zone. It slowly seems to dissolve. I scan it. It is becoming like the ones below. It slowly oozes down to the dark below. There must be a chemical clue present. Next I break off a piece of food and drop it on the zone. It does not break down and ooze into the dark below. Of course it is not going to act the same. But how is the life form below going to react to it? The dark below, or rather the bright pink, comes up, engulfs the food particle, dissolves it slowly and then drags

itself and the digested particles below.

I scan the small slugs in the normal zone, tetraploid. I scan the ones below. Diploid.

“Like watching paint dry.”

“I did not ask to be here. Anytime you want to take over, be my guest. But, as long as I am here I am going to do it right. Or you can always find another scientist. There are many who are more knowledgeable than I am on the subject. I am sure Professor Gert or Sjik would be better for this purpose.” Being the only level nine remotely qualified makes me the choice I guess. Well, the sooner this is over the better.

I get up and make my way back to the shuttle. I turn, “Are you coming or should I leave you here?”

“Coming.”

We are both quiet getting back to the ship. Thank goodness.

Back in the pilot's chair I tell him.

“I appreciate the quiet. Thank you. It is possible we are dealing with an alternative generations. A number of plants, specifically greens and reds, do this. A real advantage really. It allows them to occupy two distinct ecological niches at once.”

“So if one goes sour, they survive in the second until the first is acceptable again.”

“Precisely.” Not as stupid as he appears.

I continue, “Some even use three generations. Simple two here. The one we were most familiar with is the surface one. We are prejudiced in that way.”

“And the second is the negative phototroph. Just like on Pink prime.”

“Maybe. Don't think so though.”

“Yeah, this one does not reach out and grab low orbiting objects.”

“Yeah.”

We pop.

Pink

I am actually surprised the ship works. He had me do it up with fine wood paneling. All the tech hidden behind wood and brass. He said he works better in a real environment. Well, metal and plasteel is real too. For that matter you could make the entire thing out of 'thn fiber matrix. Would have weighed one tenth as much. I put my hand on the deck. Would not feel as good though. He does have a point there. Maybe it helps him concentrate.

We arrive in a very high orbit around Pink. Got that right at least. I don't want to end up Pink chow today thank you.

“Launch a probe. We are doing this nice and slow.”

I launch the first probe. We get telemetry immediately. We are watching this one go down. A sort of teaser to see what will happen. We watch the visual on a monitor. I am sure he is also monitoring with TK. I am.

“There is action on the surface. A sort of gathering over a ten kilometer area.”

“Noted. Right below us. The probe has reached the surface some two hundred kilometers away. It is not interested in the probe.”

“Telemetry coming in. It has started a microprobe on it's descent.”

“Got it. The bright pink layer is diploid. Just like the we thought.”

“Ed! What is that?!” He does not look away from the monitor. I see what looks like a small moon on the horizon. Low orbit. Still to far away to see well optically against the sunlight. I scan it. Mostly iron, some cobalt and nickel.

“What the freep is an iron asteroid doing in orbit here?”

“What?” He finally notices me. He does some adjustment to the monitor and the asteroid comes into focus.

“I thought that thing was a telescope, but I was not sure.”

“Enfolded optics. Lousy in low light, but great otherwise.” The picture is sharp. All I care about.

“It's coming this way. Faster orbit time than we are.”

“There. Right there.” The monitor tags something he sees. It enlarges.

“That is a structure. Looks like a . . . it looks like a command capsule. This is getting stranger and stranger.”

“I thought you said Pink was off limits to everyone but us.”

“It is. It is. I don't understand it. Aliens?”

“We need to check it out. Launch a slow probe.”

“A crawler?”

“Right. Forgot the proper term.”

“Crawler launched.”

It is much slower. We have to wait two orbits for it to catch up and land on the asteroid. We watch through it's eyes as it approaches the capsule.

“Whoa, a lot of damage. That is one large hole.” I say.

“Sending it in through the whole. Bio sensors on.”

“You don't need bio sensors to see it. There is pink slime everywhere. Pink attacked the capsule!”

“We don't know that yet. It is possible whoever they were brought it up not knowing the danger.”

“You think they are dead?”

“Likely. The only problem is that there is no trace of DNA other than Pink here. Could it have been a Pink ship?”

“No. Look at those controls. Look at the chairs. One small and one very long and thin. Those aren't Pink chairs. Almost Hu in design.” Something is nagging me at the back of my mind. I don't get it though.

“Possible. How many different forms have we seen that could fit those chairs though. Don't jump to conclusions.”

“None of ours. Well, maybe a Ba could fit the small chair. No tail space for any of the Di or Cat species. You heard about the new one on Fist? Supposed to be Cat like.”

“A Fistian could fit the larger chair.”

“They are so light weight they would not need a chair.” I laugh.

“The entire asteroid is honeycombed. Someone made a ship out of it the hard way. Mineral composition puts it as common to the asteroid belt. Appears to be one of ours.”

“A bit out of place though.” At least he admits that much.

“If I did not know better I would suspect this as a capture from some near Eden object. This thing had help getting here.”

“That means TK. No norm system is advanced enough to pull it off.”

“Not in our Froth anyway.”

“Still the possibility it is extra Froth. First Eden certainly visited enough worlds. It could happen. The first probe has found something. There are two Hu walking around on the surface. Here is visual.”

He puts it up. I nearly faint. I know them.

“Positive ID. Spider and Ravi. They are approaching the probe.” I see their hands come down to the probe and suddenly the probe goes dark.

“Assessing last info. The shapes we saw were no Hu. I repeat. They

were not Hu. Pure diploid Pink.”

We pop to a black world. We are officially in quarantine.

I set a comsat to broadcast our data. Sterilize it at four hundred degrees and pop it to Hu-Eden. The Luna people will want to know that they have lost their TKs.

Next is the most thorough examination of the ship and each other I have ever had to do. But the only Pink we found was the triple stasis sample. Our control. Wondered why he never looked at it.

“We still wait out the month. Anyone wants to get a hold of us, they know where we are. I just want to know we are clean.”

“Yeah, after seeing the cockpit and the two of them on the surface I did not want to end up like them either. That could not have been pleasant.”

“Since we are together for a month. You will need to entertain yourself.”

“Here? A black world? Oh joy.” Not my idea of a vacation spot.

“Wait, you knew Daniel. He was with those slug like creatures that could mimic most life forms.”

“The !. I know where you are going. Are the Pink becoming like them you wonder? No evidence yet. Many life forms will take the shape of the corpse they inhabit.”

“Nice thought, but do they animate it too?”

“The Pink are sentient and TK. An experiment they are trying. They must have been curious about us. What else do you need?”

“We don't make animated slugs.”

“Never tried. We have the time. We could try.”

“Okay, that is creeping me out. Am I allowed on the surface?”

“I have never been to this world, but I see no reason why not. Be careful. Very easy to fall into a sink hole or lava tube. Erosion is huge without plants or plantimals to hold it together.”

“Or tear it apart. I have seen what life does to rock faces. Or pathways. Tree roots on pathways.”

“Just go. Have fun. Leave me alone. See you in four eight days.”

“Got it.”

Ba Eden

+Looks like they won't need us on Pink. The entire world is under quarantine.+

~So, we get to go to Europa instead?~ Xot asks.

+Maybe. Sam went to ask. Should be back soon.+

~Here is a news item. Seems Spider and Ravi pulled one too many pranks. They have been banned from all Froth Lunas and Mars.~

+What did they do this time?+

~Says here they commandeered an asteroid that was on an impact path with Ba Eden.~

+That would make them heroes not outcasts.+

~And they put it in orbit around Ba Eden just for fun.~

+Very tricky.+

~Apparently that's what the Lunarians thought. Reckless behavior. Could not take the chance that they would miss next time.~

+That would have hurt. So, where did they go? I don't sense anything orbiting us now.+

~No one knows. Just happy they're gone I guess.~

I scan our surroundings. Not too many fem Hu as large as Sam.

+She is at a food stall.+

~Must take a lot to keep someone her size adequately sustained.~

+Here she comes.+

“Hi guys. Got us some food. Those nice shrimp in Ba wasabi for Xot. A fine cockroach salad for Fa and a simple sandwich for me. Lots of herb tea too.” She sets out a bowl for Xot and hands me my bowl.

We eat in silence as to our own kind. The cockroaches have been roasted to perfection. One of the few delicacies I can pretty much count on in all cultures. The fresh greens add just the right accent.

+Excellent choice my friend.+ She does a slight bow.

“Has to be better than my sandwich with some kind of mystery meat.”

~You did not ask?~

“Ah, my friend. I know better than that.” She laughs well.

~The shrimp are good. Guess they are close enough to bugs to not ruin. But I am suspicious of the wasabi. Too mild for my taste.~

Sam laughs again, “Even salt would be too strong for the Ba. We will be on Europa soon. TK rations for the next three years.”

+Oh! We are going! I can't believe it! We are actually going. I thought for sure they would come up with some other excuse.+

~Finally another posting in space. Sen worlds are so boring to me.~
+Yep, a clear night and a good far seer. What more could you want.+
“Did you two even read up on Europa?”
+What's to know? It is out there.+ I signify the open sky.
She smiles then says, “We need to catch the next train to the transfer station.”
Meaning get out of sight of everyone else before jumping.
We find an empty warehouse and slip inside and then up.

Europa

We make our way to Luna and then Mars. There we join the ones who will be our community for this rotation. It takes all types to go to a remote outpost and that is what we get. From long Luna hybrids to heavy world stocky Di and Dia whose last assignment was on a low orbit Jupiter mission. They had never seen a Ku before, so were very curious about Fa. Hu and Ceph they had seen plenty of and we were pretty much ignored. Until I challenged some of the larger Di to arm wrestling. Their arms are not really that strong, but because of their size they can't admit that.

We are last in line at registration for the shuttle flight to Europa.

Sam presents our credentials, "Professors Sam Hu, Xot Ceph and Fa'lan Ku from Ba Eden. Here are the our credentials and our approvals from the Interplanetary Council and the Psiotic Council of Elders." It has taken years to get them both to agree at the same time.

A long legged Mars official looks everything over repeatedly. He did not do this with the others.

I say in Standard Hu, "Is there a problem?" He startled by my ability to speak Hu and nearly drops everything. Wait until he hears Xot.

"All three of you are psiotically enhanced?"

Sam answers, "Yes. It is there in our papers. We are all level eights."

"One moment please." He locks our papers in a cabinet and leaves through a portal behind him. Also locked. Like that would stop any of us. Nor are we likely to let anyone else walk off with our hard gotten papers.

~Probably confirming that we really do have permission. We fake this stuff all the time you know.~

+Why bother? We could just show up if we were behaving that way. They should be honored we are doing everything proper.+

"We would not even need to study Hu Europa. Any Europa would likely be close enough for my work." His degrees are in xeno biology.

~My work would be better on Ba Europa, but that is off limits at the moment. Hu Europa is the closest they will allow."

+Any would do for my work. Just have to run some compensations routines.+

"In other words a change in routine, not another grant due."

I shrug. Done enough grant proposals thank you. Hate them.

The others in our group are nowhere to be seen. I do a quick scan and find them already on the long range shuttle. It is fully loaded and ready to

go. The pilot is doing final checkout.

“Here he comes.”

+We are going to miss the flight. They are nearly ready.+

“I am sorry to report that you cannot proceed.” He hands back our papers, then locks his station and leaves. There is no one else.

~What was that all about? Our ambassador is going to get a hearing sensor full of that I am going to say.~

+I think there is something more going on. We need to check in and see if anyone else is having problems.+

“I suppose we can always catch up, but the Learning Center is going to be upset about the lost trade we aren't doing but which they have already traded for.”

+Bartering is illegal.+

~And it never happens. Where did you come from dear?~ He shows amusement. I sigh in the Hu way and everyone laughs or equivalent.

We make our way to the Embassy. Kind of strange since we live everywhere and have no official location of our own. Why do we need an embassy?

It is a small place since no one is actually there until needed.

As soon as we enter a clerk pops in. An amusing looking Ba wearing glasses of all things. Must be some kind of fashion statement?

^Sorry.^ She takes of the glasses. ^There were needed for the assignment I was on. A level four village a few hundred clicks away.^

“On Mars?”

^We have been here for over a thousand years. Some of the Hu have gone a little feral.^

“And a Ba is keeping an eye on them.”

She puts the glasses back on, ^Less threatening. No one expects a little Ba to be a problem. Just play dumb and they will tell you almost anything. Okay, mostly they get high on illegal hooch made from gava root. Tastes horrible.^

Sam laughs, “Doesn't it always?”

^So what do you need?^

I motion for Sam to continue. She is doing well enough. Xot has already gotten out a tablet and is working up some equations.

“We were scheduled to go on the shuttle to Europa. It has taken us years to get all the necessary approvals, permits and funding.”

^You mean doing it through norm channels.^

She nods.

^Can't you just go anyway?^

She sighs, “We are trying to be nice. Just wondered what is going on.”

^The Interplanetary Council is putting a lot of pressure on all TKs.

After Spider and Ravi went rogue and nearly destroyed Ba Eden. Reports say they have been spotted on several other worlds as well. Nothing destructive yet, but we are trying to find them and settle this.^

+I don't believe it. Spider and Ravi would never hurt anyone.+

^I have known them my entire life and I don't believe it either. But, they have a right to file a complaint, same as anyone.^

~Looks like they did more than file a complaint according to what I am reading. They were told to permanently leave Luna and Mars in all Froths. No trial, nothing. Just told to leave.~

+So then why are they appearing on Froth Edens? Wouldn't you have expected them to check in first and tell us their side of the story?+

~Says here that Ed and Doc found the meteor they retrieved turned into a ship/home. Sharks! It says the ship was destroyed by something from Pink. Then later their forms were seen on Pink itself by a probe, but the forms were pure Pink. No Hu at all sensed. Imposters? No wonder they all want us to be on the look out for them.~

“Might also explain why we are being denied access to Europa. They have decided that all TKs are suspect.”

^It might be a good idea to close the embassy. In protest if nothing else. Spider and Ravi are in trouble and need our help.^

+And the locals don't want it. We already have five eight days leave for the Europa project. Might as well spend it doing some good if we are to be denied our original intent.+

~It says we are forbidden access to Pink. Too dangerous apparently. The last sighting of the two was on Dio Eden. Could use Bernice on this one.~

^I'm ready.^ She makes a 'gone fishing' sign in five languages and hangs it on the embassy portal. We all know what it really means. A code for trouble, get away now. Should anyone else show up. I don't sense anyone else, but then we can hide when we want to.

+What's your name?+

She looks shocked, ^Of course. Sorry. I just forgot. My name is Eari.^

“Unusual even for a Ba. I am Sam. She is Fa'lan and he is Xot. Where to first?”

^A 'lan. Impressive. I only met our 'lan once at a state function. Well, I have a place nearby. We can go there first to collect some mass from the surrounding soil. I think we should go prepared to swing either way.^ TK and non TK.

Nearby is a relative term for TKs. It is actually more than a thousand kilometers south of here. Very isolated.

^I like my privacy. After fending off norms all day I need a place I can be alone.^ She indicates the large central space. ^A few friends show up and we socialize. I will leave messages for them as well.^

+Not norms I gather.+

^Fives mostly. They are here on a study grant. First time in low gravity. I want them out of harms way as well. Ba Eden might be safer for them at the moment.^

~I agree. Spider and Ravi were both eights like we are. They could do a lot of damage if they chose to.~

“They are not going to Xot. Get that out of your brains. If they were going to go rogue they would have done it a thousand years ago, not now.”

^We should go. This place still had to be registered with the locals. I don't want to be answering questions. Over here is where we can take mass. I have been wanting to do an addition there for some time. Just never got around to it as the Hu say.^

The ship has to blend with level four/five tech. So it looks more metal, lines and bumps than I would have designed it. Inside is similar. Nothing that would frighten a local, well, except for the fact that it flies. Even there we have gas jets and lights to give it the illusion of nothing too far outside the imaginable.

“Why do we even need a ship?”

^Because we may need to get us and/or the two of them outside normal space without TK abilities. I put in the latest dim inverter I just happened to have in storage.^

~That's what that thing is. I would like to know more about it when we have a moment.~

^Certainly.^

+Are we ready?+

^I would like to suggest to the surface first and then to Dio Mars. No one should be there. Neither the Dio or Dia were interested or ready to develop it.^

~Then we come into Dio Eden slowly.~ She nods.

Fist

~What?~

^We don't understand how it happened. They somehow managed to escape. There have been sightings, but they are still loose.^

~You are very lucky there have not been any deaths. They probably see everything out here as food.~

^Several adults have been eaten. We assumed it was an attempt to gather knowledge.^

I know from scanning their minds that the bugs look just like larger versions of one of their favorite foods. Only less muscle. We are very weak compared to their world.

As near as I can figure it, they come from a world that is smaller than ours, but more dense, so gravity is about the same. But, this is the critical aspect. It only rotates once every approximately two Eden years. That means they are further away from their sun and it is more intense than ours. They are restricted to a narrow band of living space that is constantly moving. Therefore they must also be moving nearly constantly, or they die. Probably very heat and cold tolerant as well. How the smaller life forms survive is not obvious yet. Their minds did not say. Hard to worry about details that don't matter when you just trying to stay alive.

They have weapons, mostly alloys of iron and nickel. I am guessing they are on the surface of their world. But, they must be in an oxidized form. That means they know how to extract the metal and forge it. Not stupid animals at all. All of the freeze thawing and high heat would rust everything quickly. If they evolved to live on this world it would have been like this a very long time.

Their body structure is very unusual. Nothing like it in the galactic records. That was were I was when they 'escaped' their inescapable cell. They are part vertebrate and part arthropod. They have both internal and external bones. The carapace on their backs protects them from attacks and it's honeycombed structure acts as an insulator. Not sure of the spikes. Though they do seem to hang things from them. The eyes are compound, but there is an entire retina behind each lens, not just a few cells like a normal arthropod. They can see all sides at once. No one could sneak up on them. Of course their speed alone would make that hard. They had scars, so something attacked them on a regular basis. And the scars were not from weapons. I am guessing that their food fought

back.

Their mythology does not talk about stars. I could have possibly gotten a fix if they were anywhere near us in the galaxy. Could be the cloud cover. They are black on their faces and white behind. That means they faced the sun. We know which way they were running to stay alive. Must have driven them near crazy to be here at sunset or sunrise.

I go inside the compound. There is a well run track around the barrier. They knew there was an outside. I remember when they looked back at us through the peep holes. They knew there were other life forms, probably intelligent. Nearly all of the plants are trampled or eaten. They were hungry. It would take a lot to keep them going at their obvious high rate of metabolism. Surprised the bugs did not notice this. There is plenty of open Fistian land around us. They could have organized a work detail to bring food here.

Ah, here is where they left the compound. They jumped. I phase through barrier and find the landing spot on the other side. Looks like all four followed the same path. I follow the space between the two barriers. Here is where they jumped again. I phase through and see the direction they went in. West, towards the setting sun. Consistent at least. They would not be able to keep up, but they would feel more comfortable running in that direction while they could. The fact they did not go crazy and bang themselves against the wall suggest intelligence and adaptability.

I scan and find them nearly five hundred kilometers away in an area well away from any active enclosures. They are exhausted and resting. At least they are together.

I make sure none of the Fistians are nearby and pop to near their location. They don't notice me in the dark. I do an exchange bubble, putting them and the surrounding plants back into their enclosure and the empty enclosure here. I know this will freak the Fistians. We have been careful up to this point. After seven hundred years they might have forgotten what we can do or even that we exist. Back to ground zero, or whatever that Hu saying was. I just don't think the four need to be let loose. I add some psiotic additions to the barriers as well. They will not be getting out again. Hopefully the gate will open soon and I can get them back to their own world. That should be any time now if my reading of their minds is correct.

'thants

There is a cold wind coming from the west. Snow is still on the ground, but the first glimmer of light becomes visible.

“Not long now. The portal will not stay open long. We should be ready.”

“Remember Razzel to think on our time frame, not theirs. We have plenty of time.”

“Oh, like it would open on a daily basis. It has been an entire circuit.”

We had no idea it was keyed to the sunrise. The deep ones never saw the light of day and they worked on a regular basis just fine.

“Well it is. Does not matter how. If nothing else accept that it's different here and nothing should be taken for granted. Look around you. The war destroyed a lot.”

There are craters everywhere from the north's weapons. Not all atomic or the gate might not even exist. They must not have known of the location of this hideout. Or they ran out of the larger weapons at the end and threw anything left once the metallic hydrogen went down and the hideouts were visible. Or maybe it was the mH itself, depending on if it went slowly or all at once.

We enter the cave. No lights this time. We see our footprints from our previous visit. No new ones. The cave is collapsed further in. I panic at first until I see the demarcation line for the portal. Not much space on the other side though.

“You thinking the same thing? One of us should be on the other side. They might see something the other two don't.”

“And would be trapped against the side of the cave if there is something. We all go in the same way. Unless kitty wants the job?”

Sali gives us a dirty look. Did not think so.

I'm not stupid.

“No one ever thought that.” I smile.

While we wait I watch the 'thants at work. They continue to build or maintain the portal. Never got this close to a portal before to know much about them. Fascinating that something so small would be able to do this. Someone or something did a great job designing them.

Finally! I thought I would die if I had to help any more refugees. The idea of being stuck here forever nearly got to me.

“Nice to know you have limits.”

Dark on the other side. We all scan and nothing immediately apparent.

“Let's go. Full shielding and be ready for anything.”

As soon as we are through we spread out.

That was a really rough ride. I don't remember it being that bad before.

Something happened at the end. I don't think we are where we are supposed to be. This is the second opening for this portal. There should have been someone to meet us. They would have set up sentries and observers.

Looks like our kind has been here though. The footprints match. The destruction certainly does. I continue my scan but don't find them in the immediate area. Weird thing is that the line of trampling ends abruptly for no apparent reason. Like there was a barrier that isn't there now.

They may have gotten out. I would have.

Nothing more entertaining than a trapped kitty. Razzel you are getting yourself into trouble.

I comment, *Seems to be the right world. I am sensing a few nines and eights. Not hiding themselves at all.*

That is stupid with new portals opening at random times. They have gotten lazy.

Agreed. Razzel adds. Better than teasing. Better than teasing.

A bug pops in.

I didn't know they could do that.

I didn't either. Have we been gone that long? We all immediately dampen our TK to norm level.

The bug comes up to us to examine us. We all immediately pull weapons to defend ourselves.

They will not be of use. Speaks our language. Must have gotten it from the four that went before us. Wonder which one they ate?

I try, *What happened to the other four. We wish to return them.*

Unfortunately there has been some interference. They are where you should have come through. Did you get sufficient readings when you came through to know where you are?

Huh? Sali looks surprised.

I get it though, *Bug! Finally. I have been looking all over for you.*

Rooi asks, *Why didn't you land on the same planet as we did? I thought we all went though together.*

I have had more recent experience than the three of you did. I decided it might be better to be here on Fist as a Fistian to keep a watch on their activities. I have much to report.

*Good thinking. Thanks. We should get started on initiating the

compensation protocols.*

Already started. There was a perfect candidate in place.

Ah, yes, they would be good. I smile.

How about the fail safes? Good question. If anything happens to us, who knows how long or where we would return to.

I will need to include the three of you now, but it won't take long to make the change.

Oh. I almost forgot. I brought some new tech with us. I show Bug the invisibility cloak. Well, invisible to psiotic probe anyway. They could still see us if we were within normal sight.

Bug says, *You three need to change form. You look like pupae in the sun.* Bug's right. What form to choose though? We use the cloak to change. Anything that powerful on the psiotic scale would attract attention. Something we don't want to do.

Pink Luna

“No change. Log it.” He types into a term, the date, time and observations. I pull back from the large optic array. We were fortunate to have clear cloud cover for the last hour.

“You trust the TKs to leave us alone?”

I answer, “Nah. They can't help it. They have to meddle. Look at our history. They have been right there at every change. Not always good either.”

“But they are also useful. We could not support such a high population without their help.”

“You mean there would be more of us without them. They are the ones who changed us so we have a harder time conceiving. I have given up. Done it with nearly everyone I have met and still nothing.”

He looks at me with interest.

“You have been out here too long if I look interesting to you Dong. I don't have much longer. Way past any chance now. No, my mating days have been over for some time. Just wanted to make the point that they messed with us.”

“We are already crowded. I can't imagine even more people. What about all the trace metals. We would be dead without them.”

“That does not give them the right to mess with our insides.”

“You think Spider and Ravi will return?” He changes the subject. I do tend to dwell on it. Can't help it. I am bitter. All my friends had at least one. I am the only one with none. End of the line. No brothers or sisters left either. Brother died in a construction accident. Sister of a stroke. Not enough exercise they said. Weak blood vessels.

“That's why we are here. You have seen their asteroid. No sign of life on it. They are gone. We would have seen something by now. As I said, they can't help it.”

“You could be right. Let's eat.”

“Go ahead, set it up.”

“Any requests?”

“Nah. I just want to look for a little bit longer.”

“Okay. Miso and tofu again.” He is trying to goad me. When he realizes it won't work he goes to the kitchen. Put some chili in it this time. At least it will have some flavor then.

The spot I am interested in is coming around again. I thought I saw it just as it disappeared over the horizon a little over twelve hours ago. Any

moment now.

I wait until Dong comes back, but it has not appeared yet. Maybe I was mistaken.

The miso is plain. Or it looks like it. I taste it.

“Fish! Where did you get fish?” I savor it.

“A birthday present. Been saving it. We are out of here tomorrow.

Thought it was the right time.”

“You aren't trying to get lucky are you?” I give him my best evil eye.

“Don't worry. You are right. Ugly as a fat one out an airlock.”

“Thanks. I feel so much better.” But we both laugh.

We both slurp our soup slowly. Rare we get real fish. Tiny, but they add so much.

Dong sets his bowl down first and points to the monitor behind me.

“What's that?”

I turn around quickly and see it.

“Shit. It is at least five times larger than when I thought I saw it last.”

It is a huge brown spot on an otherwise multi shaded magenta colored surface. Strange that even the oceans are magenta on Pink.

I take measurements and do a quick calculation.

“It is expanding at an exponential rate. It will be only a matter of a few hours before it covers the entire planet.”

“What is it?”

“Focus the large array on the edge.” He rushes to the other side of the room and types in commands. Normally we keep a rather broad angle of view. About one meter resolution.

The edge appears and then we are totally into the brown.

“Sorry. I will instruct to compensate for the expansion.”

The edge reappears. We see a rush of pink coming from below the surface through every possible crack and fissure in the surface. Once the sunlight or whatever hits it, it begins to turn brown.

“Look Liu!”

I take my eyes away from the monitor and look out the portal he indicates. The center of the brown spot is turning black.

“They are certainly doing something. Wish we had probes that could get there in time. We will have to depend on the few remaining micro sats we have in place.”

Everything else we send gets sucked down by a huge pseudopod like thing from the surface.

We watch as the entire surface turns brown and then black. Even the new surface appearing over the horizon is now black as well.

“You sending this back to Hu Luna?”

“Of course. I expect we will have visitors soon. Maybe we should clean up some.”

“We won't be getting any visitors. We are expendable. They will wait and see what happens before they risk themselves.”

He looks surprised and then concedes the point. Only the old and the trouble makers end up here or on any of the other non Hu Lunas. Dong can't help but get into fights. Usually pride is what does him in. I have seen his file. Can't sit still long enough to get a credential in anything but the simplest tasks. Like here. Does not take much to operate a few controls.

“Are we recording?”

“Yep. I started as soon as we saw the brown spot. Does it appear to be getting lighter to you?”

“Not sure.” I focus the array as close as I can and adjust the mag to max. At this level we can see down to the centimeter level.

“Strange. The lasers say I am in focus, but I don't see a thing.”

He looks up at the monitor.

“Could mean it is smaller than a centimeter then.” A beeping starts.

“Lasers just went off line. They can no longer focus. Definitely getting lighter.”

“I will widen the view.” Definitely lighter.

It takes a few minutes, but eventually it settles down to a light gray. The weird thing is, is that it appears the entire planet is becoming hard to focus. I run to a portal.

“Does Pink Eden look fuzzy to you?” He joins me at the portal. A little close in to my personal space. I try to concentrate. He sniffs my hair.

“Stop that right now! You have been officially warned.” He freezes.

“Sorry. I meant no offense. What did you use?”

“Never mind. Just concentrate. If the Pink can reach into space with a pseudopod I have to wonder what they are doing now.”

“And whether or not they can reach us here?” I nod.

“Shit.” Yeah, shit.

Black

“Doc, get back up here. We just had an emergency transmission from the Council.”

“Roger that.” Had to use radio as he was just outside my range. Should have learned how Silver and Rooi were able to break the nine barrier.

Doc appears a few moments later.

“What? Did Garfield get into trouble again?”

“I don't know. Instructions said not to open it until you were here too.”

“I'm here!”

I shake my head. I did not miss him.

“Have a good time on the surface?” Go back soon.

“Oh lots of fun. Made a labyrinth. Solved it.” He sighs, then smiles.

Teasing me.

I activate the message.

It is visual. Ceph leadership insist whenever it is their turn.

~A major crisis is happening. All TK levels are being expelled from all Luna and Mars habitats. When your quarantine time ends, do not, I repeat, do not attempt to appear on any Luna or Mars settlement. It is the Council's belief that they will back down once they experience failures of key systems. Specifically psiotic systems.~

“That predicates that they have not learned how to repair them themselves. They aren't dumb and other cultures have learned to make psiotic tech.”

“You could be right. We will still need to keep an eye on them so that they don't become a nuisance to others less tech endowed.”

“Is that it?”

“Appears to be. Going back to the surface?”

“How much time do we have left?”

“Twenty nine days, four hours and nineteen minutes.”

“I thought you would be enjoying the quiet.”

“It is quieter at my lab or in the field. Here I can only do analysis and write. There I can be with my passion.”

“The lichens and simpler plantimals?” I nod.

“Why do you like them so much?”

“You may find this hard to believe considering the number of papers I have written, but I find them intensely beautiful.”

He smiles, “Oh I got that. Remember the kind of Doc I am.”

“That was so long ago. Figured you have moved on from that.”

He shrugs, “Never leaves you. Like riding a bicycle. I miss those. Tried riding down below, but it is not the same without other beings and trees. I love trees.”

I laugh, “Trees think too much of themselves.”

“Slow time does sort of ruin their beauty doesn't it?” He laughs too, “They really think they are something special. Sort of like a few other species I know.”

“The OM on a lichen world does not think so much of herself. Much more humble. More inquisitive.”

“Like a first date. A lot of sens get addicted to that feeling. That's why they keep going from one relationship to another.”

I have already turned back to my work.

“I'll just go back down and find something to do.” He bangs around for at least ten minutes though. Once he leaves I see he has taken a small hand lens and portable microscope. Good. Maybe he will develop some good habits. Twenty nine days is going to seem like an eternity. No slow time to be with an OM here.

I reach over to the stasis bubble.

“What the?”

I transmit to Doc, “Get back here. We have a problem.”

He enters immediately, “Sorry, hadn't actually left yet. Wanted something better to eat than my imagination was capable of coming up with. What's up Doc?” He snickers. I want to slap him. Instead I point at the bubble.

“Stasis bubble. So what? Where did you get this one?”

“There is only one. That is the one from Pink.”

“Not possible. Stasis means stasis. That can't be the one from Pink.”

“It is. And it's not pink now.”

“More of a brown, no darker. Is it changing as we speak?”

“I believe so. It was more a brown pink when I called you.”

Ultimately over several hours it goes to total black and then gets lighter. I have it under the microscope the entire time. It is definitely changing. It can't be, but it is.

Doc brings over a psiotic microscope.

“I had forgotten about that thing. Most lichens are easy to read so I forget it is part of the kit.”

He sets it up like he is used to using one.

“I have done my time in the field too. I know I don't act like it.

Throws sens off. They think I only play and don't observe them. Works

anyway.”

We put it under the scope.

“Oh, wow. Impossible, but it's definitely alive. Well, the Pink are or were psiotic creatures. Looks like we have proof. What are they doing though?”

“That is obvious to me. Green man conversion.”

“Shit. Really? But why only this little stasis bubble?”

“I don't think it is just the stasis bubble.”

“Oh, come on. If it was Pink itself we would have heard something. There must be other observers.”

“Just the norms on Pink Luna.”

“And from our recent Council decision. We aren't talking to them.”

“Looks like are going back.”

“Forbidden. You really want to cross the council?”

“We don't have to go. We just need a probe to confirm.”

“Ah, excellent Doc. Nice working with you.” I smile at his complement.

Ba Eden

The portal opens and Muri comes in. I sigh and grab my pack. We were told eight eight days ago, so I knew it was coming. It was just that I was really into my latest project, a new hybrid of succa and pogy grains. I really wanted to be here for the harvest, to be the first to try it. I am hoping that it will taste just as good as the other hybrids, but, as I already know, grow twenty percent faster. That could really help further north where the growing season is shorter. My brother will do the honor. He did work as hard as I did, but still, I wish I could have been there.

“Don't you look like a Ba in the summer sun.” She says.

We have been sort of dating on and off for the last three years. We are both of age and could get married if we wanted to, but there is always the problem of livelihood. Neither of us is high on the desired skill list. That means we would likely get assigned to some hut near the swamp and forced to take birth control. Staying separate and single we are each better off.

“Illis, smile! We are going to be out in the woods together. We even get liberty one day every eight day.”

“Well, we will not exactly be alone. And on the Edge there is not a lot of places to go for privacy and there is no guarantee we will even get the same liberty day off.”

“Well aren't you the Ceph destroyer of all that is fun.” She smiles when she says this. Usually this is enough to get me smile in return. Not today.

I am quiet the rest of the way to the train station, but she is smiling and as happy as a Dio in love. Only less destructive. They sure make a mess of everything they stomp around in their happiness.

^Hey, you two Hu. Get off the walkway. You know the rules. I will report you if I see you again.^ Grumpy old Ba.

We jump down into the mud. Takes twice as long, especially with Muri splashing most of it up on me whenever we reach a more fluid puddle.

“I am not going to pass even entrance inspection.”

“Who cares?” She rubs mud on herself so we are equally dirty.

“We will be prepping hoppers together anyway.” I smile finally.

“There you go.” She rubs some mud on my face. I reach down and grab some mud and chase after here.

^No running in the streets! Filthy Hu kids.^ Another happy customer.

We reach the train and one look at us the Loader decides we are to ride in the animal car. The animal car is not really for animals, well mostly not. There are a few birds in cages. Mostly though it is the drunks. Ceph and Hu mostly, but I see at least one Dia as well. Never any Ba. They take care of each other in the hidden ways. They would deny it of course, but we are not as stupid as they say we are. We see them at night when they think we are asleep from exhaustion. What they don't realize is that pain keeps us awake. Or at least enough times to see the truth.

Muri says, "The way they treat us reminds me of the story of the Hu, the Dia and the Ba on Fist."

"The Ba were in charge of things there as well. I remember. But weren't the Bugs, I mean the Fistians, really the ones in charge?"

"Not really. They were more observers than leaders."

"Our illustrious leaders did not learn a thing from the young one's tale."

"Because it is a young one's tale. Too low on the intellectual scale for the Ba to notice."

"But of course." She mimes an arrogant Ba.

#!You two be quiet! We are trying to sleep.!#

I look over to them. We have chosen a place near the open portal. There are things that smell worse than muddy Hu. Not the kind of sens that I would want to have a dispute with.

Muri whispers to me, "We could snuggle instead." I nod. Too warm today to be covered for privacy. I quiet the ah, meter, that is attempting to gain my attention. Not here.

Soon, with the gentle rocking of the train car, we fall asleep.

I awaken first. It is nearly dark. We should be there by morning. Normally I would bring out something to eat, but I am not in the mood to share with everyone in the car. Nor am I interested in sharing whatever they might have among themselves.

I didn't even know that a Ceph could snore. Great start to four eight days of yearly duty. I wonder why we always seem to get Edge duty and the Ba always get duty in town. Easy duty. They say it is totally random, but no one believes it. Hu and Dio always get hard labor tasks and the Dia, service duty. The Ba work as clerks in government or learning center offices. They improve themselves even in the yearly duty. While we only gain more body aches and larger muscles. Their homes are in the trees on the shady hill while ours are next to the compost dumps and the farms where we all invariably work.

Still, life is good. We are healthy, we have enough to eat and work to

do. Not like the stories of the old days on Hu Eden. I wonder if Hu will ever be allowed to return? Or it is just a story. There are even some who think we all came from this world. The Ba are on top at the moment, so they wrote the history. But maybe the Hu were even on top at one time.

When I awaken again Muri is not next to me. Neither are our packs. I panic, looking around frantically.

“Muri! What are you doing?” All of our stuff is spread out in the center of the car and she appears to be kneeling over the Ceph.

“Shush Illis. He's hurt. Just helping out.” No one reaches for the food or anything else scattered about. It is starting to get light. Won't be long now, if we get dropped off anywhere near where we were last year.

Muri is always rescuing sens and animals. Good to have around on a farm. Good cook too. Me, I mend fences and run the plow. And of course the harvest. Not alone mind you. All the males get stuck with the same life more or less. But it is a good life. Especially at night. Come home dead tired to a great meal and a loving community. If you are lucky, a partner who cares. She does care.

“Anything I can do?”

“Check out the rest of them.” I look dumbfounded. “Just ask okay?” She shakes her head and I smile back.

“Listen up. Muri can heal almost anything not terminal. If you want aid, let us know?”

!!Why did you wait until now to ask?!!

“Well, we did not know any of you. Best that changes don't you think? We are bound to be together for the next four by eight. Need to be able to trust each other. Or would you rather a Ba Officer forces us together on a battlefield without any trust?”

!!I'm Mich. The old Dia over there is Gerti. She is good with anything fine detail like. Can fix most tech. Bojy, the Ceph your mate is working on is our cook on these outings. Can cook almost anything we find. Just don't ask what it is!! If a Dio could smile. . . There goes Muri being a cook this time.

#!Did you see how many cars on the train? They added cars since we came aboard.!#

“Five I think, plus the engine of course. Why?”

#!Since we are in the animal car, that means maybe one more with non Ba and three with Ba. That is a big load. One Ceph can't cook that much if he tried. Either of you know how to cook?!#

Muri looks up but doesn't say anything. I know she wants us to be together.

“Muri is a great cook and I am great at handling the pots, cleanup and prep work. Cleaning the food before they need it. That sort of thing.”

!!That means I get latrine duty again!!

#!And I get to serve all of them!# She sighs.

“What about the non Ba in the next car?”

!!Those will be the warriors. We are going to the edge after all. They put all the losers in this car. Makes me wonder why the two of you ended up there though!!

“We were covered in mud and ah, other road materials. Most of it has dried and fallen off now.”

#!We won't get the best huts to live in, but you can't beat the companionship!#

Muri speaks up, “Bojy says we need to stay muddy if we want to stay with them. Faking some kind of injury helps too.”

“A farming accident. A limp ought to do it.”

“We can't both have limps. And we don't fake anything. You know that. The three of us together will make food so good they wouldn't dare rotate us.”

!!Good luck. See you in the latrine before the first eight day is over!! He does smile, or the best Dio muscles can handle. I shake my head and start laughing.

#!Now they will think we are all crazy. Keep it up Mich!#

I pass out food to those whom I think will like what we have.

!!Thanks. Those birds were starting to look good enough to eat and I hate Yiyi birds. Taste horrible!!

#!Ha, ha!# Gerti munches on a hersa root. Too bitter for me, even if they are good for you. Dia usually like them though. We grow a lot of them in the field closest to the stream. They like lots of moisture. The melon went to Mich of course.

“I just noticed something. None of you are addicts.”

~Shit, if he can figure it out the Ba will for sure. We need a new excuse.~ I really did think he was a magger before we started sharing thoughts. Good acting.

#!I like Muri's excuse. Do good work and they will want us to cook!#

!!Guess you will have to learn how to cook then Bojy!!

Bogy signs amusement.

I whisper to Muri, “You might have to take the lead on this.” She punches me in the arm.

“We are slowing down.” I look out of the portal that is partially open for fresh air.

“Looks like deep forest all around.”

Muri asks Boji, “So how does a Ceph end up deep in a forest?”

!!Oh no. Not the story. Hey, the train stopped. We had better get out and line up!! He is right. I quickly stuff everything left back into our packs. Probably all mixed up. You don't want to miss lineup.

#!Slow down Ba bait. We are always the last ones out of our car. They expect us to act a certain way. We really don't want to disappoint them.!# A threat I am guessing.

Muri has none of it though and throws the portal wide open and hops down to the ground, turns and grabs her pack to disappear. I quickly jump down, but when I turn Boji is holding the rest up trying to decide how to get to the ground.

I sigh, “Okay big guy. Let me help.” I thought he could sucker down the side or something. I grab a hold of him or more he grabs me all over.

“I have to breathe. Be careful.” He hands me, ~Sorry.~

I gently set him on the ground. Gerti and Mich are already down. We make our way to the line and try to look attentive.

There are several groups ahead of us, but we are not the last ones to get into line either. A Ba officer comes out to inspect us. He starts at the other end and makes a few comments we can't hear. When he comes down the line to us he turns to go without any comment or attention to us. Not surprised. I relax some.

Someone on the sideline motions to the officer. He goes over to hear what they wanted. I wonder who that is that can get an officer to obey? They talk for some time making motions towards us, or near us more likely. I look down the line to see who is next to us. Everyone has kept their distance from us. I know we don't smell that bad, the mud has dried and is nearly gone.

The officer comes our way. He finally gets a good look at us, then turns back to the other one. Too far away with my sight to make out clearly. My glasses are in my pack for safe keeping. I could not afford to replace them if they broke. I can see well enough to get around without them most of the time. He turns towards us again.

He inspects us one at a time. He stops at Boji and inspects the injury that Muri worked on. Muri gets nervous, but does nothing. I hear the chattering of squirrels in the trees on either side of the tracks. They are voicing their opinion as well. Finally he comes up to me.

^Can you shoot a pestor?^ I nod. He grimaces.

“Sorry, yes sir, I know how to use one.”

He motions for another officer to bring one over. I reach around to my

pack and remove the glasses.

He hands the gun to me, "I fancy some squirrel with my dinner tonight." I am surprised. I did not think Ba would eat squirrel. I look at the trees on my side of the tracks.

^I hear that the ones on the other side of the track are better tasting.^ Ah, a challenge.

There are certainly a lot of them. Most are hidden well, but there are a few younger ones who are too curious about what is going on. I suspect that they sometimes get food from sens who pass through or who are waiting for another train.

We kill them by the thousands on the farms. Mostly ground squirrels there of course. They would eat all of our crops if we didn't. I shrug, take careful aim and fire. The one I was aiming at falls, but then so do two others. I am not that good.

^What the?^ Apparently he was impressed as well. The one on the sideline has come closer. I can see now it is a higher ranked officer. A fem.

Gerti takes off in a streak and retrieves the three squirrels. She brings them up to the officer for inspection.

^It would seem you are already a team.^ This is said by the male officer in front of us, but I can see the fem show amusement then hide it.

^One killed by the pestor, but these other two don't appear to be hit. That's strange, their necks are twisted.^ He suddenly drops them.

#!Sorry, but Mich and Bojy just stunned theirs and I thought you would prefer them dead.#!

^Just so. Ah, thank you. What did you use? I only heard one shot.^ And we would not be allowed to have any weapons not sanctioned by the patrol. Be careful guys.

They both pull out slings. Legal, just barely. Near the limit of their range to hit the squirrels. I am impressed. He just nods understanding.

He turns to me again when someone further down the line shouts out in Ba, ^Any old farmer can hit a squirrel with a pestor. That's the only thing there is to do on a farm besides sit and wait for crops to grow.^ Amusement is sounded by many. Someone is clearly trying to bait me. Not a problem. I have heard it all before and know better than to react.

The officer was not as amused. He goes down the line until he thinks he has found the offender. He pulls them out of line and hands the pestor to him. A male of course. Hormones are nasty things if you let them control you.

I can hear him say, ^Your turn. One shot. Bring down as many

squirrels as you can. Find a big fat old one even. Just one will do.^

By now of course the squirrels are alerted and it won't be so easy. I see the Ba male search around with the gun to his eye. Finally he thinks he sees one and pulls the trigger with a jerk. I don't think he has even hit the same tree he was aiming at.

The fem officer signs something to him. He comes back to me, ^We need to be sure it was not luck. Could you get me another one please?^ Please? Strange word from a Ba. He does motion to Mich and Bojy not to try again themselves though. It is just me this time.

I suspected this was coming and have already scoped out my target. The sane thing would be to intentionally miss. That way I don't make an enemy of the Ba down the line. Just that I have never been one for deception. I am what I am.

I take aim and fire. A squirrel drops from the tree. Gerti remains motionless. We can't eat all the ones we kill anyway.

He calls out to everyone else, ^Anyone else like to try? A bonus of an extra freeday if you hit one with one shot.^

^And if we don't?^

The officer shows amusement, but says nothing. What would have happened to me if I had missed? Probably nothing. They were expecting me to miss the second time. Having stepped out of line to get the squirrel I see just how many there of us. I am guessing around fifty all told. About twice what I was with the last time.

Trucks come up to the station.

^We still have a half day of travel ahead of us. Pile in.^ He holds us back though. We will probably have to walk. Nice day. Not too hot up here in the hills. Should be some lakes nearby to go fishing in as well. I do like fish better than squirrel. Squirrel gets old after awhile.

The trucks are loaded and leave. Still we remain. How much of a head start are they going to give them? It will take us days to get there.

The fem officer comes up and the male backs away. She inspects each of us in turn, but I get the impression she has already made up her mind about something.

A third officer comes up. We call anyone regular, patrol and officer. Since we have to follow their orders no matter what, they all seem the same to us. The third is holding the biggest pestor I have ever seen. I didn't even know they made them that big.

The fem takes it and hands it to me, ^This is called a death eater. It is not for squirrels, at least not normally.^ Yeah, I would guess not. ^No need to get into loading and care just yet. I want you to try using it.^ She

looks down the tracks.

^You see the stupid one sitting on the fence post down that ways a bit?^ I nod. Just barely visible.

She flips up a sight on the end of the firing tube. ^It pulls ever so slightly to the right, so line up just to the left of whatever you want to hit. See if you can hit the squirrel from here.^

The death eater is heavy. Too heavy to hold steady for any length of time. I kneel down and use my pack as a sort of tripod for it. I finally decide it would be better to lie on my stomach and rest on the pack. I can just barely see the squirrel in the sight.

“This thing really needs a spotting scope of some kind to be more effective, but I'll try.”

I get a feeling for my pulse and wait for the right time before gently squeezing the trigger. I hit the top of the post, but miss the squirrel. It is quieter than I would have expected it to be and not much recoil. I am surprised at that. I would have thought being so big I would be needing Muri's help with my shoulder.

^First time is always a surprise. Don't worry about missing the squirrel. Without a scope you were very lucky to have hit the post.^

“Are there more projectiles in the death eater?”

^Yes.^ She shows me how to cock it. I re-assume my position and squeeze off another shot. It takes the top of the post off in a fly of splinters. Now that I know I do not need to tense up in anticipation of the recoil I can be more relaxed and accurate.

“I am surprised you asked me though. Muri is as good or better than I am.”

She looks surprised and motions for Muri to assume my place. Muri cocks the weapon having seen how and lies on the platform using my pack as I did.

“Almost no recoil. Don't have to brace for it.” She nods.

Her shot takes the top off the post five more distance from mine.

“That was fun.” She hands the weapon to the officer and stands back.

Bojy hands me, ~What have you gotten us into?~

I hand him back, ~I don't know. But it has to be better than latrine duty.~

~There are worse things than latrine duty.~ I know, but I don't want to think about them.

!!Once the others hear about this we will be in real trouble!! Mich says quietly, but not quietly enough.

^That will not be a concern. You five will not be joining the others.^

She looks us over again, ^May I assume from your present condition that being ah filthy does not trouble you?^

Mich answers, !!It is not a preferred state, but we can survive it.!!

^Fair enough. You will follow this Third.^ Indicating the one who first refused to inspect us. She then leaves to an enclosure I thought was the station. Must be some kind of meeting place for officers.

The Third is much nicer and more respectful of us now.

^You have been greatly honored. Even I am impressed. Let's get something to eat. I would imagine you were not fed in the animal car.^

We follow him to another enclosure where he motions us to stay outside.

He comes back out with three bowls and another Ba with three more bowls.

^I would have liked to have brought you inside, but we would have needed to get cleaned up first and I thought having food was more important and dignity just yet.^ He and the others hand the bowls to us and he takes one himself. The other leaves without comment. Usually there is some sort of put down.

Then he does the strangest thing. He eats with us. We are all polite and wait for him to start, but we never expected him to do so. I expected him to go some distance away to eat.

#!Hey, this is good. Almost as good as fresh squirrel.!!# He shows amusement at the comment.

^Squirrel is not that bad if you cook it with the right herbs and a little salt.^

Muri adds, "Dried hicka and roasted over an open fire is the best."

^Especially if you are so tired that even an old Ceph shoe looks good. No offense. We have to compare methods some time.^

Bojy asks finally, ~What have we just volunteered for?~

^I will explain as we begin the training. First we, the six of us, have just become a team. We are independent of the other Edge workers. We answer ONLY to our Second and no other. I am your leader, but only because I have more experience and know the mission. We will operate more by consensus than top down.^

!!Will we have assigned duties?!!

^Only by consensus. We decide as a group who should be doing what and when. Some duties will likely be rotated, others left to the sen determined to be the best qualified.^

"Seems reasonable even. How strange." Muri says it, but I am feeling it too.

Our third shows amusement, ^Our rep is not that good is it. No matter, this team is special.^

#!If we are so special, then why did you not check us the first pass. It was only when the second indicated that you needed to that you did.!#

^Ah, well, that is why she is second and I am third. I will be more careful next time.^

“What are our odds of surviving?”

^Good if we succeed and poor if we don't.^ More amusement. ^I do believe she was right. You five are a good choice. Shall we proceed to the training site?^

“What about Bojy? How do we bring him? He won't be able to keep up with us without some kind of help.”

^Well, we are a team. Let's solve this problem as a team.^

#!What resources do we have access to and where are we going?!#

^We can rec almost anything we can find, Patrol or private. As to where we are going. I am afraid it is overland in rough conditions.^

I turn to Bojy, “How are you at tree climbing?”

~I am no Silas if that is what you are getting to, but I manage.~

!!Rough conditions. I suggest a single wheel situation. Retractable wheel would be good. Then the container can be used as a sled as well. Could even help with supplies. Two would be better. Three of us can trade off pulling them.!!

“Rope. We need rope. I am no tree climber, but with enough rope I can go anywhere. It can also be used to help when Bojy is in sled mode.”

#!Are we expected to forage or will we have access to food piles?!#

#

^We should check the supply shed then.^ We follow him several hundred meters. Bojy seems to be able to handle this distance over hard packed soil.

He unlocks the shed.

“A lock? Isn't that only for dangerous materials?”

^Weapons are stored here as well. That will be my department.^ He already has the death eater. What else would we need? Not that I have an idea of what we will be doing.

!!Over here. Found what we need.!!

We rush over to where Mich is.

“Whoa. Those are amazing.” Muri quickly figures out how to unlatch the wheels. It has fold out sides which are also removable. But it also appears that assembled it is water tight. I am guessing this floats as well.

#!Climb aboard Bojy. See if it fits.!# He tries it tentatively, then pllops

up quickly. He tests the sides which are now back up. Even lowers one himself.

~No metallic taste. What is it made of?~

^I believe it is a resin carbon material. Light weight but very strong. Hard to make, so only used under special conditions. Still want two of them?^

!!Oh yeah. One for Bojy and one for supplies!!

#!What are these?!#

“I have a question. What do you want us to call you? Third seems too formal for a team.”

^True. Never run this kind of team before, though I have had training. Everyone is different, so training can only anticipate so much. I guess it does not matter. My name is Pogo.^

#!Okay Pogo, what are these?!#

^Concentrated food packets. Not very tasty, but they can save your life. They are sen specific. Go by the picture on the cover. One packet is one meal for that species. Best to get one eight day worth for everyone here.^

“I found the rope. I think. There are so many different kinds.” Kinds?

I go over to where Muri is. Looks like an entire wall of them.

Everyone different.

^Remember, I am the one with experience. Glad I will be useful for something.^ Amusement.

He picks out several bundles of rope, but does not explain why those selections are made.

“One is heavy rope with no elasticity. Good for pulling a load. This next one is for climbing. Very strong, but light weight and elastic. That way of you take a fall when you reach the end it stretches to minimize the stop. Otherwise you are likely to lose your hold. The third one, hmm, I am guessing this is for binding. Too small to pull a load, but easy to put into a pocket or pouch. Could tie a bundle of supplies or a prisoner.”

^Very good.^

#!Do we need to worry about shelter? All of us I think are used to being out of a shelter, but I don't know where we will be going.!#

^We need to keep our weight down. We will find or make our own shelter.^

!!That just leaves weapons. This might give us a clue as to what we are going after!! We follow Pogo with interest.

The problem is that except for the knives I don't recognize what he is loading into the second cart. Too much for this cart.

~Put the food packets with me. I can make a nest out of them. That will give you more space in the second cart.~

“What else do we need?”

~Special clothing for the rest of you.~ Bojy suddenly disappears against the cart, blending in with the food packets.

“Camouflage.” I look at the weapons, the ropes, the six of us. We are each better at some task than the others.

I make a guess, “We are going after someone. We will not be bringing them back. Someone who has eluded others, possibly even killed. A very dangerous sen.”

^Close. I am not convinced that what we hunt is sentient. Yes, they have killed, but the deaths might have been unintended. Mostly a lot of destruction and mischief. There may be more deaths as a consequence. Lost crops, missed opportunities.^

“What can we tell you about this thing?”

^I only got a glimpse. Rumor has it that it is a wizard gone rogue.^

!!No way. Wizards are a Hu myth. No offense!!

“None taken. Don't believe in them myself. Stories told to scare young ones into behaving. Be careful or the wizards will get you and take you to their hideaway to be eaten.”

#!In our version they are kept in a dark chamber and slowly starve to death. All because we did not eat our food.!#

^Our version we are dangled over a pit of fiery beasts wanting to eat us. Not seen any evidence of any of those things yet.^

“Those bad dreams must have come from somewhere. Always a grain of truth to a tale. The problem is which is the nut in the waste pile.”

“That is always the puzzle.”

^Well, it looks like we are ready. Best get going before dark. Lots still left to do today.^

“You still did not say why we were chosen. Surely there were Ba better qualified.”

^I can only guess of course. The decision was the Second's. Oh, I was instructed to find a team out of what was presented and I did my best. Here is what I think.

Yes, we are hunting. We will be in the wild. We are likely to run into unexpected trouble needing novel solutions. We need to go unnoticed by our quarry and by others we might meet.^

~It is likely that these solutions might entail getting filthy and eating materials normally not considered edible and sleeping in places not fit for animals.~

^That about brings it together. Nothing a Ba would submit themselves to do under any conditions.^

“Sounds like normal life to me.”

^That is why all of you are so perfect. You won't hesitate or look for alternatives that will take time and resources. A moments hesitation could mean our deaths.^

!!And the all Ba teams failed!!

^That too.^ Amusement. As in they are now all dead fail?

Edge

The First is restless. Two teams from our side and three from theirs have all failed. Now it is our turn. Honor as well as lives are at stake. They are supposed to be here at the turn of the fifth eighth and there is no sign of them. The sentries should have picked them up by now.

^Where are they? I hope you have not failed me Second.^

^It is not time yet Sir. They will be here.^

^For your sake I hope so. I would hate to lose you.^ Things are tense. He won't execute me, just transfer me. Probably end up in some situation worse than this one, though I can't imagine one. Three chances and you are transferred. Noting personal. Twelve of ours have died so far. Eighteen of theirs. This time at least they are of the disposable class. No one will miss farmers and a few unclean ones. Non Ba are not treated well on Ba Eden. I have to wonder how Ba are treated on their worlds?

Not our fault really. They were simply not evolved to live here. That gives us the home advantage. Nothing more. I predict that all our worlds will finally be restored to pre interference conditions. The gates are closed. No more immigration or emigration. That part hurts the most. It would have been so much easier to send them home rather than watch them slowly die under foreign conditions. No one likes to watch others suffer unnecessarily. We are not without compassion. Maybe it is better that we use them in this way now. Send them on impossible missions. At least that way their end will be quick.

I am beginning to wonder if they have failed training. Or worse, run away. I hate tracking down runaways. It dishonors us both when they are caught and executed for cowardice. It often brings species violence after wards. There is retaliation and then retribution. So many die or are permanently maimed. Such a waste.

^It is time. I don't see them before me. Send out the search parties. You will report to center for reassignment.^

^One moment First. I would like to try something.^ I emit an all clear signal. Very high pitched. Only a young Hu or normal Ba would even hear it. We rely on high speech to communicate among ourselves when necessary.

^What the? Who is or what is that?^ First points to the field before us.

I show amusement, ^I believe that is our Third Pogo. On time. He was definitely here before time was called.^

^I don't see the rest of them.^

I wave to Pogo who nods in the Hu fashion. He has been with them too long. He spent time as a kit among them. Part of the reason he was chosen for this suicide mission. Other part was he was becoming an embarrassment with his questions about the program to separate the species. We follow orders, we don't question them.

Slowly, for effect, I am guessing, the other five rise to be seen. Amazing that he was able to train them so well in such a short period of time. Where did he get the knowledge? There was nothing in his file about previous experience in hiding. If we truly are dealing with wizards, and there is much doubt that they even exist, these methods will appear crude and they will be easily seen, so why go through the trouble?

First turns to me, ^I want you with them. If they succeed it will be at the unfortunate loss of their lives. Their memory will be honored forever. This order comes from the top. Nasty business.^

^I do not have the training they have. I will harm their effort. You want them to fail?^

He looks at me, ^You are not joining the cowards are you? Hang back until you are needed. Let them do their mission, then move in. Your story, when you return, will be our only evidence that they succeeded or failed.^

^Understood.^ So much for having kits of my own. I will be lucky to survive. Now I wish they had not been here. Swamp duty would have been better.

I come down from the observation tree to meet with them.

^I have the location of the latest series of incidences. Third Pogo are you and your team ready?^

^We are Second.^ Confident. I would not be. He has seen the monster and it's aftermath. I would definitely not be so confident.

^Follow me.^

I arrange for transport. They are loaded onto a supply truck. I have them get out of their field disguises and into kitchen help uniforms. Their equipment is concealed in boxes of food. They really need a thorough cleaning, but there is no time. The incidences quickly move on not to return until a random time later.

We pass through multiple check points. When they see me they wave us on, though I noticed that twice they had someone check the back. I was right to have them disguised as kitchen help. The lower classes are often overlooked. We travel for two eighths until we reach an Edge camp. There is much confusion. Tents are overturned, supplies are scattered. Ba are running in all directions. Materials are being hauled up into the trees.

The camp on the ground is being dismantled. Is that safe? Not my call.

I dismiss the driver to help the others and to hide the team's leaving to do their work. They strip off their kitchen uniforms and don't bother with their field disguises. They look like more like forced labor with a task master now. I am amazed at how quickly they assume a new identity and disappear right into the middle of the crowd. I notice Pogo asking a few questions and the Ba responding by pointing. Then he takes his group in the opposite direction. I follow at a distance. No one questions me.

We are quickly outside the camp. Almost immediately I lose them. This ability should have taken years to learn. How were they able to so quickly? I then notice an unusual track. It appears to be a cart track, but too narrow. The tire track is right, but there should be two of them. I decide to follow it, lacking any other marks to follow. Ah, they are circling back around the camp. They only appeared to be cowards. They have disappeared from the camp and will be quickly forgotten. Non Ba are expected to be cowards and no one cares.

We are around the camp and now heading out into the forest proper. I hear a snap and quickly turn around. To be confronted by Pogo with a weapon at the ready. Within moments the others are next to him

^I am curious as to why you have been following us?^

^I am under orders as well. I am to confirm the kill.^

^You were nearly collateral damage. With the amount of noise you have been making you will give away our location. Stay here and we will come back to get you when it is over and personally escort you to the body.^

^You have no idea what you are dealing with. It would be far better for you if you all simply disappeared and were never seen again, if you understand what I am saying.^

^Be careful, wizards can read your thoughts. Stay away. We don't need you thinking about the mission and giving us away.^

^Thinking about the mission. What are you thinking about?^

^We are on a targ hunt of course. The fourth in the camp back there said they have been spotted in this area. We circled around the camp and picked up their scent.^ He points to tracks I had missed on the ground.

^Three of them. A hunting unit. They scared the camp pretty good when they came charging through in pursuit of a rasker.^

^Why didn't you say so! I love targ meat over an open fire. Cut it into thin strips and sear it to perfection.^

“Or in a stew with sattose roots.”

~With fresh herbs of course.~

“Of course.”

^You are making me very hungry. All I have had for an eight day is field rations.^

^Those things are horrible. I would rather find a rotten log and eat stink bug larvae. Well, since you are so keen on targ. Would you like to join us?^

^I am afraid that I don't have the necessary equipment or training. I have not been on a targ hunt since I was a half height.^

“We only have an eight day off. Maybe it would be better to separate?” The male Hu.

“No need. We have enough supplies.” The fem Hu.

^It is settled then. Better to have you with us than scaring everything away behind us. Get her outfitted. We are losing light.^

They load me up with a heavy pack. I am sure there are rocks inside, but I don't dare look. I am going to get Pogo for this, if we survive. Right after I get the First for putting me in this situation.

Being in the rear I am able to observe them. Each has different talents. The Ceph is in one of two wheeled carts and most of their supplies are in a second. The wheels are in line with each other and not in the expected parallel state. The Ceph disappears as soon as he is put back into the cart. Amazing talent. The Dio and the two Hu take turns pulling the carts. This happens without a word on some prearranged schedule. The fem Dia is in the lead. She seems to be able to sense something that I can't see or smell. She stops to look at leaves and the ground sometimes, but by the time I arrive at the same location. whatever was there is trampled by the others.

Pogo is just in front of me. Normally it would be a Ba in the lead. He must trust his team very much.

The Ceph has just grabbed a leaf. I wonder why? There goes another one. Not the same kind. I am afraid I don't know the plants here well enough. I feel like a kit out of a tree. Very vulnerable.

^We need to find shelter for the night. It will rain soon.^ Huh?

^How do you know that?^

^Bojy told me. He is always right.^ I have to wonder what their idea of shelter will be. I start looking for a good tree to climb, though I can't imagine the Dio climbing a tree. Maybe the non Ba stay on the ground to guard the base.

Instead they find something more resembling a cave well hidden at that.

^Looks dangerous.^

“The trees around here are infested with gitters. Feel free to climb the nearest one. The dust in the cave keeps them away. Best if you rub it all over yourself.” She then takes her cover off and proceeds to do just that. Have you ever seen a Hu without their cover? The ugliest thing I have ever seen. Even Pogo rubs dust into his fur though. The Dio, Dia and Ceph don't bother. I am guessing the gitters don't bother them. Oh, ugh, the male Hu is dusting. Reluctantly I throw some dust on myself.

The cave stinks, but as it begins to rain, I go further back to stay warm. The others are already there.

“I'll take first protector.”

^Let Second. She won't sleep yet and won't be able to stay awake later.^ The Hu fem grins. I hate it when they do that.

^I volunteer to do first protector.^

~Good idea.~ I can barely see him in the fading light from the cloud cover and cave. I am not going to hand communicate with him. Hate the feeling of Ceph.

I go forward and start watching the surroundings outside the cave. Looks like a normal forest. Nice trees. This might even be a good place. Guano! I slap my arm. Gitters. I quickly reach down to add more dust, but get mud instead. I retreat further in until I find dust and apply it. Of course it turns to mud on my wet skin. It works to keep them off of me though.

It is just as I am about to fall asleep when someone nudges me. The Ceph. Ugg. He hands me, ~Go back into the cave. The targ hunt at night and you are not prepared.~

Normally I would take this as an insult to my position, but I really am tired, so I ignore him and go back into the cave. The rest of them are in a pile of some sort. I am guessing for warmth. I am cold, but not that cold yet. I curl up near the edge of the cave and put my hand into something soft. When I bring it up it stinks really bad. I am guessing this is targ waste. I wipe my hand as well as I can against the wall of the cave and then in the dust away from the targ latrine. The dust covers the waste on my hand, but does not remove it. I find a dry spot and curl up again.

Ba can see very well in very low light. I could use my sonar to add more information, but that would wake everyone. If I had, I would have 'seen' the waste. It absorbs sound differently than other materials. Somehow I manage to fall asleep.

I stir and find myself locked in. I am trapped! I start to move and become wide awake. I am curled up with everyone else. They moved to where I am at some point. It will be light in an eighth. At least then I can

clean up and get rid of this smell.

But when I wake again I am alone. First glow of a new day is reaching deep into the cave. I have overslept. There is a ration pack next to me. I break it open without thinking, then realize I am handling it with dirty hands. I stop, cursing my stupidity, and make my way to the front of the cave.

Something moves quickly away from me. I did not get a clear look at it. Ah, but I see what it was after. There is a pile of half eaten rations, ripped open by some creature. My guess squirrels. I sort though what is left with my foot. Nothing that has not been chewed. Why did they leave the rations here? For me to find? Not very smart.

It is then that I hear a hideous snarl and turn just in time to see a full sized targ racing towards me. I calmly pull out a small sticky bomb and throw it towards the targ as hard as I can. It sticks right to its head and then goes off. I am now covered in targ brains as well. Great.

Might as well see what I got. I go up to the dead targ. Male, four, maybe five years old. Skin is not in great shape. Even cleaned it would not trade for much.

Suddenly the others appear next to me.

^You sure pick the noisiest way possible to kill anything don't you?^

^I did not have time to be gentle. It was in an attack run.^

^Muri killed the fem with a hand knife.^

^Not possible, the fem are the larger of the two.^

The fem shows the teeth she saved from her kill. Very large. Her story appears to be true.

!!That leaves the young one. Dam, I was hoping for the male at least!!

The Hu male grins. I shudder.

He says, "Your kill. You get to keep the teeth. If you can find them."

^Who left the pile of rations on the ground over there?^ I ask.

#!Targ really like food rations for some reason unknown to all other living things. We were hoping to draw it out and get it before it got to the rations. Looks like we were too late.!#

^The squirrels got to them first.^

"The only thing that targ like better than rations is fresh squirrel meat."

^And it did not bother you that I would have been killed?^

^Sorry, thought you would sleep until noon and miss the entire thing.^

He grins like one of the Hu. I could tear a leaf on him for that. If we survive.

!!We need to go further afield to find another set. I will not settle for a young one. I would be humiliated back at the battle pit!!

I am surprised. He does not look like a battle Dio. I am sure he is not. They are covering my eyes again.

^We go north east. I am sure there is another set there. About a half day's run from here.^

I look for my pack and find it near the entrance. They are waiting for me when I return.

We run faster than I am comfortable. At first I do pretty well. Not as silent as they are, but not the targ I was the first day. Soon though I tire and am back to targ status. How do they do it? How did they learn so quickly?

What really frustrates me is that I was the one who suggested that Pogo use them. I was counting on random chance. A last chance really. Having lost two very well trained teams already I felt I had nothing to lose and I did not want to lose any more Ba. My mind would not allow it.

We break for a quick meal of dried targ meat and water from a small spring. It tastes funny, but I don't complain.

“Good huh?”

I show acceptance. It will nourish. That is all that really matters.

We finally reach a pass over the ridge and go down the other side. There is a small lake below. Targ like caves and there don't appear to be any caves in the area.

When we reach the lake the rest of them throw off their packs and jump in. Splashing each other and having a good time. I test the water. Freezing. Must be snow fed, though I do not see any snow about. Even the ridge was clear this time of year.

^Better get clean while you can. You smell awful.^

Reluctantly, I enter the water and very quickly do a token effort. At least the mud and targ waste is off of me. When I get out it is even colder as the water evaporates off of my fur.

Someone has started a fire this time.

^Why didn't you do this last night?^ I get closer to get warm and finish drying off.

They look at me like I am a new born.

!!We hunt targ. Targ are afraid of fire. Scaring them away makes it harder to hunt them.!!

^Then you are saying there are no targ about?^

Again they look at me like I am a new born.

^Then I suppose this fresh waste near the marked tree here is from a

squirrel?^

The Dia comes over. She actually picks it up to smell. I half expect her to taste it.

#!She's right. Maybe we have been too hard on her. Kills targ with sticky bombs and can find targ shit better than anyone else.!# That did not come out as a complement.

#!A male. Big, for a male anyway. Feasted on rojo berries that were partly fermented.!#

“An excellent time to be hunting a targ. Douse the fire friends. We hunt.”

^Just when I was getting warm.^

^You found the shit. You get the credit.^

It is then that I step in what looks like Ba waste, but in too large a quantity. I look up, but there is no evidence of a camp above us. Strange. There are appear to be no settlements of any sens in the area.

“We are not hunting those today Second. Only targs.”

^What is it?^

“Looks like Ku shit.”

^A sentient? In this wilderness? Do they hunt targ too? I would not want to get caught in a line of sight.^

He shrugs and walks to join the others. I run to catch up. What is a Ku doing out here? I have only seen one once. Looks sort of like a very large grouse hen. Very large. Over sized head though.

It is rough going through the brush up the side of a hill. My fur is matted and my skin is shredded. The others do not seem to be affected.

^Okay.^ Guano I hate that Hu expression.

The Dia turns and looks at me in anticipation. The others keep going.

^How did all of you learn to be this way? How did you learn to go though a forest so quiet? How to know that was targ waste? And what it had eaten?^

#!Only Muri and Illis were farmers. The three of us had ah other means of acquiring what we needed.!# Thieves?

^But even they know a lot I would not have expected.^

She shows amusement, #!You have a Ba view of what a farmer should do and know. All of us have had to supplement our protein allotment with a little hunting. Or even to assess what a predator has done to your hard work. Shooting squirrels is a euphemism for getting anything not sen that passes within range. You saw how the two of them did with the death eater on their first try. Two bullets and two hits. Could you have done that well with a strange weapon? Remember how well Mich and Bojy did

with the slings? That was not luck. They really are that good.
Consistently.!#

^Aren't they afraid of the enforcers?^

#!Not if you are good at running silent.!#

^Ah, so the five of you really are the ideal team. The Ba teams were clumsy, to be polite.^

#!Gentle folk. Used to high end tasks. Never gotten dirty. Probably never had to kill a creature bigger than a bug before. Your society will collapse unless this spiritual distance is not corrected.!#

I am taken sideways by the statement, the insight and the rudeness. I am not in a place to emit gas though.

We run to catch up and nearly run into them. The Dia goes ahead, but Pogo and the Ceph hold me back. They have hidden themselves in the bush. The Dio is near by.

I can't see much, but I can smell it. Targ. Can't be that far away.

I hear the Dio whisper, !!Mine!! He runs out ahead. I peak over the bushes and see him hunkered down behind a fallen log. The targ is huge! It is coming this way at full speed chasing the little Dia. She is faster though, barely exerting herself. Stays ahead just close enough to keep the targ interested without putting herself in it's claws. Tricky skill.

The Ceph hands me, ~Stay here. Do not move. It is their kill.~

I hand him back reluctantly, but I don't want the targ to hear me. Ba vocals can be heard a very long way. I would have preferred to have asked Pogo.

~Where Hu?~ My Ceph is not very good. Usually I only had to deal with servants.

He points to the left and right with two of his arms. I can't see them, but then I could not see them at the presentation field either.

Pogo hands me, ~Two days and you still don't know their names?~ I ignore him. Rude underling.

The targ roars! I sneak a small peak just in time to see the Dia leap over me, skid to a stop and join us breathing heavily.

~Too close.~ She shows amusement.

The targ comes next a little slower, suspicious of why the Dia is no longer visible. Just as it trots over the fallen log, the Dio leaps up into it's underside and plunges a battle knife deep into it's heart. It staggers a few steps more and falls dead.

It is then that I think I hear the death eaters fire. They are silent, but so is our surroundings now.

^That sound? What is it?^

^We can stand now Second. Come and see.^

When I stand, all of the others are already standing, including the two Hu. They are disassembling the death eaters and putting them back into their packs.

Pogo points. I follow his arm.

There is an encampment of mixed sens in the far distance. The place is a mess. Wonder who their second is? They should be put on report. They are cheering. Why?

^Did the targ cause them harm?^ That would explain the mess.

He looks at me like I am young kit. This really has to stop.

The Dio has cut off the head and is now breaking the teeth out of the skull with a rock. Disgusting. Covered in blood, which he occasionally licks off of his hands.

The Dia comes up to me, #!They are cheering the fact that Muri and Illis have killed the wizard that was harassing them.!#

My eyes open, ^What? You actually did it? It did not sense you and stop you? How? It is supposed to have been impossible.^

#!Sit and I will explain.!# Pogo has gone to help the Ceph cut up the targ for food.

^I need to get down there to examine the kill.^

#!Sit now. This could save your life.!# I am not used to taking orders from a lower sen, but saving my life sounds like a good thing right now.

I sit.

#!That was not so hard. The wizards can sense your intentions. If we had gone straight for the wizard it would have sensed this and taken action. Ah, but we didn't do we. We were going after this nice fat targ. All of our minds were concentrating on the targ, including yours I am guessing. That is one of the reasons we did not let you see too much. We have all been practicing hiding our thoughts.!#

^Then how did they kill it?^

#!They were aimed at where the targ would be, but not very far off from that is where the wizard was. By waiting just a split ahn they fired and hit the wizard instead of the targ. Their intent was always on the targ.!#

^You mean they learned to miss.^

#!Yes. I see you understand. Now go and see the kill.!#

^Wait here for me. Too many sens might be seen as a threat. One lone Ba never hurt anyone.^ They show amusement. They don't believe me. Well, I did get one of the targ.

Their camp is further away than I thought it would be. Half way there

I realize that I have not done my duty for the First. I reach into my pack. The packet of poison is still there. I look back but don't see them. They could be almost anywhere. They know it will take time for me to get to the camp and back. They actually did it and we are all still alive. Well, it looks like they did it. Can't be sure until I see the body.

I make it there just before sundown. Now I won't get back until the next day. I am not going back through all those bushes in the dark even with a clear sky and moonlight.

Once on the edge of the camp I ask the first Ba to come by,
^Permission to enter your camp.^

^Permission? Come on in stranger. No permissions needed here. You can help us set things right again. My name is Birtle.^ Work is not what I was looking for. On the other wing though, something other than dried targ would be good, as good as it was at first.

^I was looking for the wizard that was killed.^ I am being very impolite not giving a name.

^Word gets out fast. Where did you come from?^

Are we past the Edge? I don't want to start an incident.

^I represent the group that killed the wizard. Just wanted to confirm the kill.^

^You and your group will be welcome till the end of all time, with or without homes or names.^ He shows amusement. No, I am not looking for a mate.

When he sees that I will not respond in kind he says, ^Follow me. I will take you to what remains of the body.^ What remains? A death eater is messy, but not that messy.

There is a lot of activity in the camp. Sens and servants running about with purpose and joy.

^Hurry up. I'm getting weak.^ I hear the voice, but don't immediately place it until I look up. A young Ba is hanging precariously from a small branch. How did she get up there? I run to the tree and begin an ascent. It takes very little time to reach her.

^I am called Zigm, what are you called?^ Guano, I have just given my name.

^Usii kind one. I am afraid.^ Not a Precar name. I am over the Edge.

^I will help you. Do you know how to glide?^ She motions no.

^You can climb on my back then and I will take you down. Is that something you can do brave one?^ A little suggestion can't hurt.

^I think I can do that.^

^I know you can do that. I will get closer so it will be easier.^ I

snuggle up as close as I can without knocking her off the branch. She quickly climbs on. I back down the tree. We really weren't up that high.

Once down at the base I ask her, ^Did you see what happened?^

^A big fooder went crazy.^

^A Ku?^

^Yes a Ku. They make food. Good food.^

^What did the Ku do Usii?^

^Very bad things. It put me up in the tree I did not climb.^ That explains why she was afraid to climb down. She did not know how she got up. A common problem for ones her age.

^What else?^

^Made our homes messy. Put others in trees too.^

^Did anyone get hurt?^

She points to the far edge of the camp. A tree home is collapse in a burned out pile of debris. A hearth fire. Happens too often. They are cleaning things up very quickly. I need to find the corpse.

^Are you well?^ She affirms.

^I need to leave you.^

^Goodbye!^ She hugs me. Kits can be very affectionate. One of the reasons I joined up. No hugs there.

They are putting everything that can't be salvaged into the center of an open area. I am guessing they will burn it soon. I go there when I see a flash of yellow, the shade a Ku might be. Though their patterns vary widely. A few feathers On the ground. I pick them up to feel them. The ridges on a Ku feather are much different than any of the Ba wildlife. Ku feathers, definitely. I need more than feathers though.

At the waste pile I look as thoroughly as I can without endangering myself from falling debris. No more feathers.

“Looking for something?” A very old Hu. Surprised she has not been put out.

^I am looking for the Ku that was killed.^

“That weren't no Ku. It was a monster. Did you see what it did?” She indicates the mess all around us.

^I need to be sure it is dead. Wizards can be very tricky.^

“You know a lot about these wizard things?”

^I hunt them. It was my team that killed this one.^

“They will always be welcome here.” So I have been told.

^Can you take me to the body?^

“Nothing left. They chopped it into pieces so small an ant would go hungry trying to find enough.” An exaggeration certainly.

^Where did this happen?^

“Oh, right here. Right after it happened. Everyone hated that thing so much they just went crazy themselves. It has been harassing us for many eight days. Our crops are ruined, our water supply poisoned. We will have to move once we clean up the mess. Tonight we spend on the trail. Still, we are happy that the thing is dead. Death to all Ku!”

^Death to all Ku!^

More and more sens start chanting in all the sen languages. Just as the sun sets they start the fire. It is then that I see part of a vestigial wing. The feather pattern is burned into my mind as I am sure it has been into each of theirs.

^Good Ba, tell us. Where are the ones who killed the monster? We wish to thank them.^

^They are up in the hills there. They have lit a fire.^ I point in the direction I came from. You can barely make out the light on the hill.

^Hey everyone! We move!^

They pass us by seemingly as happy as any sens could ever be. They must be hungry. Hope they have finished prepping the targ by now. It is starting to sound good again to me.

Thank goodness for the moon tonight. Still, I manage to get tangled a couple of times. I want to take a piece of targ out of my pack, but it could not be shared thirty ways. The little fem Ba finds me and hugs me in the leg. There are only about five young ones. There should be more for a group this size. I do have enough targ strips for the young ones.

I reach into my pack and remove the strips. I hand one to her. She sniffs it and then starts chewing on it.

^Thank you Zigm.^

^Help me give some to the rest of the young ones.^

^Even the Hu young?^ I hesitate.

^Even the Hu young. They can't work for us unless they are strong.^ She acknowledges her understanding.

^You are a true hero. Thanks for the young ones.^

^There will be more once we get there. The adults can wait.^

“Thank you. They have had nothing to eat for days.” Must be his young one. Her arm is around him. Though I am never sure of the gender on young Hu. You would almost think that she loved him. Of course that is absurd. Just emulating our behavior.

We reach the kill site of the targ about half night. No one here. I expected them to be asleep with one on protector. No one about. Probably the large crowd approaching scared them away. The fact that there is a

fire should have told me they would be gone.

The targ is being slowly cooked on branches near the fire. Some is ready and is quickly removed to cool. There is easily enough for everyone for several days.

#!Over here.!#

We go over. The Dia male is unwrapping a leaf package. Inside in large script in excellent Ceph is a note. I am surprised. I thought they were all thieves. This looks like the work of an educated Ceph.

#!It translates to, 'Please enjoy this meager offering as our thanks for letting us solve your little problem.' That's all.!# He turns over the leaf, but it is blank on the other side. Must have used carbon black from the fire. He was smart in using large script. Must have known it would be dark by the time we arrived. Why did they leave?

^Over here.^ A small Ba male from the sound of him.

I arrive first this time.

^It's a map.^

This is written on cloth. No idea where they got that.

^Here is the fire where we are. This is the lake we came from. A map of this area then.^

^Over here is a spring apparently. Forests here, just on the other side of this ridge we are on. This makes an excellent settlement site. We can raise crops on the slops, use the trees for shelter and the spring for fresh water.^

I notice that it also shows where we are in relation to the Edge camp where the others of my collective are.

^We all need to get some rest. The fire will keep us warm and the targ at a distance. Hang the meat to protect it from the small ones.^

^Zigm, we would be honored if you would share a branch with us.^ Apparently the parents of the one I helped. I affirm.

Persecution

“It is not safe for you to go out there in that form Fa. They are actively hunting Ku now in daylight. No more waiting until a moonless night to burn out a hutch. All eateries are shut. Some have even been taken over by new groups, Ba of course.”

+What of the secret ways. Are they still intact?+

“For the moment. But for how long? Edicts are being given that anyone harboring a Ku will be brought before the council. There are searches without notice of random locations. It is only a matter of time.”

+It is impossible for them to operate the transfer boxes, but many innocent could be harmed.+

“Your prediction that it would not be only the Ku appears to be coming true as well. It has always been hard for anyone not Ba to rise to positions of authority. Now it is impossible. Even recent graduates of the best learning centers can only find manual labor for work. Under qualified Ba are given the positions instead.”

+Not my prediction. Just following an ancient Hu path. All this talk about the species being different is just talk. Sentience seems to necessitate the opposite as a counter balance. We are in a period of insanity. Let's hope that it is a short one and we are not all taken back to the hunter gatherer stage.+

“How do they not see that the ones doing the work are the ones that they are hurting?”

+They are so wrapped up in their own pain they can't see anything but the pain. They lash out at anyone one near, trying to make it stop. Those that would be of help are the first hurt as they stand the closest. Moving everyone to safety until this burns out is the only way to save us at all.+

“The far camps are full. I worry they will be found out. They do have the necessary tech to do so.”

+Let us hope they are too preoccupied. If they go after the camps it would drain them completely. There would be nothing left to rebuild from.+

“It would be their own fault.”

+Fault? Who's fault? Maybe even our own fault. After all the spark that lit this fire was the Pink reaction to our cross froth TK system. Ultimately it is our fault.+

“I doubt it. Read the Ba records, the ones you can believe anyway. They had wars and struggles with each other. As you said the pain makes

them strike out. Whether the ones hurt are Ku, Hu or Ba makes no difference.”

+You can say that from your perspective. Try explaining that to the sens outside this portal. They still hurt no matter the philosophical thoughts we might have. Let's get back to work.+

Black Ba

^Congratulations on your promotion First Seeker Zigm.^

^With higher position comes higher responsibility.^

^Don't quote protocol with me. I know you love it. And deserve it. No one else brought together a team than can hunt and kill wizards. No one.^

^Why are you here First Hemk?^

^How goes the hunt?^

^Not well. We have only found three so far. Yet the destruction they cause continues. They have become smarter. They hide until ready, strike and disappear before we can get there. It has been nearly a year since we got the last one.^

^I have brought you a gift. Remember me when the time comes.^ He bows and leaves. Where is the gift?

What's next? Meetings. I hate meetings. A lot of talk, disagreement and nothing actually gets done. How I long to be back in the field with Pogo. The problem is, is that the wizards are no longer limiting themselves to the field. Towns and even cities are hit frequently now. Pogo's group would be a disaster in the city. The collateral damage would be unforgivable.

My aid comes in silently. I appreciate that, but I still notice her.

Once she is sure she has my attention she says, ^A visitor. Won't give his name. Has a large package with him. He said you would know he was expected. Something about a gift.^

^Send him in and make sure we are not disturbed.^

^You are due at the Conference in less than an eighth.^ She bows and leaves.

He does not knock. The door opens and he enters. He is carrying a large wooden box as foretold. It looks too heavy to be carried. There can't be much in it. The strange thing is that he is all black. Normally we have some patterning to our fur, even if only a slightly lighter shade of dark gray. He is completely black. Quite attractive is some way I don't understand, but definitely feel deep inside somehow.

He stops before me, still nothing said. Rude and dangerous.

He opens the box. Inside are smaller boxes, a lot of them. Hundreds possibly. He carefully removes one of these, closes the large box and sets the small one on top. He then removes the top of the small one, reaches in and carefully removes an all black device of some kind. One large sphere with a much smaller one on top. He removes the smaller one from the top

of the larger one.

^This is the tester, so you can be sure the larger device is working properly. You activate the tester like this.^ He twists it somehow. When he does a light appears on the sphere. The light is pointing exactly where he holds the smaller device. He moves the smaller device around and the light moves to always point in the its direction. He twists the device and the light goes out.

^Now you try.^ He gently hands me the smaller sphere. I examine it carefully, but see no obvious markings or means of making. Not even clear how to twist it. He pantomimes twisting. I try it. Nothing appears to happen. I don't feel anything move. I don't even feel my hand moving against it. But, when I look down the light is pointing at me.

^What is the range?^

^For the tester, about one hundred meters. For a wizard, it depends on how powerful they are. The ones that harass you can be found up to ten kilometers away.^

^There are worse ones?^

^Lesser ones. You will have to be closer to them to detect them.^

I can't help but notice that the smaller sphere is small enough to easily hide on someone.

^How long will it remain active? How often to I have to replace some energy unit or feed it some fuel?^

^Not for a very long time.^

He then bows and leaves. An economy of words.

^Wait, what trade do you wish in return?^

^These are surplus. We need nothing in return.^ He turns and looks at me. ^Actually, ridding the world of the wizards would be more than enough in trade.^

^We have a mutual enemy then.^ When I look up he is gone though.

They must know of these things. Is that why there are so many in the box. It would be best to distribute them as widely as possible.

^Aide!^

It is then that I notice that the one on the box is showing a light. Two lights. One facing me and another facing to the east. I twist the sphere that I am holding and the light facing me goes out. The other remains.

The conference is in the east.

^Let the hunt begin.^

Luna

“Anything from Pink Luna?”

“No Ma'am.”

“Dam, that's the fifth team we've lost.”

“We have telemetry from the improvised bot though. Guess Pink don't like to eat bots.” He indicates the screen.

“Let's see it.”

The image comes up of the control room at Pink Luna.

“My God.” My sentiments exactly. The room has patches of Pink growth on the walls, chairs, controls, corpses. Lots of corpses.

“They went in with suits this time. What happened?”

The bot turns trying to find a recent team member. We only sent two this time. It clears the control room and heads for the rec room. Rec, kitchen, showers, everything but the beds and control really.

It finally finds them.

“They were trying to kill each other it would appear.”

“Looks like they succeeded.”

“I think the Pink got them first. How did it get into their suits?”

“It got into the air locks didn't it?”

“DS. Dam! The TKs haunt us still. They are the ones responsible. The Pink did not have this capability before they interfered.”

“How soon till they appear here?”

“As of now I am ordering all overlapping structures condemned. We can't risk those spores getting in.”

“We should bobby trap the structures. Fill them with cyanide or something.”

“We don't know it will work. They might even like it.”

“Nukes?”

“Too close. But she is right. If the structures weren't even there, then when they came through they would be in a vacuum.”

“It would at least stop them from using them as a hopping off point.”

“A couple of heavy pounders should be enough.”

I sigh, “Evac the any people first.”

“No one there. Sorry Ma'am, but everyone is afraid of them. No one wants to be in those structures if they can help it.”

“Make it so.” An aide leaves the room to give the necessary orders. Wish all the com units still worked. Afraid that we will lose what we have, we use them as little as possible now. I am glad we were able to

evac most of us to Mars while the transports still worked. We are down to a skeleton crew to conserve resources. It is a suicide watch. The last transport we attempted to use did not even make it into orbit. Crash landed into an evacuated area at least killing eight.

“Dam those two. Why did they have to be so reckless? Why? Why couldn't they have behaved themselves and served just like the rest of us.”

We have been over this a thousand times. The best guess is that being TK does not change your basic personality. The records showed that Luna was having trouble with the two long before they became TK. So, why were they chosen then? Did we make a mistake banning all TKs from Luna and Mars? At least on Mars we can survive even if all the tech fails. Won't be easy, but enough terraforming has occurred over the years that it is livable. Well, at least to those who have been genetically modified for the higher CO2 concentrations and lower O2 levels. Being lazy and a bit stupid is better than dead.

“It is done Ma'am.” Can't afford to lose too many more bombs either. We may need them in the end for ourselves. Rapid decompression is not the best way to die, but it beats starving or suffocating slowly.

“Let's get back to work getting something together that will fly.”

“Yes Ma'am. Good idea Ma'am.” The chances of success are low, but any of us would volunteer to be on board anything we put together, no matter how low the odds.

We never expected the fall to happen so fast. We were totally unaware of how much those two were doing without even reporting it. I almost wish they were back. Almost. I shudder every time I think about what would have happened if the asteroid had hit Earth. It is entirely possible that the back splash from the impact could have reaches us, wiping out Luna as well. No need to worry about that at least.

Pink. What happened there? The world is totally dead now. At least up to the time of the last report. Without the interlink on Pink Luna working we don't know any more. It is possible that some of the spores landed back on the world and reseeded it. A world as large as Pink would take a long time before there was anything there to detect though.

What if it is reseeded and they retain the ability to DS across the froth? How long until they finish what Spider and Ravi almost accomplished? We may have only postponed our extinction by exiling them. We may have brought this upon ourselves by exiling them. We may have condemned all froth worlds. Shit. I pray to what ever controls fate not to let that happen. Don't destroy everything because of our mistake.

“Ma'am, confirmation on the destruction of the structures. Orbitals show no air present in any of them.”

“Keep up a vigilance all the same. They are sneaky.”

“Yes Ma'am.”

Council

~Come to order! Come to order!~ A shouting Ceph does not attract much attention. Too bad about the prohibition about using TK on each other. A collective whack on the side of the head would be effective right now.

+How do you feel about your people now Jordan?+

I sigh, ^Very much ashamed Fa'lan. Very much ashamed. I am truly sorry for their behavior.^

+If it were only the Ba I would be upset with all Ba, but it appears that the disease has spread. All sens are pushing against all non native sens on their respective worlds.+

^I want to know where they got these sensors that can find even a nine when they do their best to hide. Anyone without DS capability is a target.^

+So, they are on the other worlds too?+

^Everyone that I have heard of so far.^

~First order of business. Who the hell gave the norms those dam detectors?~

“If I may speak?”

~Good to see you out of quarantine Doc. You may proceed.~

“The tech is like nothing we have seen before. Several have gone to the library, but initial reports from them say it is not in the library. We can't do anything to affect them. We can gather them up by hand when we happen to find them by visual sight only. We can then hide them from the norms once found, but we can't detect them with any known tech, we must see them to find them. That makes it nearly impossible.”

~What of the spores?~

“Ed is working on them. Fortunately they don't seem to be able to DS across the froth. They can DS across short distances though. They have to be handled extremely carefully. It is likely that Pink has been reseeded, but that is the only froth Eden that has, thank goodness. It will of course follow it's normal course and attempt to reach out to the rest of it's own froth universe.”

~What of the Luna and Mars colonies? Have they still refused our help?~

That's where I come in.

^They are still refusing help. Luna is down to approximately thirty individuals. They just lost two more they sent to Pink Luna. Doc can

confirm this, but the spores are not intelligent and will consume any organic material they can, including living bodies. Some mercy should possibly be shown them. I am sure they would curse us till the end of time, but if the thirty suddenly found themselves on say Mars I am sure we could coax a smile out of them.^

~How show you all?~

It is unanimous. I have my work set out for me.

^I could use Mandhi's help with the transfer. A caged rat can get vicious. The faster this happens the better they will be.^

~Where is she currently?~

!!Last entry says she is still on Fist!!

~I am here.~ There is a displacement of air when she arrives. She must have come in from some distance. She pops to the front to be with us.

~Sorry I was late. Research does not go well. All of you know of the initial four that came in. They are not in any library. And I mean any. We have even been to the Galactic Central Library.~ Whoa, that gets a reaction from everyone.

~They run several times faster than our time frame. This makes them very hard to study without drawing attention to ourselves by matching them. As you know we have been hiding our abilities in all locations now. Even on Fist there are anti TK forces at work. But that is not the problem. We have evidence that several more came through during the recapture when the first four got loose.~ The hall goes wild.

~It gets worse. We have no idea where the additional ones are.~

“What do you mean. They are fast, but not that fast. They have to be somewhere on Fist.”

~We have evidence that they have high level TK abilities. The auto detectors picked them up for a few arn when they first arrived. Then they totally disappeared from all detectors on Fist.~

#!That just means they have froth DS. What about other worlds?!#

~Nothing that matches them.~

~Keep on it Mandhi. Jordan, sorry, you will have to find other help.~

^Understood.^ Maybe Sussi is available. Wish Roo was here. She could have done it in one hop.

~What about the doubles.~

Fa'lan speaks up, +Several doubles of me showed up on Ba until I changed form and hid better. There were several incidences where Ba enforcers tried to kill me with projectile weapons. Apparently they were successful killing the impostors. All of the enforcers are armed now. Any

'wizard' as they call them that presents themselves is duped within days and the dupes begin their destruction immediately. I can find no evidence as to how this is being done. Though I agree with most that it must be somehow related to the Pink event.+

Many agree with the assessment.

~Which brings us to the sentient crisis.~

The obvious is to return everyone to their own world.

~That would undo everything we have done. It would set us back a millennium.~

“Not to mention learning inter species communication and cooperation. What happens when one of the species makes it off planet like the original Hu did? Do we want them going in shooting anything that looks different?”

Affirmations.

~That only leaves deep cover.~

^Not with those dam sensors everywhere. Our only choice now is to find some hard rock and hide until several generations have passed and they lose interest.^

“Brown here we come. Garfield is getting company again.”

~Order please! We have some time. Think on it everyone. Session dismissed for one Eden day. Meet back here then.~

I am still near Fa'lan.

^What are you going to do now?^

+Barbara has some ideas. Ku are being persecuted on all sen worlds. We need to find a new home.+

^Really, all worlds?^

She looks at me, +I stand corrected. There is one they are not being persecuted on. Because there are none on that world. Good idea Jordan.+ She rushes off, presumably to find Barbara. Which world are there none on? I need to find Sussi. She is my only hope.

Hu Eden

+You know her better than I do. Maybe she will come out for you.+

“She seemed pretty determined the last time I was here. I will try.”

+Why is she in slow time? Don't her people need her?+

“You know the answer as well as I do. There are times in the life of a TK when the abilities we have overcome our belief in ourselves to do the right thing.”

+And the four.+

“Yeah, well, she did know one of them rather well. A long time ago, but you never forget.”

+They weren't mates were they?+

“Hu TKs don't mate unless we fake it. Ask James about that. I never tried. As to before, who can know. They did know each other before this all happened. Went to the same learning center at one point is my understanding. Before even my time. He was already in his sixties when I first met him.”

+Some say he was ah different even then.+

She looks at me, “Fa, we all were. Everyone who has ever become TK was already different then their peers. Sort of a qualification in my mind. I see the rest as sleepers. Norms can go an entire life without questioning anything around them.”

+We question everything. Got it.+ I raise amusement feathers. Can't actually smile with a beak after all, but side feathers on my face accomplish a similar effect.

!No TK from this point on.!

+Why is that? Doesn't it take TK to stay in slow time?+

“Only to enter. Once there anyone can stay, until a TK breaks them out of it.” She smiles.

!A necessary exception. Live with it.!

+I am sure that a large white dinosaur, a huge bird like thing and a warrior princess does not attract any attention.+

!They have seen worse.! Really?

“We are near the Regional Galactic Center take off point remember. We do get visitors from the center occasionally.”

+Has it reached pre anathema levels again yet?+

“Not yet. But any visitor is better the none we experienced during the anathema itself.”

+Was it worth the price?+

“I miss them too. It was their choice.”

“Speaking of sacrifices. Did I miss anything?”

“Welcome Jesus. No, just in time as usual. We were about to walk down to the sacred site.”

+Why is it sacred?+

Jesus laughs, “Well, the site of a person that has died but not rotted, out in full sun and rain for a thousand years makes for a nice conversation piece.”

+She has been out there that long? Trying to break Silver's record or something?+

“Silver would sit out for hundreds of thousands of years at a time. She is a beginner.”

+Didn't you old timers have duties?+

Barbara shrugs, “No more Hu on the first Earth at the time Silver sat. The rest of us were out there doing what we did. Hard as it is to believe, we more or less forgot about the place. He was left alone for a very long time.”

+Why didn't he go out there to be with the rest of you?+

“Because of his promise to the magmotics.”

+Right, I remember that from class. Think Pushy Paws is trying to make contact.+

“The magmotics are easy to contact. We don't because of an agreement not to harass them this round. You let them be. No, she is trying to follow part of the path that Silver did in order to try and understand what he awakened to.”

+Not so easy.+

“No indeed.”

“This will take some time, even with the three of us.”

+You are staying too Jesus?+

“Would not miss it.”

Barbara looks concerned, “I would think your services would be most needed on the front line of the coming species wars.”

“There will always be wars and rumors of wars. Sometimes sentients need to experience war to learn to avoid war.”

+Tough learning experience.+

“Cultures need to learn as much as sentients need to learn.”

“We are here. There she is. Array yourself within a meter of her. The absolute minimum time we will be out is a year. More likely longer.” She turns to me, “Who do you have on the colony?”

+James, Rachael, Q, Hei Long and Daniel.+

“Daniel? I would not have guessed he would volunteer for hazardous duty.”

+Sens learn new skills. No one else was available from the first line. I need sens who are good at fast time and form changing.+

“Form changing? What form are they taking that could possibly help?”

“We should start.” Jesus smiles. I think he knows. Barbara is still confused. It will all be revealed in slow time.

Ku Colony

^How can anyone live out here? There can't be any water, no food, no shelter. Nothing but heat and sand.^

^A light gas lifter found them. I have drawings if you want to see them.^

^I have seen them Second.^ I have also seen the secret silver recordings outlawed by the pollution board. They don't understand that we are at a war for our survival.

A Fourth runs up, ^The colony has been spotted.^

^How much further?^ I ask the Second.

^We can get most of the way tonight and attack at dawn. They will have the sun in their eyes.^

^How many death eaters do we have ready?^

^Twenty four.^

^Not enough.^

^It was all we could obtain with three days notice.^

I have already seen the grunts. Several hundred. Not enough either.

^How many Ku are there?^

^We can't be certain. Many were killed by civilians and even eaten in some cases. We can expect up to a thousand if all the rest of the ones missing have made it here.^

^How could that many come here without leaving a trace. There are no tracks of any kind.^

^Light lifters?^

^We would have seen them also. Especially that many.^

I finally say what everyone is thinking, ^Wizards. They are all wizards.^

^Wizards can do that?^

I sneer, ^How do you think they were able to get away from each terror event?^

^You actually believe the old tales? They can travel through air and slip between space over long distances?^

^Judge from the evidence, not your emotions.^

^Be prepared for anything.^

We are using new transports called dune walkers. Large lightweight wheels that don't get bogged down. We make good time. The problem is, is that we can't carry much weight. Just the twenty four death eaters and their operators and the command structure. The grunts are walking in.

Slower conventional transports bring up the rear with supplies and temporary structures. Would not want to be caught out in the sun during the day. I would not even subject a grunt to that treatment.

^Far seerers are getting details now. A large dome shaped structure. Sand colored, which explains why it took us so long to find it. There are three sens visible on the outside. They remain motionless. Dressed in black if you can believe it.^

^It is not light yet. If they are still black when the sun is up then I will wonder.^

^Wizards, what's to wonder?^

I give my going speech, ^Listen up. We are the forward line. I want the death eaters spread as far as possible. Be prepared for anything. They can cause things and Ba to be moved from a distance. If they start the attack, don't wait, fire at will. I would rather wait until the grunts get here, but if they move I won't wait. I understand what that implies. My own experience has shown that surprise is the only way to success.^

The death eater squads put on their sand colored suits. It will be hot, but better than being seen instantly. That would be deadly.

^Is the alternative plan in place?^

^Yes, but do you think that will work?^

^Not a chance, but it looks better to command.^

^We risk lives for appearances.^ Not my call. I am hoping that this will all be over before the lifters get here.

^It could be another day before the grunts get here. They won't travel during the day in this heat.^

^What about the forward death eaters?^ I do care about them even if most are not Ba.

^We have worked out a sand colored tent like thing. Highly insulated. They will feel the heat less that we will. We can't afford for them to lose their concentration.^

^Let me know when they are in position. Also let me know if the ones outside the dome move at all.^

They don't. The death eaters are quickly into position, for ones who don't appear to move when you are looking at them. The day goes by. I sleep during most of it. Everyone else does shifts to maintain observations of the three.

^It has to be over forty out there. How can they handle it? In black? Are they crazy?^

^The sun will set soon. Only a quarter moon tonight, but the sand should reflect it will. We should still be able to observe them.^

^We attack at one eighth before sunrise with or without the grunts. I am not waiting any longer. There are only six of them between us and our goal.^

^The Ku could offer some resistance.^

^Since when? Only ones who have ever been a problem have been the wizards in the shape of Ku. Your standard Ku is quite docile. Make good workers. Not particularly fond of their cooking like everyone else, but they do work hard.^

^Would you want your kits befriending them though?^ I shudder.

^Didn't think so.^ The thought of having kits makes me shudder.

^If all the Ku really are in the dome, we will soon be done with them.^

^We have looked every where else. Only place they could be.^

I turn and look straight at him. Damn I hate being on the ground like this. I feel so exposed.

^Has anyone seen a Ku near the dome?^

^No. We are not even sure how they could have gotten here. There are no tracks in the sand at all, though of course they would disappear quickly. We may have just missed them.^

This whole affair is beginning to feel wrong somehow. I am not at all convinced these are the ones we want. If they were anything like the wizards we have already encountered they would have acted by now.

A runner comes up, ^First. We have a good description of the three. They appear to be Ba. Two males and a fem. They are wearing ancient battle gear. Circa first millennium.^

Slowly a figure rises before us. Was completely hidden a moment ago. I hate it when they do that, at the same time I am always amazed.

^There are five. Four males and a fem. All apparently Ba.^ I blink and the figure is gone.

My Second comments, ^Why would Ba be helping the Ku? They most know we are here by now. Would you defend the Ku with such odds against you?^

^You are presuming they have seen us. We have seen no movement. No one has raised a far seerer to their eyes. Can you see them clearly from here without one? They probably don't know how many are here. If they had, they would have gone into the dome to warn the others. No, I don't think they know we are here yet.^

Two eighths before sunrise, the grunts arrive. Along with them is the long range cannon. I am counting on it to make a hole in the dome.

^Set up the cannon. I want a hit at ground level on the part of the

dome facing us. Easy entrance. No wind, so you should be able to use standard calculations for inclination. Fire when you see the five go down, but not before. ^ The Third acknowledges and runs off to inform the cannon squad.

^Soon we will know.^ Still does not feel right. How can they even stand that long without moving. It has been an entire day now. Don't they eat, sleep or emit waste?

^Guano. Are we sure they are alive? They could just be statues. Carvings to look like Ba. A deception.^

^First, there is not much wind, but there are slight movement of the air. We have seen their fur move with the air. They appear to be breathing too.^

^And how many ways are there to fake that? Haven't the Hu taught you anything about deception? Run a long air tube to the statues with a bladder inside. Someone in the dome could be operating bellows to make them appear to be breathing.^

^When the death eaters fire we will know. If they are statues they will shatter. If Ba, they will die.^

^As Ba do we have the right to fire unannounced?^

^We are still well within our assigned territory. Granted it is the high desert where we have never had any real presence, but the area is granted to us. We have nothing in our registry about their being here.^

^We also have no evidence whatsoever that they are here for hostile reasons. We have seen no wizards, no Ku. A lump in the sand that should not be there and five Ba standing in a circle around it. And they may be statues. That makes us look very stupid.^

Silence.

It is nearly time. If I say nothing it will occur without my presence.

^Second. How long would it take for someone to walk to them from here?^

^Maybe an eighth. A transport could get there in a fraction.^

^Walking will do. Tell my assistant to bring me the lacquered wooden box I brought with me. She will know what you are talking about.^

The Second looks put off being used as an errand runner, but complies. A moment later my assistant comes with the box. Not running. If she dropped the box it would mean her death and she knows it.

The second looks curious.

My assistant sets the box down on the table before me and leaves to her duties.

^What is it First?^

I ignore him and carefully touch the box. After breathing a few meditative breaths I slowly open the box. Inside is as it should be. The Second's eyes go wide.

^I will go. Signal the death eaters and the cannon not to fire. Pass word to them that if something happens to me they are to proceed as planned. If I return then I was right and we need not waste resources.^

^Very wise First.^ Patronizing.

I must concentrate. I know the contents down to the last microscopic portion. My pattern is laid out, no matter which side is chosen.

Seeing how it will be sunny before I can return, I bring a large sun shader with me as well. The one truly great contribution of the Ceph. Lightweight, looks good closed or open, and very adaptable to individual taste.

Best get started. I hear the whistle code to inform the death eaters. I just hope they heard it and obey. No guarantee the Hu, Dia and Dio can always hear a code that high pitched.

The ground here is a much dust as sand. I would have thought the wind would have scoured it clean to rock. Maybe the dust came from further on. Most of the desert is outside our area of influence. Best not to think about it. We weren't always so territorial. Must have caught it from the Hu. Distasteful but useful. More military positions because of it. What would have become of me had I remained in the family profession? Artists. Not sure what use they have. How could I have become one?

It takes me nearly an eighth and I am in good condition. Not like so many officers. I have the sun shader up before I am within easy sight of the figures. I chose the center one as he or it is the closest. Still no obvious sign of movement. They do look very much like statues even this close up.

I get as close as is polite. Feels very silly addressing a statue.

^Ah, good day.^ A universal greeting. Should work for statues too.

Nothing.

Well, I have some time. I set the sun shader to shade both of us and proceed to set up my box. Legs unfold from it so that it is self standing a short distance from the sand. Sand would not be good. For me it does not matter. I sit firmly on the sand after placing my mat.

“Sorry, how rude of me. Are you familiar with the ceremonial art of Ki ni ji? An ancient and honorable art. Been in my tree for as long as anyone can remember. Far longer than written records have been found to attest.

Well, as I already know this leaf well I will go first so as to afford you

time to study the other side. Plan your pattern well. So, I will begin.”

I reach for the ji, a special small curved knife. Very sharp, very fine. The preferred tool for the best of Ki ni ji, translated from the old speech as leaf cutting, though put that way it seems so cheap.

Thus I begin. Passage of time and awareness are lost once one is deep into the cutting. The pattern materializes before my eyes as if by magic. It is like I am impressing the surface with my very mind.

When I am done I am wet from concentration and spent. I allow enough time for my statue to appreciate the final pattern before I invite him to begin his pattern.

^Now begin your try. Don't feel ashamed if you cannot come close to what has been presented. As I said, the skill has been in my tree a very long time. I thought that doing Ki ni ji was a good way to pass the time and provide a measure of each of our resolves.^

I don't expect anything to happen of course. It has been a nice walk and I admit I do love the time spent in this form of meditation. I almost regret that I will have to return soon. No weapons have been fired at least. The sun has moved a great deal. They must be worried, but my Second saw what I was doing, so will be patient. No one does Ki ni ji quickly.

I look to the dome. It looks more like a hill of sand from here than something made by sens. I wonder now what the lifter guiders saw in it. Possibly the winds have put the fine dust that is everywhere here over it as well and hidden it in such a ways as to put our own efforts to shame.

Statues and a hill of sand. Just as I suspected. I sigh.

Well, best get back. I can do the other side of the leaf at some later date. Would be a shame to waste it. It took months to prepared the leaf properly for this style of cutting.

I look down to the leaf to retrieve the ji that I had set out for the statue to use when I notice that there appears to be a pattern on the other side of the leaf. Must be my mind already seeing a complementary pattern that will be cut. I shake my head to clear my mind and look more closely. There is a pattern. Barely visible. Exquisitely carved. It follows the natural structure of the leaf, almost as if the leaf must have known deep in it's being that this is what it was to become. My own efforts look crude by comparison, as if done by a first year student.

The pattern does reflect what I have done and builds on it. Yes, I can see it. As if my pattern was the starting point, the core of the design, only it has gone several steps beyond.

I look up to the Ba before me. ^I am sorry for having thought you made from wood or stone. But what I don't understand is how you were

able to carve it so quickly in such detail. This is the finest example of Ki ni ji I have ever seen in my life. I am truly honored to have cut with you.

Having acceded myself to the lesser position, it now within your right to ask a favor. Please feel free to ask any thing you wish.^

Again, I don't expect anything when he speaks.

^I was practicing Ki ni ji from before your tree was a thought of as a seed. It is I who apologize for taking advantage of you. I could not possibly accept a favor from you under these conditions. It was very enjoyable to watch you work.^ He is alive.

^May I ask you? Are the Ku who have disappeared in the dome?^

^What dome?^

I stand to point to it when I notice that the dome is missing. Just level desert going on as if the dome or hill of sand was never there. Even the patterns in the sand itself show no line of where the dome was.

I pull out my wizard sensor, yet it still does not register anything. I thought it was because I was not close enough, and when I saw him as a statue I did not see a need.

^Those silly things are easily defeated if one knows there is one about. It is a simple six dimensional enfolding. I have known ones as high as thirteen in my time. Granted the lesser of my kind find them perplexing. We let them be so they may learn as we have.^

The device disappears from my hand, though I don't know how.

^We are not the ones you hunt. You have sought us out by mistake. The ones you hunt are not true wizards, but false ones. For some reason they have been sent here to cause the true wizards much distress.^

^Are you saying that the Ku are not these false wizards?^

^Not one. There are very few Ku wizards and none of them are on this world at this time.^

^Where are the Ku who were here?^

^They have been removed to safety. Even if I was able to convince you of the truth that I have said, I doubt very much I could convince the rest of Ba. Best they are out of harms way. Too many have suffered already.^

I remember from my younger years, ^Is it true they were told to leave their own world because they were evil?^ And is that why they have been removed again?

^None were told to leave. A few were rescued by choice. Those few became the many on this world and others. The ones who were rescued were not of the evil ones, but the gentle ones.^

I stretch to see the other Ba. They are gone. It is only this one and

myself.

^They were in the dome?^

^Yes.^

^And you caused the dome to be moved through dim space?^

^Very good. Yes.^

^Then the weapons aligned with you were pointless.^

^None of them are operable currently.^

^Why did you let us get this close?^

^That I may meet you.^

^How did you know I would be the one sent? There are more experienced enforcers than me who could have been sent.^

^You have the most experience with the false wizards. You were the logical choice. Sometimes, almost as if by accident those in authority sometimes do the right thing.^ He shows amusement.

^Not very often.^

^No. Not very often. That is true with my kind as well.^

^It will be dark soon. I should get back to the others. They will be worried.^

^To them, you have disappeared along with the dome and the four others. There is no one to go back to. They have left the area where you were.^

^It is a long way back to the Edge encampment. I have not rested for some time. Nor do I have the necessary supplies. I lack water and food. I could be in trouble.^

^You could come with me if you wish. Or I could take you to them. Or you can stay here.^

^The choice does not matter to you?^

^The choice matters to you. That is what is important. What will you choose?^

^If I allow you to take me back, they will wonder how I arrived. Likely I will lose my position and be suspect for the rest of my much shorter life. If I stay here alone without help my life will be very short indeed. There is only one choice with merit. I will go with you. At least I may gain knowledge.^

^Finish packing the leaf then. When you are ready we will go. My name is Daniel.^

^I am Zigm. Daniel is a Hu name. How did you get a Hu name?^ Most Ba would be ashamed to be given a Hu name.

^Ah, that is because I was first aware as a Hu. I have been many many different forms. Ba is only the latest. Not a bad form really. The sonar

seeing is fascinating.^ He emits a few chirps and shows amusement.

^We think it is the best form of the sens.^ More amusement but no comment. I do not believe he believes that. Not sure I do any more either.

^What's it like being a Hu?^

^Good and bad. Not being able to see in the dark is hard. Not being able to soar is a loss. But, being strong enough to do heavy work is a plus.^

^Hu are good at heavy work.^

^They are also very smart. Be careful. They know much more than you think they do. All of the sens are about equal in intelligence, just slight differences in which areas they are able to grasp easier.^

^Like the Ceph being best at math.^

^Yes. They are also good at administration. Ba and Hu are both very bad at that. You will miss the Ku cooks very much.^

^At least they were not afraid of dishes made with bugs. Hu are quite silly about that.^

^Indeed. I have done some research. There are some cultures of Hu who are more accepting, but most associate bugs with eaters of grain, a major food substance for the Hu.^

^I can't stand their grain dishes. No taste at all. Horrible stuff. Did you actually like it as a Hu?^

^As I said, there are differences. As a Hu, you are raised and taught to like it. You really never give it much thought. Just as we like bugs without thinking about it much. We accept that bugs are a good source of protein.^

^And taste great with tamik sauce.^

He shows amusement, ^Indeed. You have finished packing?^

^Yes, it would be a waste to not display this piece while it lasts.^

^Art is best ephemeral.^

^Indeed. Guano, now you have gotten me saying it.^ We both show amusement.

Mars

“They had no right!”

“Stop your whining. I am glad to be alive. You know that last transport project was doomed. We would have all been killed for sure. Besides, they did not show themselves. They did not change our minds about anything. They did not ask for anything nor demand anything. Just got us out of an open mess with no safe enclosure.”

I object though, “How are we ever to learn how to do anything on our own if there are never any consequences? All we have to do is give up and wait to be rescued.”

“Say that to the many who died on previous attempts. They let us try, what six, seven times. Granted most of those never had human cargo, but still, they were impressive failures. No guarantee they will ever help us again either. Have you seen one since we arrived? Know of anyone else who has?”

“No.”

“No one has. They are gone as promised. Probably just passing by and seeing our situation made one last good will gesture to help atone for all that they did to us in the past. I for one do not mind being on the good side of one of their actions just once. I have lost relatives to their silliness. Don't lecture me on how bad they are.” She turns to leave. It is a volatile subject. I really need to learn to stop using my mouth and lungs for speech and stick to breathing.

“Hey Mo. You're up for PT. Get a move on.”

“Just getting to the physical therapy center is PT enough for me thanks. This higher gravity is going to kill me.” A TK could have changed me in an instant of course. No more! I straighten up and make a good show of walking down the hall like a new born learning how to walk again. Glad they installed hand rails in this section. I only weigh twice as much. Not like if we went to earth. Six times would do me in for sure.

It has been nearly ten years since I visited Mars. Back before the TKs left. Not much has changed except that it seems everything is more inconvenient. More steps to every task. Really, I think it is because more has broken down and so many workarounds have had to be found. Even this center. There are fewer pieces of equipment than I remember. Of course fewer people would need it now that most travel has been canceled. If you can walk there with a breather, then you can go. Otherwise stay where you are and work hard.

“Mo, have you given any thought about what you will do here?”

“Meaning there is not much call for shuttle pilots.”

“Not much. We have no working shuttles at the moment and already have three pilots who suck at the public expense.”

“It is those damn TKs. What made us think we ever needed them? We have all gone soft with them around. Once I get my strength back I intend to help in engineering. I am good with my hands. Just coming here I have seen far too much equipment out of service.”

“Not from lack of trying. Mostly it is the lack of parts.”

“Then I shall go to manufacturing.”

“There the lack raw materials. Rare metals especially. We were far too dependent on earth and of course the TKs.”

“Had no one thought to have them make an excess and store it for use later?”

“During good times few think ahead to what must come. Have you thought of prospecting? We really need people finding new sources of materials. You have enough education to learn what you need to know quickly. Lonely work, but you must be used to that having spent so long with the thirty in all of Luna City.”

“We stayed together. How many people do you routinely deal with here yourself? Most have only a small circle of friends. Everyone else that is seen is merely background scenery.”

He laughs, “I believe you are right there. Well then, what else appeals to you?”

“It seems I will have to give it some more thought.”

“Ready for another set?” Not really, but the sooner I do, the sooner I can get out of here. I am willing to work. What does not matter so much.

“Ready.”

It was grueling. I am weak all over. My muscles tremble from exhaustion. It must have been a good session. I lie down an hour to allow for my energy to return. I crave something sweet. Would it not make sense to have food after sessions such as these? The entire place seems so disorganized. Very inefficient. I am beginning to get an idea of where I might do some good. Too many Lunarians have arrived. The social structure has been disrupted.

I get up. First I must find food. I have used up too many calories in therapy.

At one time the layout probably resembled Luna City. Like producing like. Not now. I should be close to a food prep area. Yet I seem to be getting further from anything I recognize. Is this what it feels like to

weigh seventy kilograms all the time? Remind me to lay off anything with fat in it. In frustration I open a door at random and am peering into a greenhouse of some kind. Maybe there is something edible in here. I go inside and the door closes behind me.

I don't get very far before I feel faint. I collapse to the floor unable to move and pass out. Just before I do I see Martians standing over me. Shit, just my luck.

I wake up in the infirmary.

"You are using up creds like a drunk at a hi test vat. Hope you find work soon."

"What do they do around here for those who don't find work? The airlock?"

"Worse, they GM you into a Martian. Of course after wards you don't mind."

"Prospecting sounds good."

"Thought it might. Put your thumb print here." He indicates a tablet.

"You have one that still works?"

"If you find something useful, who knows, you could end up here with a fancy hundred year old barely working, crashes every few hours, tablet like I get to use."

I print my thumb, "Anything for air."

"Anything for air. You understand. You should do fine. Just watch your six. Out there, there are no enforcers and no one will care after wards."

"Thanks for rescuing me from the Martians."

"Don't go into any more greenhouses without a breather. In fact, don't go anywhere without a breather. Here it is not decom that kills, but asphyxiation."

"Good safety tip. Ah, where do I get one of these breathers?"

"You just signed up for a three week intensive class on prospecting. You get issued one when you graduate. Learn how to service and maintain that thing like it was your own set of lungs, because they essentially are."

"Got it. Thanks doc."

"Remember me when you strike it."

"I will. I promise." Holding a hand to my heart. He shakes his head and waves me away.

"Hey doc. Where can I get something to eat?" He throws me an emergency ration bar.

It takes me only a few seconds to finish it.

I finally find a directory and find out where the learning center is. I follow the codes a few sectors till I end up at the center. I am amazed at how few people there are around. I go up to a pod to begin my training.

“Mo Ling. Prospector training.” Nothing happens.

“Those things don't work.” A older lady tells me. She looks like she has been in the Martian dust forever.

“Where do I go for my training then?”

“Oh you're in the right place.”

“I don't understand. If the pods don't work, but I am in the right place, then how does this work?”

“You sure you have not been GMD?” She smiles though.

“That would mean, you are my instructor? Like in the ancient times?”

“Well, I have been called ancient a number of times, but I assure you I was born in the current century. But yes, I am your instructor. If you will follow me I will introduce you to your classmates.”

“Do we get to sit at wooden stools and read from paper surfaces?”

“They are called desks and books. No. Much more practical than that. What were you before you got here?”

“Pilot. Really thought I was going to die in an attempt to get here in a rust bucket. Bad luck I guess.”

“You are part of the ones the TKs brought in huh?” I nod.

I follow her into the next room. Large by Luna standards.

“Oh shit, not you guys.” I shake my head.

“God Mo, I hope I look better than you do.” Tess says.

“Nope, you look much worse. I hope.”

“She doesn't. Get used to it. Prospecting is not dependent on looks. Sit down Mr. Ling.”

“Oooh, Mister now. Teacher's favorite.”

She gives me a seductive look which makes me shake. She laughs at my reaction. Must be at least twice my age.

“Don't worry. I don't mess with students I could have grandmothered. Not enough experience.” She licks her lips, “Now sit!”

I sit in front of Tess who pokes me in the back.

“How I ended up with a third of you excuses for fertilizer I will never know. Listen good. If you don't memorize everything I say in the next three weeks you are dead. No one will care. No one will come looking for you. I certainly won't. Thank goodness this is my last class of Lunies.” She smiles when she says it though.

Thus our training begins.

A week later I am convinced that I could service a breather in my

sleep in a pitch black cave at zero degrees. Oh and within the one minute before I pass out from lack of one.

We will travel in packs. Our class is one pack worth and the major reason we train together. Half are Lunarians. That means that some other pack is half Lunarians or they found work other than prospecting. We will be dropped into a location of their choosing and we will then branch out in pairs from there. Always coming back to home base to report and pair up again for another excursion, until we find something or run out of supplies or places to look, within two days of walking from base. We will then be picked up, moved to a new location and repeat the process.

If we are lucky and do find something, the lucky pair moves up the steps to help choose the next location the pack will be dropped of at. Two in a row and the pack gets total freedom to choose. We are all aiming for that level. Of course the opposite is also possible. Skunk out ten times and you become Martians. That is the threat anyway. The system is not against you, they would much rather you found something, but resources are not infinite and the threat discourages slackers.

Week two is about identifying what we are looking for. Every imaginable rock formation is covered. Test kits are issued. Both chemical and spectroscopic devices are handed out. Week one was survival gear, week two was survival gear of a different sort. None of us wants to end up Martians.

Week three was field practice. We are taken to simulated sites close by and tested on how well we find the good stuff. We stay out overnight in each case to get used to using the gear and what to do if something fails. We are not very good at it and are quickly discouraged.

“Don't worry. No one has a find the first time out. A built in edge to the game.” Great.

The big day comes and we have all been over our supplies ten times. We are sure there are no surprises. Defective equipment is replaced or workarounds found. 'Supplies are not infinite.' is the excuse given repeatedly. In other words we are at the end of the list for resources. You would think we would be a priority, since we are trying to find materials to save everyone.

Transport is a craft I would have rejected as unserviceable on Luna during the exodus. Guess because we lack a vacuum here they are more lax. I am aching to get into the cockpit, but every time I try to get up the others pin me down.

“If we crash this thing we all die. Does not matter if there is air out there or not.”

“We are only ten meters off the ground. Good chance of survival. Whoa, that was a steep fall!” We have gone off the edge of a rift and are descending into a valley. The pilot is making good use of the air currents to save fuel.

“Why couldn't we be taken out in a lifter instead of a winged one?”

“Only the upper classes get to be in lifters.” A non Lunarian in our pack adds. Good kid. Goofed off during school and ended up here. The fear of death has straightened him out quick. Tess, Luan and Ci are the only fem. Some of the guys are gay, but that still leaves a lot of tension. Best to just forget it for the rest of the summer season. And no one wants to be here during the winter, not even a Martian is crazy enough for that.

We land in the valley next to some sort of rusting structure or device. Iron is prevalent on Mars, but with the increasing oxygen and moisture levels it does not last long before it returns to it's natural state.

“All off. We are here. Help unload the habitat.” The pilot is the only crew, so that means we do all of the unloading. She never leaves the cockpit. I go up to chat briefly.

“If you set the laterals a little more down you will get less vibration.”

“That may work on Luna, but not here. First updraft and you would flip over and pancake it. You a pilot?”

“I was. Now I'm a prospector.”

She smiles, “Good luck.” You will need it is implied. I nod.

I go outside to help the others. Instinctively I have already donned the breather. Glad the reflexes are working. Could save my life later.

On the com I hear, “Over here Mo. We are having trouble getting the habitat out. Seems to be stuck. Looks like it was packed in a hurry by some lazy sobs.”

“It is stuck on the door hinge. I go back inside and release it from there.” Thumb up from our setup leader. That was decided a day ago so there would be no confusion now.

I go back up, wave to the pilot. I am still wearing my breather, but no point in taking it off as I cycle through the air lock to the cargo area. Air lock is a bit of a misnomer. More a small closet with two doors. Pressure is the same on both sides.

It is obvious what's wrong and I put my hands on the corner of the habitat package and pull, but they are still trying to pull from the outside.

“Hey guys, let me pull first to clear it.” The tension relaxes and with effort I pull it the few centimeters necessary.

“Okay, slowly pull as I guide it this time.” They do so and it plops out onto the surface.

As soon as I hit the dirt the pilot starts her taxiing, but hits a snag almost instantly. A flap refuses to budge. She won't be able to take off in it's current state. I pick up a fist sized rock and take aim. Miss by a mile. I am still used to Luna gravity. I grab another rock and at least hit it this time. A third rock does the trick and the flap moves.

"Thanks Pilot." She waves from the cockpit. I wave back and then turn to the others. They are well on their way to unpacking the habitat. The shell will be the actual structure. The inside is packed with everything else we will need. We need to set up solar collectors, rain collectors, waste, etc. I am still having trouble getting used to clouds in the sky and not being able to see the stars in the day time. Tess looks visibly upset.

I run over to her just as she faints.

"Tess, what's wrong?"

"Lunies. Never been out in the open before."

"Cut the insults. Your life may depend on their help later. Do you want them to hesitate?" No.

"Hey Mo, how come only Tess is freaking out?"

"The rest of us worked on the surface a lot. And of course as a pilot I was exposed to much worse than this. Tess was deep under. Probably never even saw the surface before coming here."

"Ah, where am I?" She still seems woozy.

"Tess, suck on your sugar sipper. There is caffeine in it as well. It will help bring you back. Just sit here for a bit until you get your wits back."

I get back to the others who have not stopped working. We need to get set up before nightfall. It will go twenty below at night at this latitude. I see them struggling with the solar array and go to help out there.

"You have been busy today." I nod.

"This would be a typical day for a pilot before the Pink went crazy. Everything changed after that."

"I would have thought it was when the TKs went crazy."

"Pretty much the same time in my mind. We did not even notice them gone until the Pink. They dealt with the higher ups, not us lowly ones."

"That is universal at least. Same thing here. Hand me the wrench." I hand him the six millimeter. "How did you know? Anyway, the ones here did not mingle much with the common folk. I only saw them from a distance. That was over a year ago. Things have been falling apart ever since. Did not know they did that much."

"Made us all weak if you ask me. That should do it. Let's move on to waste."

“Who's cooking tonight?”

“Ho and Pepper.” I am on for breakfast, just before we go out on our first excursion. Who we are paired with will be by lottery then. Stops anyone from playing favorites. Each group decides for themselves and we all immediately went with the recommended method. Later, after we have had some experience it may be different. Suits me anyway.

Tess comes up to me, “Thanks back there.” She waves and goes into the habitat. I shrug.

The meal is tasteless. Not the fault of the cooks but of the ingredients. I expect breakfast to be the same. Not much different on Luna. Was on Luna. No one there now. I fall asleep without even being away of falling asleep. My dreams are of being stranded out here. The iron tower figures into it.

After breakfast I am paired with Tess. Everyone including me thinks it was fixed somehow. She is small, subject to fainting and weak as a newborn. If it weren't for her phenomenal memory I would have voted for leaving her in the habitat. We have coms, but no pads. Too low on the priority list. Tess is our living pad.

Tess immediately tells me, “We are going to the tower.”

“I have a bad feeling about the tower.”

“You had a bad dream too?” I open my mouth, which does not show through the mask and then nod.

“Best if we face them than run from them.”

Did I forget to mention that when she is awake she is hyper, like a rat on a rat chase. Never very good at that. Always the last one picked in school. Became a pilot to compensate. Another story.

“Lead on.” Of course I am carrying most of the weight. She being half my mass.

I am panting and nearly faint myself by the time we arrive. Didn't help that there is no trail and the place is littered with everything from pebbles to boulders. We could see it from the habitat. I did not think it was that far away. I rest my hand against the side and then finally look up.

“Oh shit! This thing is huge.” I had not counted on the size. How far did we walk?

“You two at the tower?” Ho.

“Roger that.” Tess answers immediately. I am still out of breath.

“Be thankful this one is dead. The entire valley was probably underwater from its output. The stream of water created went up five kilometers before falling as a very heavy rain.”

“Any chance it will restart?”

“Never expected it to stop. We are a far ways from having oceans yet.”

We go completely around the structure, but see no obvious way in. Why Tess wants to get in I don't understand. I am more interested in the ground. Both from a safety point of view, severe trip hazards, and from the fact that the water flow exposed the subsurface. I stop to take a spec reading several times.

“Stop that already. I want to get to the top. Help boost me up. There is a ladder above us.” I look up. You would think as a pilot I would be thinking more three dimensional. Of course I did not have trip hazards and weighing twice as much as on Luna.

“I am guessing the ladder reached the ground before the water washed it away.”

“It doesn't now. Boost please.”

“Why do you want to go up there?”

“Why not. You know this site has already been gone over by multiple groups. Just part of the practice. I want to go someplace I know none of the others have gone.”

“I don't see any evidence of anyone here before.”

“Silly TK. The Martian winds would have blown any of that away long ago.”

“Right.” I sigh. I am still thinking Luna. No wind there.

It takes me two tries, but I get her up to the first rung. She gets up far enough to have her feet on the first rung instead of her hands. She clips onto it with her belt.

“Throw me a rope. Then you can climb it to get up.”

Good idea. I get a short rope out. It would take too long to bring out the long one. I throw it up to her and she ties it good to the third rung. Good idea number two. Made it much easier to get up and have something to hang onto. I retrieve the rope and stash it.

Did I mention how high this thing is? It goes on forever. Reminds me why I preferred to reach orbit with a shuttle. Climbing the entire way sucks. I probably should have left the pack on the base. No one around to take it. Leave anything unattended on Luna and someone grabs it. Or they never grab it and it stays there for thirty years. Can never tell.

She is to the top long before I am. I am surprised when I get up there to find a wide lip with guard rails. Why would they design it to be climbed? I look over the edge and see there is a ladder descending too. How did that withstand the water jet? I'm no engineer, but shouldn't that have been sheared off instantly? I wonder what it is made of? I unclip my

spec and sample it.

“Shit, they have been here too. The rails are TK metal.”

“Honey, the entire structure is TK. Didn't you pay any attention during the history classes?”

“You would think that I would have figured it out. Who else can bring this much water up?”

“Bring it up? They did not bring it up. They made it. There is more water on the surface now that has been on or in this world for billions of years. Look over that way. You can see the lake that formed from this one's effort. The settlements around it are all Martian. You can see their crops laid out up the side of the hills around the lake.”

“How come Mars is not green like Earth then?”

“It's coming. Going to take thousands of years for that to happen. Better to do it slow and right. Takes time to make a stable ecosystem.”

“How do you know all that? Your memory? You read it somewhere?”

“I was part of the crew that maintained the food supply. Spent a lot of time counting bugs of all sizes to be sure everything was stable.”

I shine a light down the hole, “I wonder how far down this goes.”

“Who knows?”

“If the water uncovered layers on the outside, imagine what this thing did on the inside? I think you did a really good thing by having us come up here Tess.”

“You want to go down there? That's nuts. Is the rope even long enough?”

I point to the ladder.

“Oh, right.” Score one for me.

She adds a question, “Leave the pack here?” Can't believe hers is getting heavy.

“Better not. We don't know what's down there. I'm calling the others.”

I set the transmitter to the emergency channel.

“Attention group. Tess and I are going inside the water fountain. We believe there might be some interesting stuff uncovered by the process they used.” Silence.

“Good idea guys. We are coming over.”

“Negative on that. It will be dark soon. Everyone needs to be back in the habitat. We can all come back tomorrow. You two come on down. It will be there when we come back. Take the caterpillar tomorrow. It's faster and we can all participate.”

“You heard them Tess.”

“But it was my idea.”

“And you will get credit. Better safe than dead.”

“Pilot stuff?”

“And common sense. Exciting though. Wait, do you see that?”

“What?”

I point to the side of the rim, “Something shiny there.”

“Old probe. They did a lot in the 20th.”

I fumble for the nocks, get them up and focus, “Too big. Shiny is interesting normally. Genetically programmed to seek it out.”

“So are rats. Doesn't do them any good.”

“I'm logging it anyway. Maybe I'll go there while the rest of you visit this place.”

We start our descent. Just as hard going down. I'm getting old. Been cheated there as well. No more extension injections for me. For anyone. So am I at the half way point or well beyond? How long did people live before them? No one remembers.

I don't remember going to sleep.

“Sleep in Mo. No one goes out today. Dust storm. Likely to last three days, or more.”

I roll over. Great. I can't get the sight of the object out of my mind. It flees from me.

The people of Mars are good in their design. The habitat is holding up well to the winds. I barely hear them. But I long to be out there.

Three days pass in agony. By the fourth everyone is on edge and we retreat to our separate spaces. There is no privacy. Not here, never on Luna, well, except at the end when we each had entire complexes to ourselves if we needed it. None of us grew up that way though.

Here we are the invaders. They did not want over a hundred thousand Loonies invading their world. Especially ones not adapted to it. Thank goodness there was over a year between us and the last set. Time to breathe, though I have a feeling that we were all sent on suicide missions such as this one. They need more Martians, not more people. We have this one chance to redeem ourselves or we become what they wanted us to become from the beginning. Thank you for at least this chance. I would have preferred to have died on board a ship though. Curse you TKs.

On the seventh day the storm calms, not completely, but we are so wound up we don't care. We all evacuate the habitat at first light. A party of five head with transport to the tower. Tess is among them.

Ho asks, “Going after your shiny thing?” I nod.

“Good luck. Want company? Not safe alone.”

I hesitate, “If you have nothing better to do. It is a phantom chase.”

“Anything is better than listening to the sand.” I smile.

“Come then. I have the coordinates in the noks. I just hope the sands did not bury it again.”

“It does seem strange that given all the numbers of people who have gazed upon the walls of this depression, that no one else has noticed it.”

“Tess saw it as well.”

“I am not questioning you. The others are gone. Luan is on watch here. She has the com.”

I nod and put on my breather. Ho does the same.

“Luan, this is Mo. Ho and I are heading out. Coordinates to follow.” I press the send button on the noks.

“Coordinates received. Good hunting. Wish I was with you.” You may not later. Something does not feel right. Call it a pilot's gut feeling. Still, I have to know. No evidence this is anything other than a reflection of light. Could be glass from a meteor impact. Could be nothing at all.

I am on a foreign world. I don't know the rules here. I am out of my element in so many ways, yet I have to know. Maybe having survived this I can call Mars home. Until then I know I can't.

“Let's go Ho.”

“Right behind you. Hope you Loonies are lucky. I could use some for a change.” I shake my head. If I am his luck he really has run out.

The sand hits us with a force I did not expect. Ho does not seem phased by it at all.

“Nothing. Only a slight breeze. You will get used to it. Glad we have breathers. Sucking sand is no fun. Gets into everything. Keep your gadgets inside your pack or pockets unless you absolutely have to. Sand kills them.”

“Understood.” I put the nocs away and switch to my arm GPS. No images put it does have direction and distance. I follow Ho's example and bend to the wind.

Once we get more into the shadow of the ridge it diminishes. Of course now we are marching uphill. Can't win.

It takes us several hours all the same. I thought it would be closer to the habitat than the tower was. Certainly better than climbing it. I guess the uphill climb made the difference. Getting back should be easy at least.

“One day's travel is not enough. We can barely get anywhere in one day.”

“If we succeed they will give us more resources.”

“And since we are not expected to succeed we are not much of a loss.”

“Probably doing them a favor by getting the garbage away from the settlements.” He laughs. I shake my head. Too much truth to the statement.

“We are at ground zero according to the GPS. I don't see anything.” I am scanning the area around us. Such a let down.

Ho is scanning the ground. He stops at one location nearby.

“What is it?”

“Seems strange. Why is there a depression here?”

I come up to him.

“The sand is moving.”

I watch. The sand seems to be going somewhere. It is like looking at the top of a slow motion whirl pool in a sink drain.

“It's going somewhere. Dig!”

We break out shovels and dig around the spot where the sand is disappearing. It takes us nearly an hour to get enough sand away from the hole to see anything. Sand from the slope itself fills in whatever we do as fast as we dig. We finally had to dig up slope a large enough area to stop this from happening.

“It's shiny at least.” We are on our knees looking at a one meter square cube like thing with a one corner knocked off. It is there that the sand had been entering. Shining a light into the hole yielded nothing. It seemed to have no end.

“Bring out the spec. Be careful. It is the most susceptible to sand intrusion.”

I unpack it from my side pocket and place it against the side of the thing.

“It says gold. Should be easy to cut some off.”

We bring out knives and try. It proves pointless. I finally manage to scrape some the gold off the surface and then try the spec again.

“Shit! Double shit!”

“What is it?” asks Ho.

“TK metal. This thing is worthless. Nothing we have can attack it.”

I take a whack at the corner with my shovel and another chunk falls off making the hole even larger.

“I thought you said nothing could attack it?”

“I did and whacking it should not have done anything.”

“Well, something did the first hole. Maybe it was exposed and a rock hit it?”

“Certainly enough of those around. But why would anything work? The tower has a ton of it too. The entire inside is TK metal. Makes sense

given the force of the water than must have gone through that thing. Maybe this is a control point for the tower or serves some other function related to it. This hole may explain why it's no longer working.”

“I don't know what it was like on Luna, but here the TKs always kept the controls attached to the device itself. They did not trust wireless control mechanisms. Felt they were too easy to hack. They preferred control mechs that were literally buried deep inside a device. Something only a TK could possibly access.”

“Same on Luna. So, if this is not the control box . . .”

A sudden and powerful rumble shakes us, knocking sand down on us and the structure, nearly burying it and us. We both flatten ourselves on the ground.

“Luna does not have quakes.”

“Mars rarely and nothing that strong. Holy Shit! Oh mercy, mercy!”

I watch as a huge stream of water emerges from the tower.

“The team was inside it! How could they do that? I hate them!”

It starts raining very hard. Rivers of water start to gather and rush towards the bottom of the excavated area. We watch in horror as it rushes towards the habitat.

“Luan! Put on your breather now! Get out of the habitat with all the gear you can reach that floats. Prepare for the ride of your life. A wall of water is headed straight towards you.”

No reply. I hope she has heard us.

We both have our nocks up, watching in horror at the destruction.

It is over with very quickly. I have no idea if she got out or not. Too far away to see clearly over the rapidly moving water.

“The water is headed towards the Martian settlement.”

“It is much flatter and broader there. At most they may get some minor temporary flooding, but are likely to survive. We are now alone. They will find our bodies seven weeks from now, desiccated and starved to death.”

“Cheerful. Best to set off the emergency beacon.”

“We were told in class that it is only for our own sense of well being. Nothing will actually happen. They won't spare the fuel to come and get us out of schedule. Just tells them in advance what to expect.”

My hand is resting on the cube, now missing a large section of one corner.

“Well, they got us into this mess and killed the rest of us. I feel no obligation any longer to respect the property they left behind.” I start the process of whacking a large hole in the cube. Ho helps and we alternate

strikes. It takes time, but we make progress.

It is nearly sundown by the time it is big enough for us to squeeze through. I drop an empty water container into the hole and listen carefully. I don't hear it strike. Similarly we never hear anything from Luan. She may have been washed out of range more quickly than she could take the time to respond to us. If she made it to the Martians she might survive.

“Shit, it is starting to snow!” I say.

“We really have no choice. These suits keep us warm enough during the day and maybe for a few hours at night, but they won't let us survive the night. The snow will be twenty centimeters thick by morning.”

“Let me guess, if we had succeeded they would have given us better equipment.” He nods.

“Into the witch's lair then. Let's go out fighting!”

“Tie your rope around the outside. I will tie mine to the end of yours. That will give us a total of a hundred meters at least.”

“Will a single rope hold both of us? Would be safer to have two ropes going down and then if one fails we survive.”

“If we have to fall the last fifty meters we will be dead too. This is not a time to be overly cautious.”

“True. Do as you say.” I work on the outside rope. It takes up four meters of rope just to go around the cube and secure it. I don't like it. I really don't want to hang on the end of a rope all night waiting to climb up at day break. It is only because of the fear of freezing to death that I will even attempt it. Of course starving to death later is not a pleasant thought either, but that is the future. This is of the immediate concern. We can always choose freezing later.

Ho drops his rope into the hole. The sun has set. I turn on my head lamp. A lot of prospecting is done at dusk and dawn when the glint of a lamp can reveal what cannot be seen in the stronger light of day. We have colored filters as well and I set mine to red. Seeing what I have done Ho does the same and then descends into the hole. Pilots use red light a lot to preserve night vision.

I keep my head over the hole so I can hear his transmissions.

“I'm down. Did not even get to the end of your rope. I am at the top of a huge pile of sand. Your rock is here to. I am undoing my rope. Keep yours attached. Come on down.”

“Roger than. Beginning descent now. Get out of the way. Here I come.”

I quickly descend. Knowing that it is safe is a big relief. I hit the sand

hard and scatter sand down it's sides. I look around with my lamp, but don't see much. I look down the pile and see Ho's foot prints. I follow them down.

“Whoa!” I exclaim.

“No shit. Where are we?”

I switch to white light. Ho takes out a full lantern and lights it. Pressurized alcohol with a ceramic mantle. Local product. What we see now does not dispel my first impression. It makes it worse. We are surrounded by artifacts on rows and rows of shelves. The shelves reach the ceiling at least four meters high.

I go up to one at random. It has tech of some kind, but I don't recognize it. Script in several languages, none of them in Standard seem to describe what is present.

“I don't know this language. Wish Tess was here.”

“This pays our way to the very top of any pyramid, if we can survive. We need to find food at least. Water we can get from the surface if we have to.”

“The three days of emergency rations will hold us till then I hope. We can stretch it to a week if we have to. We can filter our own piss too.”

“You trust those filters?”

“Pee into your empty water containers. We might get desperate enough to try and I would rather have the chance. I want to know why the TKs did this and what it is?”

“I am guessing some kind of historical storage. These things look very old. Thousands of years maybe. Might even be from before the fall.”

“Well preserved if true. That suggests temperature and humidity control at least.”

“TKs have something called stasis, but nothing here appears to be in a stasis bubble.”

“None of this stuff appears to be particularly degradable. Probably saving the bubbles for more perishable materials.”

“Some of which might be edible.”

“Bad enough we are here. Let's not go making enemies right away. Even TKs like to eat, though I know they don't need to. Must be some kind of mess hall here. Those stasis bubbles I will let you pop.”

“Don't know how. Do you?” I shake my head no.

“Stay together. This place is too easy to get lost in.”

“So smarty, how do we find out way back?” I look at him like his has lost it.

“What?”

I shake my head and take out tracking buttons. Easy to get lost in the field. We were issued dozens of these. They give a location beep to our com units. Will drive you crazy eventually, but right now they may save us.

“I hate those things. Do we have to use them?” Ho asks.

“For the moment. Stick to line of sight, minimal use.”

“I say stick to just out of range. Activate one here. Easy to see the sand pile from here. Then move until we are just out of range of this one. That way we only hear one at a time. It is when we hear three or more that they drive you crazy.”

“But that will mean coming back we will have to scout at each one to pick up the next.”

“Only take a moment. Can use a tagger as well. Redundant means are good.” I nod and take out my tagger and spray an arrow on the wall towards the sand pile and place a button next to it.

“That suggests we should go this way.” He points down a row.

“Might as well see what is at the other end.”

It is long. Very long. We pass tech, art, pottery, things I have no idea what they are. I soon don't even bother. It becomes a blur as we pass them. We reach the other side eventually.

“I am going to need to rest.” It is then that I notice that Ho is not wearing his breather.

“What? You didn't notice that the red light went out?” I glance down at mine and sure enough it has. I remove my breather and take a few experimental breaths. Feels good.

“We should sleep in shifts, even if it takes longer to rest. I don't want to die in my sleep because the air goes bad again.”

“Go ahead. I'll take the first watch. Switching to minimal red to conserve power. No sunlight to recharge down here.” I nod and using my pack as a pillow am out instantly. I learned that trick as a pilot. Can't afford to waste time falling asleep.

I wake to snoring next to me. I smile. I am not surprised. I reach over and turn his red light out after turning mine on. My cron says I slept for four hours. That will help.

Nothing happens during my shift either. I wake a reluctant Ho who takes over for me.

This time he is awake when I wake. We switch roles again. I only sleep three hours this time.

When I wake we each eat a ration bar and get ready for our next day of exploration.

“It branches from here. There appears to be only hallways, no portals or doors. I did a little recon when you were out the last time. Always within sight, don't worry.” I nod.

“Any likely directions.” He shrugs.

“They all look the same. This is a huge, huge, warehouse to hold stuff. Nothing more is my guess. Wish there was a directory or map.”

“They would not need one, being able to perceive the entire thing at once.”

He suddenly turns and stares down one of the hallways.

“Is that light I see?”

I squint, “Maybe. Let's check it out. I can still hear the first button, but I want to set one here anyway, as it is get very confusing trying to find it later.” He nods reluctantly.

As soon as I round the corner to go down the next hall it goes out. He smiles.

“You win. I will place it here.” I do so and make my arrow.

We reach the light in less than an hour. We probably would not have seen it if it was any further away, so I am not surprised.

It is a large round area with platforms at various heights. Not obvious what their purpose is.

“A meeting area of some kind. Different species have different requirements.”

“You seen any sentient not Hu in your lifetime?” I ask.

“None. You think it is a myth?” I nod.

“I don't trust anything a TK has supposedly said.”

“You two are trespassing.” My heart nearly stops. I turn and see a woman in white jump suit of some kind. Light skin, black hair and brown eyes, normal in other words.

“You TK?” I practically spit it out. How else could she have gotten in so suddenly?

She says nothing.

“It was your water tower that killed the rest of our group. We had no choice if we were to survive. What would you have done with our limited abilities.” She pays no attention to me and appears to be concentrating on something else.

She looks back at me, “You have desecrated this facility. Your damage has been repaired. You will leave now.”

A second creature appears. It appears to be a dinosaur with blue and yellow feathers on it's head. Stunning really. I am drawn to the carefully arranged pattern. It opens it's mouth. Not something I wanted to see. We

both back up a pace.

Then it speaks, "That would be against the rules Mei. Besides, how would they leave? You plugged the hole and have taken away all of their markings." The first scowls, turns away from us and walks away. My mouth hangs open in disbelief.

"You two never heard a Di speak? Or are you impressed with my perfect enunciation in Standard Hu? I know most sentient languages fluently. A little rusty in high Ceph. I'm sure you understand."

She turns to leave then looks back at us, "Well, are you coming? I suspect you are both hungry. Can't stand rations myself. We call it TK chow, but it's basically the same. Oh, my name is Simone."

"She talks a lot for a dinosaur."

"Di. There are four sen species in our morph. The Di, we were the first found, the Dio and Dia, and finally the Diu. The last three all from the same world. The Diu keep to themselves. Most sens know only of the first three."

We enter a kitchen area. There are tables and stools instead of chairs.

"Sit. Be right with you." She goes to a cabinet and removes some items, chops them on a surface and adds them to a bowl. Stuff from another cabinet. Finally she puts the bowl into another cabinet and then a moment later removes it. She pulls bowls out of another cabinet and places them on the table in front of us.

"Sorry, only spoons. All sens can use them. Just keeps things easier."

Ho says, "No offense taken."

"So you do speak. Good for you. The first Hu I raised was Jake. He paired with a nice Bernice. They met before I met them and went though together. Lots of adventures together. Can't say I know where they are at the moment. No matter."

"Eat. Should be cool enough now." She sits down with us. Now I can see why stools are used. Her tail would have gotten in way of a chair. She starts eating. I don't trust her, but I don't suppose it would benefit them to kill us after bringing us here. They could have done it at any time.

It tastes pretty good. Much better than our normal chow.

"I don't know these vegetables."

"A favorite of mine from home. You like them? Most Hu think they are strange and avoid them. I'm so glad."

"We get limited variety on Mars and formerly on Luna."

"Sorry to hear about the evac. Such a shame."

I get angry, "We had no choice."

"I hope I have not broken too many rules myself. We had nothing to

do with the tower starting again. It starts on its own when the average humidity drops below a certain point. All automatic. We did not even turn them on. Just designed them according to the ruling council's request.”

“You could have prevented their deaths.”

“We were not allowed to. We are prevented from any more interference by the council's decree. Not even allowed to show ourselves outside of this location. Can't have it both ways.”

“What is this place?” Ho asks. I am too mad to think straight, but am suddenly curious too.

“We call them knowledge caches. Everything here is duped. We store artifacts from all sen cultures in multiple locations.”

“Why?” She looks at me as if frozen.

“What did I say? Why is that a strange question?”

“Each sen saves what it can of it's journey. All sen species have two means. A special sen call a 'lan. I won't go into details, but they absorb details from thousands and thousands of lives and then deposit that information in a central library at the galactic center. The second are these caches. What you have walked through are the artifacts of thousands of years of Hu art and science. We can't save everything of course, just representative samples. There are even things here from Mars and Luna. I could show you if you wish.”

“You say these are duped?”

“We don't steal. A copy is as good as the original down to the atomic level. At the quantum level they are different, but only a level eight TK could tell you the difference, but not which one was the original.”

“What are you going to do with us?”

“Ah, those rules again. It seems we have some too. Can't let you return now that you have been here and seen what you have seen.”

“So you intend to let us die like the rest of our group?”

“Die? No one has died today within a hundred kilometers of this location. I would know. Those with you earlier are safe at the Martian settlement. We were watching all of you and detected the tower activating before you did. Easy enough to remove everyone.”

“Luan. What about Luan?”

“Her too.”

“Then you have just condemned them to a fate worse than death.”

“Oh, how so?”

“They will become Martians. We can't pay back the equipment that was lost. We have no find to present. Therefore we will be required to become Martians.”

“That's a good thing. They should be happy. No more breathers. One with your surroundings.”

“No! That is a very bad thing. Martians are the stupidest life forms in the galaxy.”

“Actually they are just as smart as you or I.”

Ho comments after looking at me, “Good imitation of a Martian Mo.”

I close my mouth.

The creature continues, “It is not their intelligence that you are reacting to, but their time frame. They work in a world that is twice as slow as yours. Their body temperature and oxygen use are also much lower. That is how they can go without breathers. They can handle the twelve percent oxygen levels without assistance. This is a very good thing. They will survive after the coming tech collapse that has already started.”

“Huh?”

“When was the last time you saw a new breather? Why is it that more and more people are being converted into Martians? Doesn't it seem like there is almost any excuse for 'condemning' someone to this state?”

“She's right Mo. My whole life I have never seen a new breather. Of course I am not lower level. Maybe they get all the new ones.”

“I've seen the lower level people. Theirs are cleaner, but don't look any newer.”

“Breathers are only one of many essential technologies that are dying and not being replaced.”

Shit, I just realized, “What about the water towers? How long till they truly fail?”

“They will fail eventually. The tech is actually very simple and multiply redundant, but yes they will fail eventually. Probably take thousands of years if no one repairs them.”

Ho comments, “Too bad we told the TKs they could no longer interfere.”

“Are you turning on me too?”

“Oh don't worry. You had plenty of times to figure it out.”

“Right, you said we can't go back to our friends. Then, what are you going to do to us?”

“Something truly devious. And, it has already begun.”

“What did you do to us? I don't feel anything.” I am freaking out. I truly don't feel anything different.

“Tell me what you know about our kind?”

“You mean TKs?” She nods. A nod seems to mean the same thing.

“You are all pests.” Ho starts and I smile at his boldness.

Surprisingly she answers, “True.” Huh?

“You have special abilities you don't deserve.” I try.

“True.” Shit. Really? She believes that?

“You can't be killed.”

“False.” What?

“I don't believe you.”

“What happened to your own Spider and Ravi then?”

“They are just hiding somewhere.”

“Possibly, but no TK has seen them since Pink. And we have a lot of people looking and trying to understand what happened. All the evidence says they are gone.”

“Well, the Pink thing is pretty weird. Probably does not happen very often.”

“No record of it ever happening.”

“I still say you can't be killed then. The odds say that at least.”

“Still false. Oh we can live a very long time, but all life forms eventually die. The average life span of a high TK is about seventy million years give or take. Would not help much if they have 'thn babies and then could not raise them. Oh, and the average lifespan of a sentient species is about ten million years with a huge amount of variation. The oldest being about a hundred million and the shortest a few hundred thousand.”

“How old are we?”

“Hard to say. Sauron did not keep records. I am only guessing that Hu are about two million years old.”

“And the Di?”

“Maybe four or five million.”

“What about the Ceph. I heard they are an old species.”

“About thirty five million.” She is patient with our questions and seems to be giving honest answers. But, I don't trust her.

“Humans are one of the youngest?”

“Definitely. Also the most creative, most violent, though there are close seconds there, and the most versatile.”

“I would imagine that all species are better at some things and worse at others.”

“True.”

“It is driving me crazy. What did you do to us?”

“We have rules. We had no choice. When you asked us to stay away we did. We count these caches as legal exceptions, since none of you are

supposed to know about them.”

“But you interfered when you saved our group. So, you can make exceptions.”

“The only reason we saved them was because of the two of you. Had you two not showed up here, we would have let nature take it's course.”

“We pay the price for their lives. I count that as fair.” I nod as well.

“Good, then we can begin. There will be plenty of time for more questions later, but I like to get right to things.”

“Get to what?” I am fuming.

Ho says, “Shit! You made us TK. It is the only possibility left.”

“Very good Ho. Level one Hu. Telekinetics. You should be able to move one kilogram up to one meter away. Lighter weights you can move further.”

I have sunk to my knees.

“You did this on purpose. To get back at me because of my hate for TKs.”

“No, because of your decree that we can't interfere.”

“You are giving the two of us the ability instead. If we interfere you have not broken your vow.”

“Nor have you, since you never took the vow.”

“Aren't you playing games with the rules?”

“Are we? I have no idea what you will do. You could destroy the world if you wanted to. You are not under the TK council. We have no say in what you do.”

“Oh shit.” She laughs. She actually laughs. “Oh shit.”

Then she just disappears. No explanations.

“How do we know how to use these abilities? I don't even remember what they are. How many did she give us? When did she do it?”

“Hey, the first ones to have these abilities did not know either. They had to figure out everything on their own. We are pioneers.”

“At least the kitchen is stocked. We won't starve figuring it out.”

“And we have the entire museum to study.”

“If I can fly again, this whole thing might be worth it.”

“That's the spirit. Hey, lets see if there is a term around here we can access. Must be a cat of all this stuff.” Good idea.

“We should try and find the others before they are turned.” Ho's face goes sad.

“Yeah, you're right. Let's fill our packs with food and get out of here. We can always come back.”

“Have you forgotten? She sealed the hole. My guess is that the only

way in or out is with their tricks. Just like she did.”

Ho runs at the nearest wall and slams against it falling to the ground.

“Guess it is not that easy.”

“Didn't think it was.” I casually reach for a fruit of some kind and am too far away, only instead of reaching further the fruit suddenly comes to me so fast that it slams against my hand and mushes like it had hit a wall. The weird thing was that it did not hurt. I look at my hand and there is no pulp on it.

“That's weird.” Ho says. He reaches out and nothing happens. I reach out for a cup and nothing happens.

“Okay, when we try to do it nothing happens. But when I was not thinking about it, it does. I am afraid this is going to take time. Find the term. Might have something about their early years and how they went about this.”

“Wish I remembered those childhood stories better now.” I nod.

Black 3401

“Ed, it can't be a prion. None of the tests show it. All the proteins are acting normally. No plaques or other signs of disease in the body recovered from Ba Eden.” It is half a world away from us. We are examining it remotely. I would have preferred to have been several worlds away, but we are getting desperate. We are being kicked off nearly every world. Mei and Simone just reported in. No one left in the earth system except the group with Pushy Paws. At least her Hu aren't so easily tricked. Or are used to being tricked. I smile at the thought of coyote and spider woman.

“A prion we could treat. We already know this is an alternate generation. Probably something that occurs at regular intervals when conditions trigger it. My guess is that it is innocuous and non lethal to other species or worlds.”

“But the last time they would have gone though this they did not know about other worlds and TK abilities. Is that the difference? Did we unintentionally create a monster.”

“We had good relations with the Pink.”

“But they were very secretive about some aspects. Like this alternative generation. No hint about it.”

“Hu are not so forward about their mating habits either, especially the 'alternative' means of pleasuring.”

“True.”

“Still, we were forward about our dangerous sides. All the sens have been. If this was dangerous, they would have told us.”

“This was their first experience with TK. They did not suspect themselves. Where are you going with this?”

“I think they were used. Someone made use of the potential and pushed them towards it.”

“Shit Ed. Who?”

“That is where I am stumped. Some species that is jealous or fearful.”

“The Bugs? We have seen nothing of them. Even Paradise II, or Fist if your prefer. We are getting along great with them. After the initial misunderstandings were worked out they have been very cooperative. We would not be doing nearly so well without them. Even other species are coming around and accepting us again.”

“What new species have come through recently Doc?”

I check the database.

“Two in the last year. The fast ones and some plantimal species resembling flying saucers. Very pretty from the images here. Sixteen eyes and matching arms arrayed in a circle.”

“No, this started earlier. Look up the first sightings of differences in the Pink behavior.”

“Well, they all disappeared years ago. Been a mystery for some time.”
I type away. Can't believe this terminal has a keyboard. Who uses a keyboard? Those went out in the twenty stone age.

“Here it is. They disappeared three years after the disappearance of Silver, Owa, Rooi and the Bug.”

“Tessera. They have names you know.”

“I had forgotten it. I spend a lot time with the others. Only saw Tessera once. You think there is a connection? Still no signs of the four and it has been what, seven hundred years now. Why did the Pink suddenly reappear now? Does this mean the four will as well?”

“Match their reappearance with new species on Fist.”

“No match. Nothing before their re-ap for ten years. The fast ones and the plantimal were three years later.”

“What was the closest one before they disappeared?”

“A communal mercat species. Party animals and escape artists. Was the main reason they upped security around available entry points.”

“Which did not work. Heard the fast ones got out twice and they have not found the second set. Why did they wait so long to put in security?”

“To most species the Fist flora is lethal. Go beyond your enclave and you risk a horrible death. That and given that the 'thants only build gates on sentient worlds. Most sentients are curious, but not stupid. They test the new environment and then when the Fistians start communicating they settle down.”

“Until they figure out they can't go back, or at least not easily.”

“They can go back every day until the gate shuts down. That can be hundreds of years. So, why do the Pink do this alternate generation thing?”

“Normally it is used to tide a species over during times when an environment is not ideal for the primary generation or to spread out to new regions.”

“What changed on Pink that made it not ideal? And why would this affect all the Pink on all the worlds? You would think that they would take advantage of the already dispersed and simply move to the new locations.”

“Not under their control. They probably received a message to return

to home. This signal was likely chemical or pheromone. Might even have been unconscious. Once there, the group feedback did the rest.”

“What set them off?”

“Or whom. Normally this would have happened only during a crisis.”

“No crisis that we were aware of. Are you saying that someone figured out their 'vulnerability' and used it to turn them into a weapon against us? Don't you think that is far fetched?”

“Are you saying that it was an accident? Someone accidentally released a complex proper set of pheromones into their population at just the right time and way?”

“Not likely.”

“This was engineered for sure. But how and who?”

“Someone really hates us.” He nods. “Well who hates us that much?”

Ed looks right at me, “Who doesn't? We are kicked off every world. That was not because of one person's hate. That was real. A lot of sens resented our interference all the time.”

“Maybe Silver's way was the best. Remain hidden. Never visible. We were fooled into thinking we could be part of a larger whole.”

“They did a lot. Look at Barbara's whales. They were very visible and accepted.”

“They were true sentients. Hu are monsters by comparison.” He nods.

Fist

~Are you two ready?~ I nod and Pu ignores her. He's ready.

It hurts like hell. I pass out at some point. Why did she have to change us? Make the new form and let us transfer. Much less pain involved. She said it was because in this species pain is important. They experience much pain in their existence. It is important to start where they are. They would be suspicious otherwise. Hell, they are going to be suspicious anyway we do this.

I awaken to face an active portal. We figured we had to port in to be believable.

~Hurry you two. We don't want them coming through to here.~ It is like she is saying it in slow motion. We are through before she finishes the first two words. She waves her arms a lot to look threatening. We are running from her. If they see her hopefully they will not think to run towards her. The gate closes. A few arn later I feel Mandhi close by. We are in the enclave anyway.

“The sun rises Pu.” We figured we would keep our own names. Good as any and translated into their language in sounds totally different anyway.

“We run.” No TP from Pu? Strange. I show amusement and he does as well. Scary. I think Pu is going to like this form better than I will.

It feels good to run, but all too quickly we run right into a barrier. We pretend to show panic ramming ourselves against the barrier, then trying to find a way around it.

I hear a voice and turn around quickly to face the four.

“You will not get through. We have tried.”

“But the sun! It rises!”

“Relax. It does not get warm here.”

“Or cold. Food is not good. There are no leapers, crafters or any of the others.”

“Just something that sort of looks like a sneak and tastes horrible, but satisfies and does not kill you.”

“You just wish it would.”

“Your accent is strange to us. Where are you from?”

Shit, I try and guess.

Pu answers though, “North of the burn zone.”

“Ah, we are all from the south.”

“We escaped once. This is a large world. Many strange things. We

should all endeavor to try and escape again.”

“But why did they do this? Why are we here?”

“It may have been an accident. Did you walk through a shiny space?”
We affirm.

“So did we. We are not on our world any longer.”

“How? We were running with the sun with our clan and now we are here. What will happen to them, our clan?”

“Did the shiny space disappear?” We affirm.

“Then they will not come through. They are safe until it opens again.”

“It opens? When? We can go back then?”

“We had hoped to when we noticed it open this time, but there was a beast guarding it with unknown weapons. Maybe if the six of us rush the space a few will get through to warn others.”

“It was the beast that chased us here. We should prepare. Six should be able to take it. How often does the space get shiny?”

“We don't know. But we can see it from anywhere in this space and we keep one on watch at all times.”

“With six it will be easier.” They affirm.

“You do not wear clan markings.” Ah oh.

Pu answers quickly, “We just came off a clan conflict. We were on a needed rest period when the beast struck. We barely escaped with our lives. Many did not. Live to fight another day.” They affirm.

Good thinking Pu.

You need to spend more time as a Cat.

Three hundred years is long enough.

“You must be hungry. Come and eat.”

They pay special attention to the fem. Be careful. We do not know their ways.

I think I like this life form. Very flexible. I can see forward and backward. Running is even fun. Maybe even addictive.

It is theorized that they had to keep up with the sun. It was a matter of survival.

I remember the briefing Pu. Where is Pu'thn?

Hiding with Nipper.

Scardy Cat.

I hear a growl. The others turn and look towards us.

We say nothing.

“The food is horrible.”

Shit Pu, don't insult them.

“The food appears at random intervals. Have a bad excuse for a sneak.

You can at least get them down without choking. We let them eat some of the food so we can hunt them. Too easy, but the only other activity is running the perimeter.” Pu looks at me like I am stupid. At least I think that is what he is showing. I would need a life time to master this form. At least they are accepting us as strange because we came from the north and not because we are alien.

Do we have coordinates for their home world yet?

Mandhi answers, *We do, but it is very far out.*

Silver or Rooi could do it, but no one else feels up to it.

More or less. We will eventually, especially if you two do not find anything.

I think these four are unsuspecting innocents.

Give it some more time. They may know something they are not aware of.

Pu, Mandhi says we stay.

Send in some better food then. That will get their attention.

Done. What do you want?

They like to hunt. Give them something bigger, faster and more dangerous.

A kitty cat? I offer.

Something better than that. Mandhi says. This could be interesting.

“The dark comes. We rest except for the one on watch. No watch for you the first time. You need to understand our new line better first.”

“Understood. We agree. Are you sure we won't freeze?”

“It will get cooler, but nothing like being beyond the sun on our line.”

We both act as nervous as we can. The fem lie down and one the males goes off a ways. The other one watches us to be sure we rest.

We had better fake it.

The male settles down.

What's taking her so long?

Remember, they are running at one fifth our speed. Be patient Pu.

It still takes longer than we could have imagined. I am expecting the sun to come up but the only event so far is the males changing position. The second makes sure we are quiet before resting himself.

Trying to be true to form at dawn we run towards the sun and straight into the barrier. There we huddle until they come and get us.

“It won't burn you. Just gets a little warmer and passes quickly enough.”

They turn suddenly to the other side of the enclave. A young fem they left alone there shrieks. We all run towards her.

“It was horrible. A distorted version of ourselves, but it did not understand me. It ran that way.” She indicates. We can see it in the distance.

“Prey!” Pu announces immediately.

“Weighs more than us, but does not look particularly fast. No claws that I can see. But this kind is unknown. I recommend caution.”

I add, “And to make the novelty last as long as we can. Who knows where there will be another?” They affirm. Boredom has gotten to them. We of course recognize the species immediately. An old one at that. They can defend themselves from a known enemy. They don't stand a chance from four males of this species. Our species.

“You will follow out lead.” It is not a question. They also want the pleasure of the kill.

We can outrun them and are well armed. No contest. We remain in the back, though Pu clearly wants to be in the front. I am repulsed by the slaughter. At least they have fire. Cooked horse is much better than the local rat equivalent. Pu and I get the honor of doing most of the work of dissecting the poor thing. I wonder how they got the horse past the Fist officials?

There are no large predators on Fist. The local Fistians have seen to that. I guess when strange sentients show up on a regular basis it is best not to have your ambassadors being eaten. At least not without the intent of gathering information. So far the Fistians have stayed away from these. Too dangerous.

Pu is more interested in the fighting style. I am interested in their art. Every thing is covered by their efforts. Their packs, their eating utensils and very much their weapons are carved and etched with very elaborate designs and patterns. A lot of time during their running.

They made these designs while running. We could not do that.

We could. Norms could not. Good point Pu.

Our own possessions look so plain. We did not spend enough time preparing.

We had to be different from them. If we had copied exactly they would have been even more suspicious.

Every Cat's piss is different.

Ah, exactly. Euuu!

I turn suddenly and take off towards the barrier. I startle the others who think the entertainment is done for the day or circuit as they would say. When I reach the barrier I notice that they have been running along the barrier in frustration. I am after different prey though. I quickly find

it's tracks and follow it back into the low lying trampled bushes.

They arrive next to me, "What is it?"

"I am not sure. It does not have any legs and it is large." Another no brainer.

"Fessit?"

"Sorry, we don't have ah fessits up north."

Right on cue it wraps itself around my leg and brings me down. I make a play of it as it wraps itself around me in a squirming way as I spin as fast as I can to make it look more impressive.

Pu asks, "So that is a fessit?"

"No, never seen anything like it. Should we help? Looks dangerous."

Pu plays a long, "Maybe it will tire after killing Oz. I claim next attempt as his friend."

"As honor would dictate."

Time to be a hero. I let it grab the leader with the back of it's tail. He quickly gets away. Not a strong grasp, more just a tripping strike. I remove my knife and slit the skin at just the right location to sever the arteries to the head. It is messy, spraying blood everywhere and on everyone. Pu licks his off. Does not do a very good job even using his hands and feet to assist.

I hate this form. I can't reach anything.

Good, then help me get untangled from this thing. It weighs a lot.

"I just hope it tastes good after that fight."

"I am hoping there are more of them. That looked like fun. Were you hurt?" Jasf, the oldest male.

"Just bruises. Almost as good as a clan fight. Be careful not to exhale. It squeezes harder then."

"I would be honored to assist." I affirm.

Over the next three eight days we are given a variety of life forms to hunt. Given our very high metabolisms we really need to eat a lot and high quality food is necessary to allow free time to talk.

"Until you two arrived we were given the same thing over and over. I wonder why the change?"

The older fem, Tek, asks, "Why are they keeping us prisoners? Eat us or let us go."

I offer, "Maybe they have not seen our life form before? They are afraid of us, who wouldn't be? Inside here we are safe to study and learn what our weaknesses and strengths are. When you escaped, what did you see?"

"Sun wrong!" The youngest fem, not named yet.

Gayi, the young male says, “We could run at least. Here we are getting fat and lazy.” True enough.

Jasf sums it up, “The plants and animals were the same as here, though we did not jump into another prison.”

Pu looks up as if startled, “There are other prisons?”

They nod.

“Interesting. Then they are collecting different kinds of people from all over.”

Jasf, “Then you don't think all the prisons contain people?”

Shit, my knowledge is showing.

“Ah, that could be true too. But if they all contain people, you would think they would know more about us by now.” He nods satisfied with my comeback.

It is the next day when it really hits though. A portal opens. Pu is the first to notice and signals the rest of us. I am the closest and peer into the portal to get a fix on where it is coming from. Very far away. Mandhi was right about that. However concentrating too much has consequences. The four other hit us at full speed dragging us into the portal and beyond. We could have run back or even DSd back, but that would have broken cover and Mandhi said if the opportunity presented itself to get there, take it.

Rad levels are high.

UV is too. Much higher than Fist anyway.

I scan further out, *Evidence of a world war.*

Tek asks, “What happened here? When we came though the first time we were in a tunnel. Now we are in an open field.”

“How long were you four in the prison before we arrived?”

“About one and a half circuits. Only a guess. No way of measuring time. No moons or . . . what? No moons here either.”

“That happens. Wait until the smaller one comes around again.”

Pu and I remain silent. We had heard of the two moons in stories, but not actually seen them. The smaller moon takes about a day to transit and the larger about a month, like on Eden.

The littlest exclaims, “Sneaks!” We all turn and a rat like creature is looking at us over a small ditch. Once it sees us it takes off, as do the four. They jump the ditch and then scatter, each chasing one.

Pu says, “Why not?” He takes off and soon spots a loose one to pursue.

That leaves me on watch. I make a fire in anticipation of fresh meat. I am not disappointed. Being raised in the desert I am used to eating almost anything to stay alive. Rats are actually quite tasty. These are particularly

so.

“We were in the prison longer than you, but you act like you have never had a sneak before.”

“Prison food is never the same as fresh kill on your own world.”

They all affirm.

“The sun is going down. We run!”

We run our hearts out, but can't keep up. Not even close.

Exhausted we finally stop.

“Something is wrong. The sun is too fast. Is Gayi right? Have we gotten too lazy?”

Tek says still out of breath, “Not possible to be this bad. We were stopped more by the cold than the setting of the sun. Look, it is black now. Only the small fire Pu lit gives light. Something is wrong.”

“In stories you mentioned beings, not people, who, ah did strange things.”

“You think they did this?” I nod.

“People who were captured by them were never seen again.”

“They also used vogh to help hunt us.”

“That is only conjecture.”

“What is a vogh?”

“You don't have them in the north. A vicious creature that only kills. Rarely eats us, just likes to kill us. No one has any idea why they hate us so much. Rare that anyone who has seen one survives. They are relentless. Never give up pursuit once they get your scent.”

“No, we have nothing like that in the north.” At least I hope not. I do a quick scan of the area to be sure one is not on us already. Nothing. Probably not been here long enough to leave a scent trail.

Best we keep a watch and deter it before it gets to us. Would present too many questions. Yeah I got that.

The four are very nervous.

I offer, “I'll take first watch.”

Gayi offers two, “Best if we have two on watch.” He looks up searching for the moons. Nothing yet.

The others rest. We go off a short distance so we can talk without disturbing them.

I admit, “I have never been in the south. The shining path we entered was in the north. What else can we expect?” The north of Fist. Lying by omission.

He looks at me, “Nothing is the same as it was.”

“Except the taste of sneaks.” He affirms.

Then he asks, "Where are you two really from?"

"Huh?"

"There is too much you should know but don't."

"The north is different."

"There are things you should know about the north but you apparently don't. Some information does get down to us. We know more about the north that you two do."

Better they know and help us rather than try and impede us.

Agreed.

How to put it though.

"The world you were just on is a place where different kinds of life come to meet other life forms. To learn, to teach, to trade. Or at least that is the way it was supposed to work."

"Something went wrong."

"The shining path was designed only to open when a group of people reached a level of understanding that is consistent with meeting others not like themselves. The four of you do not show that level of understanding. Could be you are not like others here or something else went wrong. Tell me, these ones that take people and not return them, are they 'smarter' than normal people?"

"No one has come back to tell anyone."

"But you must know something about them."

"They are not like us in that they stay underground. You either run with the sun and hope you are not crippled. Being hurt can mean death. Or creatures find deep holes to survive the ice and the fire." I immediately try to find an underground facility of some sort. Too much destruction. There may have been such before the war, but not now.

There is a group traveling in this direction in the dark.

Not a good sign. I find them too. They are likely to be here by day break. This world is only about half the diameter of the Edens, but denser. Gravity is about the same. A day appears to be about three of ours. It will get cold before sunrise.

"Gayi, help me find more firewood. It will get cold before the sun rises again. If we keep a fire going we should do fine. It would be better to find shelter though."

"What is shelter?"

"A cave or something out of the wind. Not enough wood here to build anything."

"We do not have large wood like at the other place. Only this." He holds up small branches."

“Fist does not have large wood either. On other worlds the wood grows to hundreds of times taller than a person.” He looks shocked.

“Looks like stone is our best building material then. Tell me, does the wind always come from the same direction?”

“Used to. Don't know now.”

“Fair enough. If we build a wall of stone around us we will be protected from the wind and the sun. At least for part of the time. Hmm, we could weave branches together for a roof for more protection. “

“We can't stay here. There is not enough life to eat.”

“I had forgotten about that.”

He shows amusement. I have missed again.

“Pu and I were given the assignment to try and understand your people. From what I have already experienced I know you are as smart as any we have met. But, you lack understanding of the physical world. It is possible your culture was more advanced at one point and has fallen. The war that has happened here recently suggests some of those abilities remain, at least in a few.”

“Then you know what caused the change?” He is shocked.

“Part of it. I don't know yet why the sun is moving faster.”

“Not the sun, the world. The world turns. We are not the center.”

“A fallen culture then. A primitive culture would not know that. Good.”

“There is so much I want to know.”

“If there is enough time, you will learn. The time of dark is one third done. We should rest and let Pu and JASF watch. We will take the third watch if you are up for it.” He affirms with some relief.

Half way though the third watch the small clan arrives. Pu and JASF have woken to be with us. We protect the fem as is their way. Tek can take care of herself just fine, but she is very protective of the youngest and it is hard to do both.

“We have nothing to serve them. We lack so much.”

“Do you know the plants around us? Any of them make an infusion, a tea with?” He affirms.

“Find some.”

I bring a small pot out of my pack. Gayi looks at me with suspicion, but says nothing. Is everything I do going to be scrutinized? We add water from our water pouches and place the pot in the fire. Once it nearly boils I use a stick to remove it and Gayi adds the leaves. By the time they are in front of us we can at least offer tea. The pot has cooled enough to be handled and we pass it around to everyone to drink from. Certain

courtesies are necessary. Offense in the wild can be life and death.

There are about a dozen of them. Mostly male and no young. This is not a family unit.

“They are not from the south.” Gayi comments. Shit is what I am thinking.

The north does not have fem like the south, but males who become fem and are called Fem. The two here are Fem. They are treated with high respect. No male outside the clan is allowed to speak to them directly.

You cheated Pu.

Trying to keep our cover.

“Don't talk to the Fem directly. There will be one who will come forward. He will be the Lead and should be addressed as such. Talk to no one else unless allowed by the Lead.”

Gayi is surprised, "No wonder you like it better here. I'm sorry for having doubted you. Must be embarrassing to admit to such an arrangement." I affirm.

“All we knew until we met the four of you. Jasf, you are the oldest and should take the position of Lead. We will only speak to you and you will speak only to their Lead.” He affirms.

I look at Gayi, “Don't ask questions. That is considered rude.” He seems nervous, but affirms.

Pu and I arrange ourselves so the two fem are in the center of our group and we are at the rear.

Jasf tastes the tea and then offers it to their Lead after he has settled in front of us. Jasf then settles himself, then the fem and finally the three of us. Gayi is watching and copying us.

Only after they have all tasted the tea does it come back to us to sample. I grimace when I taste it. I am sure Gayi did the best he could under the conditions.

Their Lead speaks softly to Jasf.

He says very good tea. I want to swat Pu, but I don't dare right now.

Gayi relaxes. Better hearing than us. Their accent sounds funny though. That worries me. How come we don't sound like they do? How many languages or variations do they have?

Their group is a mix of southern and northern individuals. The Lead is from the north, but has learned to speak Southern.

How did they get together? I have scanned a no life zone at the equator.

Jasf speaks up so all can hear.

“We just came through a shining path from another world where we

were all kept captive for at least a circuit.”

“We have been expecting you. The special ones told us about your disappearance and possible return.” Special ones? I have many questions, but I need to be a good example for Gayi.

The Lead looks us over.

“However, there is a problem. Only four disappeared. Now you are six.”

“The remaining two joined us on the other world a short while before the shinning path opened again. They were fleeing a horrible beast. They came from the north. If it were not for the beast we would have entered the path and arrived in the north instead.” Relax Jasf. They will not bite you.

A look of surprise appears on Lead's eye stalk. He looks us over. I am guessing he trying to figure out which ones are two extra.

“We know nothing of a portal in the north. This is disturbing.” He pulls a device out of his pack and operates it. Tech! Where did he get that? I scan the rest of the packs. They are all equipped. Weapons too. One taps the Lead in the shoulder and points at us. He affirms. I feel myself being scanned. Shit. I dampen my own TK as much as I can, but I think we have already been found out.

They do nothing.

He then does the surprising thing of addressing all of us as a group.

“You have a choice as individuals. A lot has happened since you left. The old leadership in both the south and the north is gone and has been replaced by a new group for both. You may have already noticed that you cannot keep up with the sun any longer. The southern group was able to adjust the length of time it takes for a circuit to occur. It is now possible, with some help, to survive both the ice time and the sun time. However, I would not recommend doing this on your own. Know this, it is no longer possible to return to your former way of life. Everything is changing.”

Gayi can't handle it, “What about the moons?”

The Lead shows amusement, “I love the freshness of the southern people. In the north you would be dead now. Fortunately, that has changed as well. You can talk to whomever will listen without being killed for it. They will not always answer, but you can speak to them.

As to the moons. They are gone. The small moon we hope to bring back soon, but the larger moon will not be coming back.”

That means the smaller one is a construct, not natural. Pu observes. *Shh, they can sense us.*

Pu sniffs the air. Not the same in this form, but I get his meaning.

“The choice you have is to stay here and try to live on your own, or come with us back to the settlement.”

Tek asks, “To be your slaves.”

He shows amusement, “No, as equals. No more aftwatchers, fore watchers and Fem. Sorry, this is the south. We can gather in large groups now without fear. The crabs, as we call them, are gone. They will never bother us again.”

“What about the vogh?”

“Well, they still play an important role, but with these they are no longer a threat to people.” He pulls a weapon out of his pack and fires it at a nearby rock. Very loud percussive weapon.

“The sounds helps keep them away. Now they fear us.”

“Only the special ones have these new weapons.”

“No, anyone who goes into the wild outside the settlement can have one if they wish. Don't need them inside the settlement.”

I ask, “So no one dies any more inside these ah sesslemants?”

“Settlements.” He corrects me, “People still die. A weapon is not the only way to die. There is actually something that happens when you have gone circuits that is worse than dying.” I shudder, though I already know.

“The two of you will go north. The others will go to the settlement.”
Ah oh.

Pu finally speaks, “Why? Seems nice here.”

He shows amusement, “Compared to the north you remember you would think that, but the north has changed too. You will see.”

“How long will it take?” Hiding from someone with TK tech is not going to be easy.

“Oh, it won't take long. Let us depart first.” Shit. He must know.

The others go after a few looks from the four back at us. Rear vision is good, but still better with the front eyes. I wave to them.

These people do not wave stupid monkey.

Shit. I am making mistakes because of my fear. Settle down Oz.

A huge fem comes up. I had no idea they could get this big.

We are supposed to bow to such as this.

We both go prostrate.

“Getting slow. Must have been gone a long time or you were in a lax clan.” Deep voice too.

She is Fem. I wish he would not TP. They already suspect us.

She makes more tea, but since we are not supposed to talk with her, we remain silent.

We remain until the others are out of sight.

Pu asks, "We were told there is no leadership structure any more."
Risky behavior.

"There is a leadership. No ship could be steered without it." Ship?
Here?

She continues, "You are free to talk with anyone without harm. No need to bow anymore either, though you two did a nice effort, if a little slow." She shows amusement. Is that good or bad amusement?

"When do we leave? The sun is getting low." Actually not, but it again shows how nervous.

"What's your hurry?" That does not sound like someone from this world. That sounds Hu. Shit, she is TK.

We have been made.

I know. Bug out or wait?

"Relax you two. We have known since you arrived."

A portal opens.

"Shall we go?"

I look through to see what is on the other side. Does not look a whole lot different.

"Just the northern hemisphere. Did not want to do all this while the others were around."

"They would not have understood. The small moon is artificial isn't it?" She affirms.

"I did not make it though. Was there long before I was hatched."

"The special ones?"

She shows amusement.

Pu gets it, "You are one of the special ones." Affirms.

"What about the 'crabs' that came before?"

"Short story, they were the ones who made us. Our genetic line is a modified version of theirs. There was a falling out of their leadership. They split into north and south factions. There was a war. They are gone. We remain."

"We noticed the recent destruction."

"We hoped to have all of that cleaned up before you arrived."

"You knew we were coming?"

"The portal had to work both ways. Someone was bound to cross the other way. Just did not know the 'thants would fix the portal that fast. Thought we might have another circuit or two. No matter. You are here. Good effort on the forms. Almost looks like us. I am curious as to what your original forms were though."

Pu answers, "I prefer this form if that helps." I am surprised. Pu give

up being a Cat?

She looks at me.

“This form is fine. Has many advantages.”

“Maybe later. Shall we go? Oh, may I ask your names?”

“I am Oz and this is Pu.”

She does an affirmation, “And I am Offik.”

Through the portal, we run. No reason that I can see other than the pure pleasure of it. It does feel good. Even as a Hu I enjoyed running, but with this form it seems it is a necessity. Sit too long and you get nervous and depressed.

“Now we hunt.” Offik announces.

“What do we hunt?”

She shows amusement, “If I told you, would you know what I was talking about?”

“Just send us the image at least so we know what we are looking for.”

“You are rather accepting of my abilities. May I ask how long you have been of the special class?”

“Over a thousand years. Shit, you won't know what that means. Your time base is different too. About twenty of our normal lifetimes.”

“A while then. Good. You can teach me much and I can teach you about our new world.”

“We will need to get back soon to report to our leaders.”

She stops suddenly and looks at us, “I thought that was understood. This is your home now. You can't go back.”

“You don't understand, we can leave whenever we want.”

She shows amusement. What does that mean.

An image of a prey item arrives in our minds and Pu takes off. How could he sense one so quickly? I shake my eye stalk and scan ahead. But can't! This freaks me. I try some other TK ability. I am completely blocked.

“You need to learn our ways before you can add your own.” Offik adds in a relaxed manner.

Sure enough Pu comes back with one of the imaged creatures.

“Do we eat them raw or cooked?”

“Doesn't it bother you that Offik has somehow put limiters on us?”

“Ah, so you understand what has happened. Once you learn our ways, they will be removed.”

“How long will that take?”

“About fifteen of your years. Maybe more for you. Pu seems to understand much already.”

I look at Pu as mournfully as possible in this form. Pu sets down the creature and lick his hands. Still a Cat.

Pu says, "Sorry, but as good as this prey tastes we really need to go."

Offik shows amusement, but does not lift the limiters.

Pu shrieks very loudly. Offik ignores him.

Suddenly the curse is off and I can scan again. I immediately make a limiter and fit it to Offik. No more surprises.

Pu'thn appears and goes straight for Pu where they embrace.

"Was it safe for her to come this far from her attachment point?"

"A bit of a struggle, but I am been working with her since we arrived. She is fine now fortunately for us."

She is still showing amusement. I don't like that.

"Let's move it. Does Pu'thn know the way back?" Pu affirms.

I address Offik, "The limiter will wear off soon after we leave."

Suddenly several dozen people appear before us. I did not sense DS, so what is this?

"Pu, bug out!" We are in orbit. The people appear around us. So, they have DS. Not too surprising.

We need to lose them.

We DS to a froth alternate from here and find ourselves falling towards the sun.

They have no froth worlds? How strange.

The people arrive next to us and point to the sun which is getting closer.

We adjust our orbit, but with no reference we can't be sure and keep the orbit a little closer to the sun to be sure before going back to their world.

It's there at least. We move closer. They appear next to us. Hundreds now. Each jump we add to the numbers.

We can't lead them back to Fist.

They may already know.

We can't take that chance.

Then we have to abide by their game rules until it is safe.

If ever.

Better than letting them destroy the others.

We don't know they would do that. No one else that has arrived on Fist has shown any sign of it.

Look around you. How many of the others have armies of TKs waiting and watching us like these do?

Gowling in TP is not the same, but I get his feeling clear enough.

We arrive back on the surface. Pu'thn is with us.

“Most useful this device.”

“Not a device, but a solid state life form. Should be sentient soon.” Be careful what you say Pu.

“Do not be alarmed. We have been told about the 'thn and what to expect. We are not on the 'thn 'grid' here. Still, a level nine can be a cause for concern.” You are now. I can feel the link from Pu'thn to the others.

“You have nothing to fear if you do not harm or impede us in anyway.”

“That will make your training difficult. Our world is a harsh one. You will not get the true experience without the risk.”

I show amusement, “We know of risk and have experienced much. We do not need further training in that regard.”

“So be it. Then perhaps we should begin at a cave of learning.”

We are DSd to a dark room, no a hallway. Our eyes adjust and I can see it is not dark, but just very low light. We have enough to see by and I try and experience things with normal senses as much as possible. For Pu that would be unacceptable, but that is for him to decide.

We follow Offik into a large chamber where there are a few lights. We stop. Apparently we are waiting for something or someone. There is a simulation of a world around a sun. I move towards it. The world does not rotate about an axis or rather it does, but only about once per orbit around the sun. It must represent this world, the way it was until recently anyway. I surprised it has not been updated.

I turn to Offik, “Why does it not represent the way it is now?”

“It is a very old exhibit. There is no one who knows how to adapt it.”

I must have looked surprised.

“You are free to try if you like. It is mechanical except for the small device at the base.” I affirm that I understand. I quickly ascertain that it is a simple mechanical device. The timing for each of the components is determined by gears in the base.

“All it will take is a different gear here in the base. Are there any about?”

“For the sake of time, picture in your mind what you need.”

I affirm and do so. It appears next to me. Amazingly no tools are needed for the exchange. I simply have to remove the one gear and slide the new on in place. It clicks in as the simulation gears it engages come into position.

“It won't be perfect. That would take changing many gears.”

“Close enough to give the impression of the way it is now.” I affirm.

“The instructor will be pleased. We have lost much of our knowledge. Come this way.”

We are shown the progression of forms from the original to the current.

“Who gave you the name of crabs? Are there small ones here?”

“There are. Near the northern sea. Or there were.”

“Before the change.” She affirms.

“How many different life forms are there now?”

“Not many. Not enough. There are 'seed' stores, but we don't know how to revive them.” I am shocked.

I point to the original form. “Do they still exist?”

“They all died recently in their war. There were not enough of us at the time to prevent it. We have done the best we can to clean up the mess. Our population is about one tenth what it was before the war, which is only a fraction of a percent of what existed before the change.”

We DS.

She points to some ruins, “This used to be a small city.” It looks vast.

“Most of it is underground now, but all of it is empty. It held approximately ten million we guess. It had devices that used the special energy the three of us take for granted.”

Pu is shocked and interrupts, “Never take it for granted.” She affirms, then shows amusement.

She continues, “With your help we could make the city alive again.”

“What happened? Why is the world the way it is now?”

“There was an experiment. It went wrong. That was ten thousand circuits ago. Two circuits ago one group of them tried to correct the wrong. The other group opposed them, convinced it would end the world.”

“So, they fought each other for ten thousand circuits?”

“More or less. At first, it was just trying to survive, then as a stable system emerged they began to plot against each other. Even after the second attempt, which has worked more or less, they fought. This time they managed to kill each other off at least. Now the world belongs to those they made.”

“The portal opened because of the tech the others left behind.”

“Explain?”

“The 'thants as we call them because of their physical resemblance to creatures on our worlds.” I notice that gets his attention. Later. “They appear, from where we don't know, but they appear where ever and when ever a culture reaches a certain level of technical and psiotic

understanding. Basically, they have to have made a new element we call 'thn shield material or 'thn metal. Once that happens the 'thants appear soon after and use it to make the portal. Of course this annoys the people who made it in the first place, but they tend to find hidden locations that are not noticed at first. Most of the time.”

“Then what happens?”

“Someone accidentally stumbles through. On one of our worlds they used a protective construct to make a portal hidden in a deep cave. Explorers found it, figured out how to activate it from one side and used it to set up a colony on the other side. They managed to keep it in use for ten generations until it failed. We came across it when the 'thants work eventually caused a failure of the construct. Now we work with the collector world inhabitants.”

“Collector world?”

“It seems all the sAnt constructs point to the same location. Sentience of the type compatible with the collector world is not that common. They get a new portal about every one of your circuits or so. A bit random. The natives of the world try and learn from the new ones. By gathering information from each of the sentient worlds they are progressing at a faster than normal rate. We act as advisers. There are some dangerous species out there. Most don't intend it, but incompatibilities exist.”

“And we are one of the later?” I affirm.

“Why is that? Were you attacked?”

“No.”

“Harmed in any way?”

“No, but . . .”

“Then why treat us as demons?”

“If I may finish.” Pu rolls over and starts snoring. *Very helpful.*

I would rather hunt leapers.

“He is right. Let's hunt!” Pu gets up and stretches.

“You are no longer a Cat.”

“Very important to stretch properly before running unless you want cramps.” Pu gives me the look. I shake my eye stalk. In the process I see something move and make a dash for it. It clamps shut on my hand and I nearly lose my fingers. I take out my sword and try to pry it loose.

“Won't work. Once they hunker down it is pointless. Have to slip the sword in before they notice. They are called crafters, I guess because they make their own shelter. Tasty too. Not easy to get though. Small ones are better and easier to get. Have not learned about us yet.”

“How has the change affected the other creatures?”

“Not good. Some will adapt. Many will not.”

Pu comes up with several sneaks in his mouth.

“Gee Pu, just break their necks and stuff them in your pack. That's disgusting.” Offik shows amusement.

She addresses Pu, “You must have had an interesting life before coming here. I think I would like to visit your world.”

She pauses and then turns back to us, “Or is it worlds?”

“Worlds. That would take a while to explain. When you were following us just now.” I point up. “Where did you think we went?”

“We just followed. I have no idea where you went. No world below us, so it must have been some distance. Was it the same sun or a different one?”

“Both and we went no distance at all.” I show amusement.

“It seems you have many secrets. It will take some time to learn them all.” I affirm.

The last sneak goes in Pu's mouth.

“Pig!” Offik looks confused. “Not important. Just trying to get him to share.”

I see my chance and switch into fast time. A crash course after seeing this species in action. I almost overreact when I reach for the crafter and deftly sneak my sword under the edge of the relaxing creature.

“Got you!” Triumph.

“How the streaker did you get over there so fast?” She whistles into the air. I look about but don't see anything. I have switched back to normal time.

“Now what do I do?”

“SLOWLY lift up. If you go too fast you will break the shell and just make a mess of it. Only good for stew then and you will be picking pieces of shell from your beak for a long time.” I affirm.

I go as slowly as I dare. When I go too fast it resists, but when I go the right speed it slowly gives way. Interesting. Almost like I am taking advantage of its trying to get away by moving away from the sword.

“Good, now quickly flip it over on it's back.” I make the move and it flips too far and it nearly righted again. I quickly kick it back onto it's back.

“Good save. Almost a feeder of all on the first try. Good sized one too. Will feed many.”

I hear a horrible noise and look up just in time to see a large flock of bird like things coming towards us. I immediately shield.

“Don't resist. They are friends and can sense your fear.” Fear? Just

being cautious. I relax.

Pu is hunkered down though and Pu'thn is just above him ready to defend the coward.

One lands on Offik and says, "Rg'r!"

"Roger good!" She says back cuts a piece of crafter off and offers it to him. Roger wolfs it down.

I turn and see that three are fascinated by Pu'thn. Is it because they can see a distorted reflection in her? One jumps on top of Pu's eye stalk and tries to peck Pu'thn who easily moves aside in time. Even in fast time it is hard to out maneuver a 'thn. Pu of course is not amused and shakes the one off. The three decide it's now a game and all three try and touch her. She finally gets annoyed and pops out. Surprisingly they all pop out too.

"They can DS!"

"I assume you mean they can side shift." Whatever.

She continues, "Most are up to four abilities." Level fours! Shit.

"How many are there?" Pu asks like he wants to hunt them.

I admonish him, "DO NOT HUNT THEM."

Offik looks shocked, "Definitely not. They are sacred friends. You really don't want them as your enemy. They never forget and even if you can outrun them, they will drive you over the cliff of your mind." Too late, Pu is already crazy.

"Too bad, they actually look like they would present an honorable challenge." He lays back down like he is horribly bored and pops another sneak into his beak.

"How did she catch so many?"

"Found a colony. They have been doing that since the world started turning faster. They have adapted well. The crafters are in real trouble though. They are refusing to mate. We think it is because it never gets really hot or cold."

"You need a couple of geneticists to unravel what the first ones here did to them. Or start hatching more from the seed bank. I am sure they kept samples of everything pre accident. Of course. They would have lots of samples ready to go. They assumed they would be able to restart the turning and set everything right. Our form was only a temporary solution to provide food and labor. They had you hunt for them didn't they?" He affirms.

"In the south, they simply ate us. No dignity there. In the north they did the same, but also accepted food we hunted until the person could no longer hunt or provide labor."

“Then they ate them.” She affirms.

“Must be strange knowing you were not the top predator.”

“All we ever knew until now.”

Pu'thn has been unable to reestablish contact. She is worried.

She seems healthy enough.

I am feeding her.

Not good.

“Offik, Pu'thn is family to us and on this world she is sick. She and Pu need to go back so she can get well again.” And so the bird things do not harass her to death.

One alights on me and stares me in the rear eye.

I TP it, *Peck me and get sent to the other side of this world.* It hops off immediately TPing me back, *No fun! No fun!*

“She does not like you.”

“Not my task to entertain her.” How do you tell gender without scanning?

Offik asks me, “You will remain here?”

“I would be honored to. We believe in helping all those who achieve psiotic abilities.”

We need to ask a few questions before you leave Pu.

You think?

“You are not visited by 'thn and yet many of you are of sufficient abilities to attract them for ah mating.” That gets Offik's attention.

“And what would you know about mating? Is it the same with your normal forms?”

“With the 'thn it is very different. Mating may be the wrong word.”

Pu finally gets frustrated by my sideways method.

“How did you come to have your abilities? Meeting with the 'thn is how our ability lineage started. Actually it is a very long story.”

“We will have time. Yes, we had help too. It is also a long story. One that started ten thousand circuits ago.”

“Hmm, given the time differences and perceptions you could say that we started six million circuits ago.”

This is not a scratch contest.

“Pu is anxious to get going. Pu'thn is hurting and needs help.”

“We will have much to talk about. I understand that Pu will make a report on us as any aftwatcher would. The fact that you are staying makes you Lead on this information gathering.” Pu growls even though this form does not allow it.

“Pu thinks he always has the Lead role. Hard for him to accept a

lesser role.”

“There is no dishonor in one's position. Things will change Pu. Never worry.”

We go? I affirm.

I shield him with an psiotically opaque dome. Not even I can see through it. Offik shows amusement.

“You are a very paranoid life form. Might even be related to crafters.”

Turning my attention back to our meal, “Ah, how do you cook this thing? We are not all going to eat raw strips.”

“Even the streakers prefer it cooked, just not as patient as we are. You can take the dome down now. I know they are gone.” He shows amusement.

“We have had some unpleasant experiences we do not wish to repeat.”

“You have enemies, of that I am sure, but we are not your enemy, at the moment at least.”

“But life is change.”

“We shall see.”

Hu Eden

I am worried about the Ku. This has been a real setback. I will have to rethink my strategy. Fa'lan is great. I could not be happier. But we only have a dozen at level seven and only Fa at eight so far. I am going slow and careful. Maybe too careful. Or maybe it is just bad timing. Who would have predicted this attack on us by forces unknown?

As we slow down Pushy Paws begins to move. A blink still takes over a minute, but it does happen.

She is in deep. We will have to get in and get out quickly.

She intends to succeed.

What are you four doing here?

I nudge Fa.

With respect honored one. The Ku have all been kicked off the sentient worlds through no fault of their own. An outside force is turning everyone against non natives.

So go home. Now be gone. A bit rude, but given the time we are using up it works for me. I bring us out.

+How long were we under?+ It does feel like being under water.

Jesus who has been quiet until now. He points to a small sappling.

“I planted this when we started. It looks to be about a year and a half old now.”

I look around. It is night fortunately. However, there are offerings near each of us.

“I am afraid a new story will have been told to explain us.”

Jesus shrugs, “No way to prevent that.”

+What did she mean, go home? We are prevented from going home.+

Jesus says, “Much has changed. It might be good to bring it to the council anyway.”

“That much is true Fa.” Jesus raises an eyebrow and smiles.

“You know what I mean. We are being hunted along with the confused Pink imitations. All species are being forced into camps when on worlds of non origin. Maybe the best solution is for everyone to go home. Everyone back to the world of their origin.”

“The Jews back to Israel and the Palestinians to where? Whose homes to you take to make room for those coming back? We are better because of our differences, not in spite of them.”

+We know that, but the norms don't for some reason. Why not?+

“Very good Fa. Jesus, this is your area of expertise.” I bow to him.

“The concerns for daily life interfere. Mostly it is the fear of 'what ifs' that overwhelm.”

I add, “Then someone comes along with a simple believable solution or explanation. Not thinking well, they go along with an idea they normally would reject without question.”

Jesus shrugs, “Those in pain, inflict pain. The objects of the infliction are now in pain and repeat the process. Very hard to break the cycle.”

+What does then?+

“Eventually they burn themselves out, but not before a lot are hurt or even killed.”

+Any way to speed up the process?+

“Never tried to. There is much to learn by going through the process.”

I explain, “More like two steps forward and one step back. Progress is made eventually, but it is definitely not efficient.”

“There is no goal, just the path.” I bow to him.

“Have you gone Zen on me Jesus?” I smile.

“Nothing wrong with Zen.” He looks wounded.

“Oh stop it. He was always good at the sad puppy dog look.” He smiles.

+What's a puppy dog?+

“A relative of the wolf that was given to Hu as a friend.”

+By who?+

I roll my eyes and Jesus smiles, but does not answer.

We leave the area and when Jesus picks up his pack outside the forbidden tech zone he notices he has a message waiting.

He looks at my startled face, “What you thought the only tech I used was sandals?”

He concentrates, scrolling the screens.

“21st century tech? I am surprised.”

“I still can't get the latest stuff. Call me old fashioned.” I smile.

+I am not understanding all this.+

“Believe me, it is not important. What does it say?”

“We won't have to wait for a council meeting. Apparently there was one while we were under. All hands are to help transport sens back to their home worlds. We are going for full segregation apparently. Oh, and then we are all reporting to Ed and Garfield's place to decide what to do from there.”

“How long ago?”

“Just a few days actually.”

“Then Fa'lan and I are going to the Ku. They are our primary

responsibility. Where will you go?"

"Hu are still my primary. I guess we can't bring them here. Not fair to the UNA who staid. Guess we are going to try the whole European thing all over again."

"But they will be forewarned this time." He nods.

"And protected."

"Most of the metals being hidden will go a long way there. It will be a long time before they gain the ceram understanding to overcome that. What about the Ceph?"

"They are moving back too. That will be the hardest."

+No, the easiest. They have only been there a thousand years. Still qualifies as a temp settlement.+

Jesus bows to her, "I am impressed. You have taught her well."

"Not my doing. She is a literal sponge for knowledge."

Ku Eden

+What did you do to me!? I can't believe this! This is horrible. The worst day of my life!+

Are you sure this was wise Daniel? Looks a bit thin as a Ku, but this also allows him to fit in well. Most here are thin from abuse and neglect. Hard to believe considering most worked as fooders.

He has excellent administrative skills and I like the idea that he is experiencing the other side. If he survives seeing himself he will be a good sentient.

That is a big if. He affirms, but with amusement.

+It feels strange being back on Ku Eden. I am surprised at the amount of life that has come back.+

+Still mostly the smaller forms and those that had seeds. The larger animals are all gone of course.+

+Larger birds included. Lots of burrowers though. +

Barb adds, +Only on this continent. The Ku are restricted to it until the council decides otherwise.+

I scan, +The smallest one not covered in ice and most of it was desert even before the comet. Actually looks better now.+

+It will take intelligence to make it work, not just grunt.+

+Good thing only the weak smart ones were saved.+

Daniel says, +It will take longer, but the end result will be better.+ I notice that Zigm is listening carefully.

Finally he asks, +Which one of you did this to me? I fell asleep a Ba and now look at me.+ He stumbles. Not used to the new form yet.

None of us answers. Daniel must have done it. We weren't even here when it happened.

+How long does this punishment last?+

Again no answer.

+Where am I?+ He is calming down at least.

I answer him, +We are all on Ku Eden.+

+Guano! Take me back immediately.+

Daniel sighs, but does not answer.

I answer him, +Ku are not allowed on any world except here. To do otherwise would be a death sentence. You were the one who set that up on Ba.+

+Guano. Change me back first, then send me back to Ba.+

Daniel finally confronts him.

+Zigm, by order of the High Council you have been ordered to spend the rest of your natural life in the form that you persecuted the most, the Ku.+

What High Council?

I made it up. Relax. He does not know that.

+I did nothing wrong. I was under orders from the Ba Council+

+We know you did everything possible to influence the council in the directions you chose. Oh hero of the wizard hunt.+

You didn't? I scan Zigm carefully.

Daniel shows amusement. Zigm screams when a rock jumps near him.

Relax, just a two for now. And he will be watched continuously.

+We have a lot of work to do. How many others are here?+

She means TKs.

Daniel answers, +Just the ones who helped me, James, Rachael, Q and Hey Long.+ Each pops in when they are named.

Barb shakes her head, +We are doomed!+ But she shows amusement. I am not so sure. I have read their stories.

+I am curious.+ I walk up to Zigm and touch him. The images and information come flooding in. I now know him better than he knows himself.

+Wish I had that knack.+ Daniel says.

I answer, +No you don't. I am surprised it worked with him.+

Barb shrugs, +He is what he is. Would probably work with anyone you touched if you have an open mind.+

One of consequences of knowing someone this well is of course compassion for the person. He believes in what he did. Ignorance, the great Hu Buddha would have said.

+Come on Zigm. Might as well meet the others.+

He looks at me, +You are a Ku wizard?+ Not very dignified sitting that way on the ground.

+The only one on Ba Eden at the time of your reign of terror. All the rest that you had killed or chased away were innocent. Nor did you find a single true wizard. All that you killed or had killed were either innocent or false wizards.+

+Thank you for being direct. I hate it when people evade.+

+I know.+ I show amusement.

+You can see my thoughts. I forgot.+

+Much more than that. Remember that time in Green Tree school when you tricked your best friend into missing the field trip.+

He shows shame, +I am not proud of that choice.+

+No, but I know of it all the same.+

+Hey, are you taking my responsibility away from me?+ Daniel shows amusement.

+Just wanted him to understand that he has no secrets. I think I will have plenty to do with the rebuilding.+

+We will be helping, as will many others as soon as they are finished with the redistribution of sentients. We need to put together an entire infrastructure before then.+

+Thank you for your understanding, but I think food and water come first, then shelter.+ I bow to Daniel, who bows back.

+I will be staying this time as well. About time I got started with my own project.+ Barbara bows.

+You mean us.+ I show amusement.

+Oh dear, you will be a special project forever. No I mean specifically the Ku future. Nothing overt or coerced.+

+Something like the whales?+ Being the most sane and rational ones in the universe sounds good to me.

+We will see. It all depends on how things unfold. Each species is different. Too early to know where the path will lead yet. Ku could end up the most terrifying species ever to come out of this corner of the galaxy.+

I am mortified.

Zigm asks, +You don't believe that? I hope.+

+Why, interested now?+

+No! I want no part! Kill me now if you must, but don't make me part of this horrid life form. I knew there was a reason I hated this form so much.+

+All life forms have a dark side. All depends on how you look at them. Want me to tell you about all the evil things the Ba have done? They have enslaved one life form, killed another and used a third. And that is only one example of a colony of a hundred individuals. Imagine what a whole world of them could do.+

Or one, like enslave us?

Shhh, one step at a time.

We have to bring him down to build him up. But go too far and he will turn on himself. Don't mention his own mistakes. He has to see those for himself.

Is this what you did with me?

More or less. We all get the treatment at some point. You will do it to yourself once you are old enough, whenever you feel you need it.

I am already good at that. I show amusement for admitting it.

You are also too hard on yourself at times. Have to watch myself more carefully.

+Time for wizard training Zigm. Don't want you hurting any more Ku unless you mean to.+ They pop out.

+How many in this encampment?+

+Are you testing me?+

+Just tired and distracted.+

+One hundred and twenty thousand four hundred and nine. Assuming you don't count the eggs about to be laid or hatched.+

+Groups no bigger than a hundred. Disperse them in this sector.+ She shows me in my mind.

+Why so little space?+

+We are taking in the ones from Dio Eden and Ceph Eden as well. They have higher numbers, about three hundred and one forty thousand respectively. Zigm and his gang convinced a lot of Ba to kill Ku.+

+That was not intentional. He was only interested in the wizards, or false wizards actually. He was just not attentive to the collateral harm.+ She nods.

+Something we all have to learn. He is in good hands with Daniel though. Never met anyone more flexible with different life forms.+

+Because of his time with K!?+

+Possibly. We need water, food and shelter as you said. Nothing fancy right now. Every single structure with a fire pit in the center, water at one side and TK chow for now. At least the smaller plants are doing well. Some of the more useful trees too. Even some forests near the coast most of the way around.+

+A lot of desert too.+

+Save that for later. It will support fewer numbers and will take some experience before they will be ready. Ku were never designed for the desert.+

+Hu were?+

+We came from the savannahs, but quickly adapted to both forest and desert, if you count millions of years as quick.+

+Right, I had forgotten that part. Sauron also played a part too.+

+We still don't know if he helped or hindered.+

+Do you think most sentients are guided by a TK at some point?+

+Could be. It will be interesting to see what happens on the other worlds now that we have left completely.+

That is scary.

+We will have to leave here as well?+
+No Pink yet. We will see.+
+Hope Zigm does not turn them against us.+
+What are the chances of that happening?+
+Not good. He won't mean to do it, but it may happen all the same.+
+I know Daniel well. He will not let that happen. He has reasons why Zigm is here. Look at them. They are forming flocks naturally, but not always making the best choices. They need a mix of talents, not just friends.+

+I thought diversity was important? Some communities will be better at different tasks and gain a reputation for such. Would be very boring if all the communities looked alike.+

+We will not be that careful in the sorting. Families stay together for one. Trade and natural movement will take care of what we miss. Zigm will bring in Ba capabilities that the Ku lack. Balance. Let's get to work.+

In seven hundred years I have had lots of practice in community design. Of course each microclimate requires a certain amount of flexibility, but not that hard. We are not making permanent structures, just something to hold them over until they can do for themselves. Sooner or later the Pink will arrive here and we want to be ready to leave or go into hiding before then.

We get to it and the days blur together. We rest every eighth day, as in the Ceph tradition. It is important to survey what you have done and plan adjustments as needed, but not act until the next day. Even TKs need to think before acting.

Standing on a hill we look down at one of the settlements.

+It is not perfect, but it gives them a chance.+ Far from it, but Ku have made due for a very long time. I affirm though.

I say, +They will need food for some time. Water is not a problem at least.+ She affirms.

She then asks me, +Food reps or do we inspect and decide?+

+Reps are safer, especially if the Pink show up, but conscious attention is always better. We don't want them to become dependent on the machines and neglect self reliance. Probably the best way is to do both. Set up the machines, but do regular inspections to insure proper use.
+

+That way, if something happens they don't die through no fault of their own. This would not work with the Hu. Some would hoard and some would deny access with ever increasing cost.+

+Ku are capable of such behaviors too.+ She shows amusement at my

statement. She knows first experience of their actions.

+No more Ku food shops I am afraid.+

+Don't worry families will invite us to meals from time to time.

Especially if we bring rare treats.+

I show amusement and ask, +Chocolate?+

+Sorry, we have to stick to native species. Not sure it survived the asteroid.+

+If I have to search to the end of time I will find it.+ I boast and then show amusement. I can make some any time I want now. Still fun to have happy thoughts though.

Daniel and Zigm come running up. He seems to have gotten used to the form at least.

+Now doesn't that feel good? Your desk job did not get you enough exercise.+ Zigm is sweating from the exertion.

+Finally, people I know. Please save me from this monster.+

+Hey Daniel, have you done the enfolding lessons yet?+

He gives Zigm an evil look. Not sure Zigm recognizes it. Very different from a Ba version.

Zigm pops out with too much drama and a lack of grace, almost falling into his portal. Daniel shows amusement and chases after him.

+They seem to be having fun.+ Barbara comments.

+At least Daniel is.+ I show amusement.

Pop over to us. I want you to witness this.

I shrug and look at Barbara.

We pop to just outside a meeting hall. It is dark and misty. There is activity inside and we enter unnoticed.

I scan and find Zigm in the kitchen helping with the pots. Daniel is setting tables with food. Barbara and I quickly find tasks to do.

Someone recognizes me, +I know you from Ba Eden. Didn't you work in that flower shop?+ I affirm.

+Not many flowers here.+

+I have seen some nice arrangements of dried twist weed. You can still be creative if you work on it a little.+ She moves away to finish her task.

Several more people recognize me and affirm. I did not realize that I was that noticable.

+What brings you to our nest?+

+Someone has to see what everyone is doing. I am a wonderer.+

+Lonely life.+

+Half of the people here seem to remember me. I feel like I have

come home.+

+Everyone one here is from Ba Eden. Specifically Capital City.+ Guano, do they know Zigm is here? I am tempted to touch him to find out, but I am polite and continue sweeping the floor in the prep area. We may be good cooks, but we are messy.

He is still cleaning pots. Even seems to be enjoying it. Carrying on conversations with people as they bring him more dirty pots.

+Hey everyone. Put down your work. We eat!+ Immediately everything stops. Even Zigm lets the pot go into the warm water and washes the sand off his hands to come into the dinning room.

We all perch and then begin the meal.

Afterwards the thanks are given. This first of many I hope.

+Thank you fate for allowing us this meal and this gathering of friends. We especially want to give thanks for our two visitors tonight. One whom you know, Fa of Capital City and Baba from rural Ba Eden. Welcome to both of you.+ I guess they already know Zigm and Daniel. We both rise so others can recognize us. We lift our head feathers in thanks and then squat down again.

How long have the two of you been here? I ask Daniel.

This is home base. He responds.

Interesting method of training. Do they know who he is?

Of course.

Does he know they know?

Ah, that is the surprise for tonight.

Where is he? I scan and find him back in the kitchen, sorting vegetables for the next meal, stacking pots neatly on shelves and cleaning up the debris on the floor.

The incidence of disease is much lower in this village than in any other. He is equally meticulous about the latrine areas.

Does no one help him?

Many, but he always finishes up or starts the activity. Daniel shows amusement.

Someone goes into the kitchen area and has to practically drag him out to be with the rest of us. He protests saying there is still much to be done.

I overhear, +This will only take a moment, then you can go back.+ The young fem shows amusement when she tells him this. I wonder if she is interested in him? All the males know better than to try for me after a few tries. Here they do not remember me well and I can see some eyeing me. No one ever did that before I became TK.

+Attention everyone. Gather around and listen.+ Everyone calms down and it becomes relatively quiet. This is not a Hu village after all. I miss the other species.

+It is our one year crossing in our new historical home. It is a time to pause and reflect on all that has happened, on new friends, new adventures and some sadness. We remember Li no na. Her wonderful green soup and fry cakes. We remember Ky ga ha and his wonderful stories of the old times. Most of all I want to remember one particular individual without whom our crossing to our ancestral world would have been much harder. We have all heard stories from nearby settlements who have had a much harder time of it. We Ku are not so good at organizing actions in large groups. We do fine in small family units, but once we get above twenty or so we somehow fall out of the tree. But not here. Here every aspect of our village is working like a Hu mech without attention. How is this possible you may ask and any other village would have to ask, but not us. We know what our village fly straight. Tonight we honor the one who has given so much. Please come forward now and receive acclaim. Come forward Ku Zigm.+

He has made his way behind us and is trying to hide.

He whispers, +They don't know who I am and why I have to do what I do.+

+No one told you to do all of what you have done. I certainly didn't. Daniel did not. I doubt any other others did either.+

+I can't help it. I have to help. After all that I did to them. They did not deserve what I did. These are good people. They do not deserve to have me working with them.+ That is a real change.

+They are waiting.+

+Only because they don't know.+

The leader speaks louder, +Come forward Zigm.+

He yells back, +You don't understand. Do not honor me. I am your night horror, not your helper.+ Still using Ba terms. Interesting.

The leader pauses, +I am no Ky, but I will explain for those who have never heard.+ Likely no one fits that description in the room except Zigm.

+Zigm was not always kind to Ku. He used to hate us and tried very hard to hurt everyone he met. He was not alone, on Ba Eden most eventually turned against us and against all non Ba sentients. We may think we were selected from the flock, but in reality we were treated no different than the others. If the Ba had looked carefully at themselves I am sure they would find that they treated each other with equal suspicion

and contempt.

Now of course they will have their chance to see themselves in the mirror of experience.+ The speaker shows amusement and many others confirm.

+In reality, Zigm is our savior. How you ask? Simply, without his efforts we would not be here now. We would still be on Ba as second class sens. Instead we are home! Really home! What greater blessing could any of us have hoped for. This is not to negate the hurt many of us experienced. I lost members of my own family. But, think, when has change ever been easy? It would be wonderful if we were wise enough to always know the right course and not add obstacles, but we aren't are we? I know I'm not. I resisted along with everyone else.+

Mummers of affirmation. If I think about it I can see we inherited much from the bird form. We affirm with one kind of cluck and show amusement with a louder form. I would think we are chickens if I was on Hu Eden. I wonder if Pushy Paws has come out of slow time yet and what she learned. I have to imagine that OM was severely hurt here on Ku and it will be some time before she is open to visitors, even if I could afford the time away.

+So let us honor Zigm who has helped everyone here once he became one of us and acknowledge that though he did harm in his former life, he is truly one of us now.+

That sets off pandemonium as everyone tries to touch Zigm and welcome him to the flock.

Daniel comes up to me, +Is this what you expected?+

+The Ku are very forgiving and try to find the good in every situation. I am more surprised that Zigm has been taking it so well.+

+Everyone needs a home. He really was not at home on Ba. Here he is. Must be nice to be done with the search for identity.+ He shows amusement and I laugh in my Hu voice to the quizzical looks from those around us.

As we are leaving the meeting hall, Barbara interrupts, +We need to check in with the others. We have been so concerned about setting things up here that I have no idea what has been happening with the Pink and the other worlds. Has the crises passed or are we still not wanted on other worlds?+

+I need to rest some before I want to purposely inject myself into one of the crazy worlds again.+

+I am very tired too. Strange. I am almost never tired.+

+It is quiet. I don't hear anything from inside either.+ We slowly make

our way back in so as not to disturb anyone and find everyone asleep. It is the last thing that I remember.

Hu Mars

“Well this is another fine mess you have gotten us into Mo.”

“Indeed Ho.”

All the food is moldy and clearly not edible. A water system broke during our, ah, exercising a few days ago. Everything got wet I guess.

“Who knew bugs grew in here as well.”

“Probably brought them in with us fungus head.” I bat his head with the back of my virtual hand. He returns the effect and we are off again, chasing each other like old Star Wars jet cycles. Pretty much all of the museum is trashed. The frustrating thing is we are still inside the museum.

“There just has to be a way out of here.”

“Well, the outside is made of something called 'thn shield matrix. Or at least that is what the term said. We are now level fours. We should be able to dig our way out. The stories in the term talked of fours being able to.”

“Barely. I keep saying we are not patient enough.”

“You want to spend all day scraping at one spot or do you want to find something fun to do?”

“I admit I have never felt better in my life. Maybe being TK is not so bad.”

“We are going to get hungry fast if we don't fix this.”

“Not to mention it will stink in here.”

“Too late for that Mo.”

“Afraid so Ho and I am looking at the reason too.”

That sets us off again. Chasing each other through the isles, we end up in the meditation hall. A normally quiet location with a pool of water. Took us months to find it even. Secret passage way with hidden locks. Having TK allowed us to see through the walls far enough to figure it out. Ho splashes me, but I don't pay any attention.

“What are you doing? We have been over this place from top to bottom.”

“They are sneaky Ho. They are very sneaky. Think about it. They must have an escape route. The one thing that scares them more than anything is losing their abilities. If a limiter is attached you are suddenly just Hu again. Helpless and easy to kill. There has to be escape hatch. I think it is here. It has to be something that a norm could use. We need to stop thinking like TKs and think like norms again.”

“What makes you think it is here?” He asks and I point to the wall. He scans it, finds the latch and opens it with his hand to see three Mars filters carefully hung there, still in their new covers.

“When was the last time you saw a new one?”

“Whoa! I have lived my entire life on Mars and I have never seen a new one. Why didn't we see this before?”

“We weren't looking for them?” I offer.

He goes over and unwraps one to try it on. He mumbles something which I cannot understand.

He takes it off, “No leaks even.” He tosses me one. I try it on. It feels wonderful.

“Hang onto them. We might need them on the outside. I think it is through there.” I point to the pool.

“Why?”

“Can you swim?” He shakes his head no.

“I can't either. None of us can. When has there even been enough water in one place to even worry about it? That is why it is the perfect place to put it. We aren't just anyone however.” He smiles.

Ho and I waded into the pool. It does not even wet us as we are both using our talent to shield ourselves. Our scanning should have found it months ago, but for some reason I still don't understand it took us several hours of frustrating searching before we could find it by feel.

Using TK we wind our way though a short loop and come up in a cave that lights up when we get out of the water.

“Why the lights?” I ask not thinking.

“No TK remember?” He smiles and I roll my eyes.

“Ah, leave me alone, I'm just an old Luney. Not that anyone would believe it.”

“The air is thin here. Must be open to the outside.” We put on our masks. I know, technically we don't need them, but we have not been TK that long. I don't trust it yet. I don't think Ho does either. We automatically check each others fit. Reflex.

We find caches of supplies, packs, food bars, water. They were prepared or we have been set up. Either way I am happy we are doing something other than chasing each other around the museum. We stuff two extra packs. No telling how long till we reach a settlement.

There is a single channel com unit in the masks. I finally remember to turn it on when Ho gestures to me madly.

“Okay, I am here.”

“About time Luney.”

I sigh, "Let's blow this air lock!" We withdraw our landing gear (legs) and head out bouncing off walls occasionally as we miss calculate speed and direction. I end upside down at one point, but easily right myself.

Ho races ahead of me, "I see the light!"

I race to catch up and we both suddenly burst into the air and upward.

We end up several thousand meters above the surface when we relax and come back together.

"We can see everything from up here."

Ho points to the right, "That looks like the nearest settlement."

I point down and slightly to the left, "That's the water fountain and that must be where the others ended up. We need to see what happened at least."

"Yeah, you're right, but it feels weird. How come we are still Hu and they are Martians? Does not seem right."

"Why did Luna City fail and I end up here? Life is not fair. Just keep going as long as you can."

We go at a slower pace back to the ground. We land a kilometer away from what looks like the Martian settlement we think they must have gone to.

From there we walk.

We pass fields of crops. I had seen the hydroponics units on both Luna and Mars, but this just looks wrong. Seeing things growing from the ground is just wrong. What stops the water from going where ever it wants? No wonder those fountains keep coming on.

"Heads up. We are being watched." I look to where he indicates to see a lone Martian watching us. We stop to watch him. He does not appear to be moving. Just staring.

"Not going to get those crops tended just standing there."

"He is moving, just very slowly."

"I thought they were only half our speed. He is moving about a tenth."

"Maybe we aren't moving at our normal speed either. Hey where did he go?"

"Huh? He was right there." We glide over to investigate, being ready to jump out quickly.

"Here are his footprints. He was barefoot. Can you believe it?"

"But they stop here." I scan all around, but it is not until I scan down that I understand.

"I'll be a space monkey. He is right underneath us."

I find the catch and open the trap door. He is curled up inside. Seeing that his ruse has been seen he unfolds himself and comes out. Very

slowly.

“Pretty good for a Martian.”

“Remember the wizard said they are just as smart as we are. Be careful.”

“Follow me.”

He slowly turns and starts what appears to be a run, but we can keep up with him by walking at a normal pace.

The settlement is close by fortunately. Only a couple of hundred meters in fact. It is hidden well behind an embankment. I scan and see they have done a very good job of laying out everything within easy reach. Redundant system layout for all essentials.

We are brought to an entrance. We enter a small ante chamber. An air lock of sorts.

We enter the inner chamber. About ten, no eleven Martians are present. They appear to be eating something.

“Dinner time?”

“Has to be better than the nute bars we have. Those things are awful.”

Without warning we are accosted and apparently injected. I feel the needle go completely through all my clothing, the sharp sting and the pressure of the fluid entering my muscle. I scan it of course. A virus of some sort.

“Martian gold is my guess.” Ho nods. We scan each other to confirm that we have both destroyed it completely.

We are then offered to sit down to eat. The portion size is amazingly small, but no smaller than what anyone else gets. Slower metabolism means few caloric needs.

“This is good.” Ho starts to eat quickly.

“Slow down Ho. Savor it. Get used to a slower pace.” He nods understanding. I have no idea how quickly the virus is supposed to affect us.

When we are done, still faster than anyone else, we are led down a corridor to an empty room. There are simple cots made by digging a shelf out from the wall itself. We are left alone. There is water in a pitcher of sorts. Not sure what the corner structure is. Ho is already investigating it.

“We really need to stop doing things physically.”

“What would they expect us to do?”

“Ah, right. Good point. What do you do on Mars if someone caught a virus?”

“Isolate them and give everyone who was near them antivirals.”

“Yeah, same with us. But, what would you do if you purposely infected someone.”

“Put them in isolation and let them sweat it out.”

“They have all had it. The 'change' can no longer hurt them. No reason to isolate.”

I check the door and it is unlocked. Ho sees me do this.

“Winter will be here soon. What do they do during the winter? Even their blood would freeze out there then.”

“The weather has been getting warmer. Our efforts have been paying off, but you are right. Too cold during the winter. They must go to ground. Here possibly. Pull in the harvest and wait it out till spring.”

“We saw crops outside.”

“In a week from now pull in the last of them. Or maybe those are the seeds for next year. Let these rot in place, help fertilize the next crop.”

“Maybe. Guess we were in the mu, ah, structure a long time.”

“If we were ah, better at our talents, we could become Martians.”

“If dreams were H. Let's go for a walk. I don't think they are going to do any thing else to us and I would like to find the others.” I nod, but I wonder if I really want to find them.

The area we are in is very plain. It will be hard to find our way back if we did not have scanning. I make sure I understand where we are in relation to the whole before we get too far.

“Oh Dorothy! We are not in Kansas any more Toto.” Huh?

I catch up to him.

“My Lord. What the?”

We are in a large room. There are Martians all over. They appear to be painting the ceiling, the floor, the walls, the support columns, everything. The patterns are extremely intricate. Only a people with infinite patience and meticulous slow care could do this work.

“I don't think we should enter here.” Ho says as he points down to the ground. No way of entering without stepping on their work. I understand why they are barefoot now.

I remove my mask and allow my TK ability to supply what I need. I then rise and enter the room.

“Is that wise?” I hear. He must have removed his mask as well.

“What do you think will happen when we don't change as expected?”

“Good point. Hey Mo, over here.”

I go to where he is heading. They kept our group together it appears. They are working on a blank section. We set down in an area not touched yet.

Tess, I think it is her, looks up slowly.

“Hi Tess, long time no see. Glad all of you made it out okay.”

Slowly we here, “Alive?”

How?

Not
possible.”

She's a Martian all right. Skin color is not as green as the others yet, but maybe that takes years. She still looks great though a little thin.

“The others have noticed and are turning towards us. This is weird.”

Watching, we see the older Martians have gone back to their work. Only our team is still watching us.

“Stay
in
room.
Better.
Much
pain
coming.”

As slowly as I can I answer her, “No pain for us. The virus has no effect on us.”

Ho says it, “We are no longer Hu. We are changed as well.”

“Too
bad.
This
is
better
than

Hu.” She then turns from us and goes back to her work.

“Way to impress the lady dude.”

“Let's get out of here. We don't belong.”

“Yeah.”

We only go back to our rooms long enough to collect our packs and then make our way to the entrance.

It is bared, latched and sealed. There are guards there. Not armed apparently, but it does make us hesitate.

I sigh, “We will not change. Please let us out.”

“Prove
it.”

Definite defiance.

I gently push them apart with TK, unseal the door, undo the latch and

bindings and then open the door. All without moving.

Ho says, "Tsk, tsk, patience Mo."

"No more. I want to go back to the Hu settlement."

"Yeah, my idea too. Time to kick butt."

I show surprise. That is not what I was thinking about, but maybe he is right.

Outside there is a Martian dressed in a white robe directly in our path. No idea of the gender. Being that thin does things to the obvious clues.

"Is this a movie? This only happens in movies."

"Go up?" Ho asks.

"Let's hear him out. Got to be something profound or a good laugh."

We stop directly in front of him and wait. Of course TK patience is different than Martian patience.

"Wish we were sevens." I nod. What is our wise one thinking?

Finally he says,

"No
difference.

Go."

"Now that is weird. What does he or she mean?"

The Martian is moving aside, but I am not patient enough and go up.

I hear Ho shout, "We forgot our packs." He points down.

"Don't need them."

He comes closer, "How are we going to explain not having air masks and no mineral find? They do have weapons and numbers on us."

"Oops." He nods.

When we arrive back at the Martian camp we find the packs outside the closed door with the masks on top of them.

Ho apparently has scanned the packs, "They took nothing."

"A complete separation from the past."

"You know, I bet we could go to earth."

"At three times the gravity? This way of travel is nice, but do you never want to stand on two legs again? What do we know of earth anyway? Get just as much going to Europa or some other outpost. Here is where we are. Let's start here."

"Okay with me. Do we still get to kick butt?"

"Let's try talking our way in first. Maybe they will accept us as great prospectors and treat us with respect."

"Now who is playing a movie role?"

"I hope they make it. Not bad people really."

"No, but I would not want to live like them. At least Tess and the

others seemed okay. Just hope they were not mind wiped at the same time.”

“Nothing we could do about it anyway. We aren't fives.”

“Always some kind of limitation. Wonder if the nines feel the same?”

“Probably. Going to be dark soon, best get there quick.”

“They will have sensors. Which metal should we bring back?”

“Class said any of the rare elements would be like pure H. Iridium would be my choice. Glad we did the practice lessons the term had us do.”

“Two bars of iridium coming up.”

Still takes us time, but we do the transformation while we fly. This is so much better than any hopper or shuttle. The freedom is incredible. I can understand now why they fear being limited. Once you have tasted it, there is no going back.

“There is a settlement up ahead.”

“Not ours. They won't know us here and are likely to be more suspicious. South east of here.” We bank.

“I don't remember coming this way when they brought us.”

“That is because they changed course many times to try and confuse us. That settlement we passed may be the closest one, but likely they would have taken the find for themselves.”

“We are not that way. They would not have done that. Is everyone from Luna crazy?”

“We are fours, but all of the settlements have weapons that can overtake us, kill us even. No one can stop a bullet from point blank range.”

“Never seen a gun before. I am not sure they have them.”

“They do. We were met with armed guards when we came in. Weak as newborns we were no threat to anyone, but they still watched us carefully.”

“I thought you came in with TKs?”

“Them too. The TKs said they had to take us in, but as you can see most if not all of us ended up prospectors. I am a trained pilot and engineer and yet they had no other use for me.” I am still bitter about that one. You would think given their deteriorating situation they could use me in some way. I bet they never even looked for the bodies. Our masks were probably more important.

It is just after sunset when we reach Ho's home settlement.

We land a click out.

“We walk in like we made it all the way from the drop off site? No

one is going to believe that.”

“Hold the bars up. That is all they will see.” He grins.

He pulls them out.

“Those look more like lumps not bars.”

“Think nature makes perfect rectangles. These at least look like we found them.”

“Yeah except pure iridium does not exist in nature.”

“Fleas, I had not thought about that. Maybe they won't know it either.”

“No one but the lab nuts are likely to know. You are right.”

We pound on the air lock door. Fear of Martians breaking in. Not likely from what we have seen. The Martians want nothing to do with us or our tech.

“Ho, have you ever seen a Martian inside a settlement?”

“Huh? What made you ask that? No, well, technically yes. When someone fails prospecting they are turned in the med center. Technically they walk out of the settlement as Martians.”

“But they never come back? What's taking them so long.”

“Everyone is accounted for. Who would be knocking on the door? The masks. Put yours on. The com system inside. No one but a Hu would wear one. They will answer us on the com.”

I shake my head, “Being TK has made me stupid.”

“Both of us. No more mention of you know what?”

“This is command, no mention of what?”

Ho comes back, “We ain't tellen where the mine is until we are paid.”

The person at command laughs, “You two dust mites got lucky huh? Come on in.” The lock unlatches.

I spray Ho with dirt and he returns the favor. He nods to me. Wish we were sevens now. That was close. What else are we missing.

Someone meets us on the other side of the lock.

“What's you got?”

“Not much, just a couple of kilos of iridium.” We both smile.

“Holy Ox, you could run the settlement when you cash that in. Can I see it?”

“It will go on display when we are credited. You can see it then.”

“Yeah, understood. You know the way?” We both nod.

Someone of higher rank comes forward with two lower ranks in tow.

She shakes our hands, “Congratulations. Heaven knows we could use it. Not having psiotics means we have to go back to the old ways. Never thought we would see nano-ops again, but they are reliable and they

work. How are your masks holding up.” She holds out her hands to inspect them. We do so.

“Strange, these are not standard issue. You two came in on a little used freq. Must be a remnant from some long forgotten batch. Wish they would issue standard ones to you rock jocks.”

“So do we ma'am.”

“At ease. I am not your commander. Though with your find you may soon be mine. Come with me. Get you two straight to survey.”

We are led on a long twisted path. Of course I have scanned and know we have gone around in circles several times. They even have people changing things each time so we will think it is different. I hand signal Ho to be careful.

“Commander, I am a former pilot. A very good sense of direction. You can cut the rat shit.”

She sighs, “I am under orders too. Not a commander, just a major.” We go much straighter now. It was not that far from the entrance. It would make sense for it to be near an entrance so it could be assessed quickly.

“Here you are. They will take care of you from here.” Right.

Ho says off hand, “So near the main lock, ever have a leak?” He looks mean when he says it and pulls out a weapon. He duped it! Brilliant. I quickly make one and pull mine out too.

“It seems you two have had good training or been through this before. Let's see the goods.”

I nod to Ho who pulls out the smaller lump, then takes out his knife and cuts a sliver off. “That is at least a months air worth. Don't lose it.” Their eyes go wide when they run a spec over it.

“Not possible.”

“We can take our goods elsewhere if you don't like it. We passed another settlement coming, figuring we should be good and at least offer it to our 'home' base first.”

The tech looks at the other tech who nods.

“Only way this could exist is you found a wizard's stash. How much more is there?”

“That would be telling.” I offer. He nods.

“The other prospectors are going to hate you two. They come in with ore after a year of searching that is less than the sliver you have offered. Judging from the size of that lump you cut it from the price of iridium will go to zero for a century.”

“That is not what we heard. Seems you need iridium real bad. I don't

like being played. Stop the crap or we walk.”

Several guards with massive weapons come in and aim at us.

“Word gets out this is how you treat spectors and you won't get any more of anything.” I go to disable the weapons, but Ho has beat me to them.

I slowly aim my gun at a critical spot, “How long can you breathe Mars gas?” The two guard immediately try to fire their weapons. Ho aims his at them.

“Ours work. Damn those maintenance schedules. Best if you learn to service your own weapon.” I see the safety is still on for Ho's weapon. He really has not seen one before. Hope they don't notice, but I see one smile. He has. I click it off and that shocks him.

“Not worth wasting a bullet on. Keep the sliver, we are leaving.”

“That won't be allowed. No one in this room is worth as much as what you have in your pack. Why waste your lives?” I hear gas entering the chamber.

We let the gas overcome everyone else and then dissolve the lock on the door and open it.

“Think we will get the same reception at the other places?”

“Probably. They are getting very desperate. Grunts like us prospectors don't count for anything.”

“Well what do we do then?” I neutralize the gas and clean it out of the systems of everyone present. They will still hurt for some time, but at least they won't die from it. Not their fault.

“Ho, leave the iridium. They will be searching for us till the end of time if we don't and it means nothing to us.”

“True. Both lumps?”

I nod, “They know we did not tell them everything. I am worried about the location of the 'wizard's lair'? That will obsess them.”

He laughs, “They won't find it from our tracks.” I laugh too. We take off into the sky. Beautiful night with so many stars. Wonder if we could make it all the way to Alpha Centuri? Not sure I could stand being with Ho that long. We are fast, but not light speed fast. If we were sixes we could do that dimensional thing. Curse you wizards!

Council

Pu we need to hurry, they have already started.

Did you tell the Others?

Yes.

Then there is no hurry. I stop to scratch my flank. Don't know why it always itches there. Nothing that I can find. Maybe just because it feels good.

Pu'thn remains with me but is clearly nervous. I am not sure she got enough Cat influence. She needs to learn to relax more and take on an air of deserving superiority like I have. She is still a kitten, what can I do? She clearly needs to play more. I rear up on my back legs and then reach over and give her a gentle bat. She falls away and then comes toward me to try and touch me on a paw, tail or head. I jump out of the way and then pop to a nearby group of sens to hide among them.

^Oh no you don't. Go play elsewhere. I want to hear this.^

A Hu gives me a shove to enforce it. I am about to bat her when Pu'thn tags me and takes off. I decide playing is more important and chase after her.

She leads me straight up to the podium, but I am too concentrated to notice her deception. We bound through the speakers waiting to speak and bump the podium itself.

~If you want attention Pu you must follow protocol and get placed on the agenda.~

Really? Pu'thn and I have just been somewhere outside the 'THN construct. But, if you think it is not important, we can play elsewhere.

With perfect timing a huge contingent of 'thn arrive overhead and descend on the gathering. Oh, there goes that itch again. On the inside this time. I raise my rear leg into the air and lick furiously.

“Pu, do you have to do that here?” I look up with my tongue sticking out. I keep forgetting and snap it back in.

~Your report please. The sooner we get this over with the sooner we can get back to our business.~ She is pissed. Bet she would have a good time in the Hell we came from.

Mandhi pops in, ~You were supposed to report to me first!~ Double pissed.

Oz is being held captive.

~Out with it now!~

I don't know if I should now. Not much respect shown here.

!Cats!! White walks away.

I turn to the others.

If a Ceph could growl. Quite pretty in my red vision.

~Please continue oh honored one.~

If you insist. It all started with I was a small kitten.

She flashes the most amazing patterns.

We took the crab like form and made the jump. Once there poor little Pu'thn suffered miserably. She was completely cut off from the 'THN matrix and was quickly fading.

More flashing. Testy isn't she?

We met with other creatures of the same form. Turns out there are hundreds if not thousands of TKs. There was a big war and they won with the help of some special ones prophesied.

The director asks, ~What do they want? Why can't Oz return?~

He can come home as soon as I return, alone. Pu'thn can't come back with me.

~So, he really is not being held captive.~

Well, they did say that if he left they would all come here and wage war on us. But, no, he can come back any time he wants. Stupid TKs.

That gets them talking. I lick my paw and wipe my ears. Can't look too good.

Oh, they said we were all welcome to come there. In fact they almost insisted on it.

“That's blackmail!”

~Which brings us nicely back to the discussion at hand. Thank you Pu. You have given us much to think about.~

Almost forgot. They have tech we don't have. Limiters that can't be seen or felt and special shields that TK can't see through. They are a warrior culture that finds killing to be a sport. Even their own. They just moved their entire world halfway across their solar system to adjust the rotation.

^Amazing, but, why would they do that?^

It seems the former days was about one of their years. They ran along paths to keep up with the sun.

#Harsh.# You think? I like a good run too but not that long.

So now it is a few days long. They are building infrastructure to make up what was destroyed in the war between their makers.

~Wait, you mean they were not part of this war?~

^Makers?^

They were genetically designed to be food for their makers, as well as

provide muscle for mundane tasks. Seems the crabs never thought to make them more stupid or maybe being more stupid would not have allowed to have survive the runs. They made ones that fought each other for limited resources and against creatures that tried to eat them on the outside as well. Too much talk. I wonder what they have here to eat. They never have enough food at these meetings. I snarl. Nothing worthy of a Cat at least. Bug stew has no honor in it.

~What of the Cat? Where will they live?~

I am shocked. What a silly question.

~We live where we please. We don't need a special place or permission.~

^Cats are being hunted on Ba Eden Pu.^

I smile in my best evil I am going to eat you grin. And how effective is that?

Jordon sighs, ^They got a few kits who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. But you are right. No adults have been hurt.^

Director, do not worry about the Cat. We take care of ourselves. If we are not allowed in the cities we will go to the forests and plains. If not allowed there we will go the deserts or the frozen poles. We adapt, but above all we will be free!

~One less problem. What of the Hu?~

“I am guessing that Pushy Paws still have not come out of slow time? Without her help we are stuck.”

!Meanwhile Hu are dying on most worlds not their own. Some, like the Cat are finding locations not of interest to the locals and are surviving. An adaptable species that would be hard to eradicate completely.!

#Cat have the TK advantage. Maybe if we gave the Hu the same?#

And the Hu have hands. What more do you need? They want everything!

!!The Ku have gone home, why not the Hu?!!

“It did not work well the last time when a tech culture as the current Hu are confronted a non tech culture that currently exists on Hu Eden.”

!!So, put them on the isolated continent as we did with the Ku.!!

^Ku will stay there until told otherwise, but Hu never follow rules unless it serves them. They share that with their cousins the Cat.^

One of our finer traits.

#!But unlike the Cat they will gather in large numbers to get what they want. Ever try to herd Cats?!# Ha-ha, ancient joke. We just value our independent nature.

~I am worried about Oz. I was the lead on this project. It is not right to abandon one of our own.~

Huh? *He has only been there four eight day. Hardly call that abandonment.*

^You came back fast enough.^

Only because of Pu'thn. Otherwise it is a very nice existence. Not quiet as good as being Cat, but a close second.

~I would like to make the trip myself.~

~Too dangerous. If they learn the dimensional math that you know, they would be unstoppable.~

~It would appear they already are. If they can move their own world, what would they do here? Better we understand their tech. Oz is good, but not at that level of understanding.~

!!No offense to Pu, but we need more information and Pu may not have been the best witness!!

I was distracted by my concern for Pu. Ah, Pu'thn.

Several show amusement at my slip.

^Where is Pu'thn oh great parent?^

I always know where Pu'thn is. She is in my keep sack. She likes to sleep there.

“'thn do not need to sleep Pu. How do you ever expect her to become sentient unless you let her out to experience life?”

~Will someone find out what all the 'thn overhead want please?~

Isn't that obvious? How can a space exist that the 'thn don't occupy? Even harmful to them.

~Of course it is harmful to them. Anyone who understands the thirteen dimensional dynamics could see that.~

“They are not leaving Mandhi.”

~I will attend to this.~ She pops out and a moment later the 'thn do as well.

So, what's to eat here? I am pelted with vegetables! Oh, the indignity!

#!There are plenty of green worlds. Select on, set the Hu up there and be done with this question. I need to get back to Dia Eden.#! That gets a growl from a Dio, then amusement. They still fight over the name of their world. I am not upset it is called Hu Eden. Besides, what would be the point of hunting stupid prey. The sentient worlds are much better. Never let them know we are the ones truly in control.

#There is a problem Honored Director.# Qes are such strange creatures. Always fussing over silly little things. I wonder what it is this time?

~Honored one, please give your report. How are the Ku doing in their new settlements?~

#They are gone.#

~You mean they will be gone. You have foreseen a disaster?~

#Unforeseen. They are gone.#

~They settled on the wrong continent? I thought we were very clear on what was allowed.~

#Ku Eden is gone.# Qes know dimensional travel nearly as well as the Ceph. I am surprised she made a mistake like this.

~So, it has begun as you foretold.~ She acknowledges.

What foretelling? No one told me about this foretelling? Garfield may like it here, but I grow tired of this world. Time to leave. I need to find help for Oz without endangering Pu'thn. Not going to happen here with all this indecision.

Mars

Mo is okay. Not like I have a choice. Still, seeing Mars through his eyes has been enlightening and not in a good way. Of course we all knew the consequences of screwing up too many times. I was a prospector because of it. I knew I was bad. I belonged there. I was not picked on, singled out, unlucky or any other excuse. I deserved it.

I am not even as freaked out as much as Mo over the Martian existence. We grew up knowing about them. Well, maybe not everything, but enough to know what awaited us. Hell, some people even volunteered to go green. If people were volunteering it could not be that bad. Could even be thought of as a self selection process. Those of us who did not fit into the over achieving hyperactive Mars society fit better into the meditative, think before acting, much slower culture of the Martians.

Now I don't know. Looking at the culture I grew up, it looks downright evil. At the assay office, there was no call for treating us that way. They did not know we were changed. Didn't they want the iridium? It could have saved hundreds of lives for generations. Is this how they treated the TKs? It was only a few years ago that they were asked to leave, but I never even saw them except at a distance. They were always respectful and kept to the shadows for the most part. Now our own politicians, they are a different story. All the yack about the good times that were coming. Total lies.

I can scan the settlements and we have visited many from a distance. They are all falling apart. The Martian was right. Soon they will all be Martians. Nothing we could do or say will change that, only the timing. We could perpetuate the status quot and keep this corrupt unfair mess going, we could let it fall on its own, or we can assist as many as possible before it gets ugly, well uglier than it is now.

We set up a dwelling just within scanning distance of a small settlement and just within scanning distance of a Martian enclave. More like a cocoon. We thought they had all died. Why would they do that? Then we decided to check it out and when we opened it up and examined the bodies closer we found out that they were in a deep sleep. A hibernation is what Mo called it. He had read about it on some lesson he took as a child about earth animals. But he was right. With our abilities we examined them and saw the chemical and temperature changes that had occurred.

We still don't know how they did it, but it worked for them. During

the time of the year when they could not grow crops, they hibernated and missed the bad times completely. We repaired the damage when we left and have not been back since. Mo saw the logic in their methods even if they still repulsed him.

I told him, "When this if over we can move to Luna or even Earth. We don't have to become Martians ourselves."

"Took me forever to adjust to twice the gravity. Not sure I want to try for three times that."

"You know the abilities will kick in and help with the transition. It won't be bad this time."

"Well are we going to do this or not?"

"What first? I say we make good filter masks for everyone. No one needs to suffer."

"I would like to see a few politicians suffer, but of course, they already have good masks. You are right, it is the abused who are lacking even what it takes to stay alive. We have to be sneaky about it. Hide them in places where they can find them, but are unlikely to be noticed by authorities."

"Put em in the cleaning closet or the recycle centers. Never find a lower level person there." He smiles. Only the poorer people have to live at the higher levels near the surface.

"We start small. Test and observe. We may need to mix it up some so the well off don't catch on."

"Put something smelly on them. Shit would work. A norm would just clean it off, but a lower level will run from it in fright." I smile.

"Start simple and work up. Don't forget that thought though. We may need to use it."

"And another thing that bothers me, we finally get the freedom to fly and we can't even build a tower to watch them with."

"As soon as you can out fly a missile we can." Our first and last tower was blown to bits while we were out of range. We watched it happen and could do nothing about it. Now everything is underground. It takes forever to dig tunnels underground even with our abilities.

At first we dissolved all of the rock and dirt and converted it to water or oxygen, then we found it was far easier to cut the rock into manageable portions and TK it to the underground dump site. Thank goodness there are underground caves around us. When we humans first arrived they were explored some, but finding nothing of interest inside, the waste of resources was stopped. No light, no power, no heat. If we had moved the rock to the surface they would have found us and tried to

stop us. A saving point is our method is silent. No hammers, explosives, etc. to give us away. Well, except for the occasional miscalculations and dropped rocks. But that has to happen naturally at times doesn't it?

Our main entrance is in a ravine hidden from view from either camp. It still takes a TK to move the entrance rocks, but not because of weight. We interlocked them in such a way that only a TK could scan and figure it out. Probably overkill. They blend so well with the surroundings the entrance is unlikely to be seen unless they happen to catch us in the act and scanning around us prevents that. Of course we have backup exits in multiple locations. Dissolve a few steel shafts holding them shut and push.

We also stocked all kinds of supplies inside, in case something happens to our abilities. We could live out a natural life quite easily down here. In a lot of ways it is much nicer than the settlements themselves. At least a lot more creative. Secret tunnels and chambers. Bridges over deep pits. Even a small water fall. We have room for hundreds at this location and intend to build more of them. They would work for either the Martians or the humans really. Maybe the Martians could over winter without having to hibernate.

I scan the surface.

“Lots of snow today.”

“A yep.” I roll my eyes.

“We have Chinese ancestors, not hillbillies.”

“A yep.” I send a pebble his way and he whacks it back at me. It goes back and forth a few times before I dissolve it and walk out.

He shouts after me.

“We have company.”

Huh?

I do a quick scan and find no one in our tunnel complex. He comes into the room, sees me concentrating and points up. I am surprised. I scan up and find an old Martian waiting at our main entrance. I mean right in front of it, like he knows where it is and how it will swing out. He must be freezing.

“Whoa. Wonder what he wants?”

“That should kill a few days or weeks.” Yeah, they are slow.

“What is he doing out of hibernation knee deep in snow. He will freeze to death if we don't hurry.”

“I'll melt the snow around him.” Changing the temperature of objects is still a challenge and Mo looks like his is pushing a big one. I make my way to the surface chamber and begin the process of opening up. By the

time I do, I see the old Martian, wearing the ubiquitous white robe, he is standing in a puddle. A steaming puddle.

Noticing me he comments, "Neat trick." At normal speed.

I close my mouth.

"What, you thought we had to go slow? Stops the norms from bothering us. We appear less of a threat that way. Some of us can switch back and forth as needed."

"Ah, come in. Can I get you something to eat? Tea perhaps?"

Mo meets us inside and bows properly.

Mo asks, "To what do we owe the honor of this visit?"

I shake my head and whisper, "Food first, don't be so rude."

"Right" I look to the elder and notice he seems to be amused by all of this.

"You two have lived alone too long. Need more people around." He starts wondering off. We shrug at each other and follow.

I suddenly remember the tea and make a tea cup, add water, boil it and add a tea bag I create on the spot.

"Tea treats would be nice." Mo makes some flat cookies with almond spice aroma. Nice touch. The cookies are added to the saucer which I then grab with my hand and offer to the elder.

"Oh nice. Jasmine. My favorite." We are both shocked.

"What? You thought I was always like this? I was a cook before I sought the truth."

"Always the little things that you miss huh?" Mo says. The elder nods.

We let him finish. I think he has only just learned to speak fast when needed. Seems slow enough right now.

"You have done so well on the tea I am tempted to stay for dinner."

Shit. What do we do for dinner? Usually we just make TK chow whenever we are hungry and work through it. No sleep and being underground without light normally, no reason to hold to any particular schedule.

What the hey. I make a biscuit and hand it to him.

"This is what we normally eat."

He takes a bite.

"About the same as ours. Supposed to help lessen the attachment to material things."

"I am sure we can come up with something more interesting if needed later." Mo looks at me like I tried to poison him. I wasn't trying to.

"Not important. The reason I came was to ask your intentions. Spring

will be soon and we suspect that is when it will happen.”

“I have a question. How did you know where our entrance was?”

He shrugs, “Where else would it be?”

“Are you some kind of Zen master?”

He laughs, “Hell no. I am one of hundreds who are out looking for you. I just got lucky.”

“Hundreds? How many are you? How came we did not notice you?”

“You did not notice because we move too slow. Movement tends to be noticed. How many? It is a secret, but you two are safe to tell. We are up to over a hundred thousand.”

“Holy Free Air.”

“What? How?”

“Most are converts like I am of course, but we have been breeding too.”

“Without the limits of the settlements.”

“Why limit ourselves? Lots of air and space, and food production is up every year.”

“I do not scan anywhere near that number. Where?”

“Oh, some ways from here. We stay well away from the settlements. Mostly the lost hills and such. Too dry for the settlements and now that resources are slim for them, they can't afford the flights to find us. All the farms near the settlements are just for processing new converts. Once transformed and trained, we send them on to a proper farm community.”

“We are not real TKs.”

“We know that or you would have known about us.”

Mo says, “We were made by two who were here before us. The settlements made them leave. I think they made us to annoy the settlements.”

I nod and add, “We thought about doing just that. It would be so easy to force everyone out into the open. But many would suffer who did no harm other than try and survive under increasingly horrible conditions.”

“Right. The real TKs said that soon everyone would be like you.”

“They are right. Once they made the decision to keep the TKs out, nothing can be maintained properly. Eventually all all tech fails. No backup and what happens happens. If it happens slowly enough we can process the ones coming to us without difficulty. But, if you cause an entire settlement to fail at once, many will die.”

“I thought all you had to do was inject them and soon they are transformed.”

“Takes about a month. In the mean time, they need a lot of attention

and care. It takes three people per person transformed. Partly because we are slow and partly because of all the care needed. Temperature changes, breathing changes. All of this has to be monitored and gradually changed as they change.”

“Could be handled in an environmental chamber easy enough.”

He smiles, “We have no tech to speak of. We depend on simple mech anyone can make themselves. One of our few laws. No mech that can't be made by one person in less than a weeks time. There is too much work to do to let people waste more than that. Lots of babies to take care of, and of course the crops.”

“The edible lichens? How can they grow fast enough?”

“We set spores for what will be fifty years from now. What we harvest today was set fifty years ago. Soon even that will not be necessary. Look around you. Any exposed surface, not covered in sand, has lichens growing on it. Only the sand dunes do not support life. But that is changing too. Soon even those will be held down. Then we can begin the second stage.”

“Second stage?”

“Higher plants and animals. Even if the settlements fail, we need to be sure that the seed banks are maintained. Otherwise all is lost.”

“I have never seen one. I don't even know where they are.”

“We do, we will help.”

“You want us to work with you.” He nods.

“How long do we have to maintain these seed banks?”

“There are some areas that could possibly use a few new species now. But it could be a thousand years before larger animals could survive.”

“Because the air is still not warm enough and high enough in oxygen yet.” He nods.

“Most are not used to the higher concentrations of carbon dioxide necessary to maintain the heat either. The plants will love it though. Especially conifers and firs and they don't mind the cold as much.”

He sits, “Takes a lot of energy to converse this fast.”

“You need more to eat?” I make a new plate of TK chow. He slowly reaches for them and nearly stops.

“I think his batteries just ran out. What do you want to do now?” I make some hot tea and set it close to his hand.

“It would appear that our mission has changed slightly. We need the location of the seed banks before we can progress. I would also like to confirm his statement about their numbers.”

“Want to make sure we are on the winning side?”

“There is no doubt on my side that long term survival means embracing their life form. The only question is how fast it should happen.”

“Seed banks mean very cold temperatures. Wouldn't it be easier to move everything to the poles and let the natural Martian cooling system handle it?”

“How much material is there and can we keep it cold getting it there?”

“We are not that fast are we? Especially when carrying a load. I thought a TK4 was a big deal until I realized how limiting it really is.”

“We are not gods if that is what you mean. A long way from it.” I nod.

Bored I make a shape out of gold and then fractal it with diamond as counter point. I go deeper and deeper into detail. We copied a terminal a while back and Mo hacked us into the settlement network. They still haven't noticed. They have lost a lot of talent. Nerds are not socially acceptable and were likely on a short list to becoming Martians. I smile. Now the Martians have the talent that would have saved the settlements.

“What the?” The shape I am playing with suddenly glows brilliant white.

Mo shakes his head, “Good glow ball sport. Smaller would be nice unless you want to get sunburned.”

Our elder wakes up and notices.

“Unstable. Suggest dissolving before it goes critical and makes a crater where you once were.”

“How do you know that?” It sputters once and I freak and kill it. Smoke comes out of the air where it was.

“That was close.” Mo comments.

“Unlike the settlements we are not as opposed to TK help. Some of us know a little of the abilities.”

Mo gets suspicious, “What level?”

I admit I am curious too.

“Twos so far. We hope to have three in the near future, but theoretically we could go all the way to eight.”

“How are you doing this?”

“Understanding. A lot of people meditating and thinking on precisely this topic. Mars is not earth. We don't want to make the same mistakes. By using the abilities we can make what we need without digging up the landscape too much.”

“Still need mass to convert.” He nods. He is clearly still tired and is falling asleep again.

“You are apparently not one of the TKs.” He is already out.

“As twos we stopped sleeping. Maybe it is just different with them.”

“Or they don't have hundreds of TKs to have searched for us. Could be needed elsewhere.”

“Like protecting the colony from the settlement people.”

I make our elder a cot and slowly lower him to it. Mo makes a heating element to keep this space comfortable. What's comfortable for someone with a body temperature of twenty five though? We levitate out of the space to give him quiet.

“I want to check out his story. Seems hard to believe that we never noticed that many Martians before.”

“We have stayed too close to the settlements. Norms really bunched together. Probably only aware of a small fraction of a percent of the surface.”

“What about the sats and overflights?”

“Resources are scarce. Might have been true at one time, but now, for some time in fact, flights are rare. Otherwise don't you think they would have come after us? They know we are about. Less than a click away and nothing for months.” Not since they took our tower anyway. That scared them for some reason. TK stuff should scare them, not norm stuff.

“We got there very fast on Luna. Surprised it happened here even earlier.”

“We have always been a bit more independent. We have some air. Not like you Loonies. Things have been band-aided for years. It did not take a Spider and Ravi to convince us we needed to be able to survive on our own.” I smile at him and he gives me a dirty look. We tease each other back and forth all the time.

“No, but we have lots of green cheese to feed on. Let's ride.” Wish we were sevens and could com without being overheard. We stay within bubble contact.

“Scan down. They are certainly not above us and norms aren't very good looking below the surface without using a thumper.”

“There is a huge complex of caves under us. Much more extensive than the ones near the settlements and I thought they were big.”

“You Mars norms never thought there were actual Martians before we came here did you?”

“We teased each other about it. Like the First Martians will get you if you misbehave, but, no, no one actually believed in them. The most we ever found were some promising bacteria fossils. The caves are extensive, but nothing that looks structured. Not a city certainly.”

“Think billions of years. A lot can disappear in millions, so what

happens after two billion? Nothing is forever. Probably went underground as their world died. Now the process is being reversed.”

“It is clear they have plenty of space to use. Winter is nearly over, will they come to the surface and start planting again soon?”

“Planting? No. They harvest what spreads naturally. Look, the lichens are already turning green and red. The air smells cleaner even for us. Ah, there they are. Deep. Real deep. They did not want to be found. Soon they will rise. We need to be sure they are not harmed.”

“We are decided? We are the Martian protectors then?”

“They are the future. The settlements merely the seed. No one mourns the loss of the seed once the seedling sprouts. Besides, they want our help, not our deaths.” Finally he comes to the correct conclusion. Took long enough. I think it was because he did not grow up with the Martians around him. Prejudice is hard to overcome. We always knew that sooner or later it had to go this way. That was why we came up with the genetic adaptations to begin with. Then we chickened out. Fear of change. Still, when your number was called, you went without a struggle.

“There is much we can do.” First we need to become like them. Maybe not first. First we need to be sure the settlements can never hurt us and the true Martians. Then we become like them. I do not want to be separate any longer. It looked real good to me in the Martian enclave. I like the idea of everyone working towards a common good. I like it a lot.

Land of Oz

It seems like forever since Pu left. There is so much I am showing them. I never even realized how much I knew. I have not done farming and construction myself, but I guess I watched it happen enough times. They are quick to figure things out on their own though. Once you know something can happen it is easier than coming up with the initial idea yourself.

And all that we did to set up communities on each of our worlds works here as well. They are used to running, so transportation between settlements is an individual affair. They insisted on this to help maintain some connection to their past. They will change when they decide to.

Hunting is not so necessary. Farms and herds of creatures exist now, but their numbers are small enough that large areas are left undeveloped where the wild ones are. They even insisted on keeping the dangerous ones. A right of passage is to go to the northern sea and tussle with a big people eating fish. They are not allowed to kill them thank goodness. If every young one decided they needed to kill one they would be extinct within one year for sure. Touching one is proof enough. Of course some do not survive. This is accepted by everyone without descent. A harsh world. We will see if the next generation is so adamant.

Surprisingly only minimal genetic manipulation was necessary. Mostly to boost performance, but not initiate it. The species already maintained most of their past abilities. The crabs must have added to existing genes, not replaced them. Of course they were hoping to get to this place eventually, so this must have been part of that preparation.

Too bad they are not around to see it. We checked all over the planet and though we did find incubators for their young, all of the frozen or otherwise stored materials was dead. War is hell.

Did Pu and Pu'thn make it back? Is Pu'thn okay? Are the others coming to get me? The longer I am here the more I want to stay. I have even found myself wishing they would not come. Dreading they might. On the 'earths' I was one of many and of no particular importance. Of course I missed three hundred years of setup as a nearly non sentient Cat. Here I am the expert. For the moment. They are a smart species and catch on quickly.

Oofik has been my leader. She is a good leader. Raised from a low male to eventually take the place of High Fem. A remarkable story. I would like to meet the ones part of this story. The three most important

members of the clan have left on some mission. They must be high level TKs, yet I do not sense them. Metallic hydrogen? We don't run the entire line any more, so they could be close by, but hidden by it? I have thought of popping to the other side so I can see underneath, but they watch me carefully and there is so much to do. Does it really matter? Probably not.

Oofik comes up to me, "Oz, are you happy here? Do you long to return to your own kind?"

"Of course I have friends and I worry about Pu."

She nods, "I would worry about Pu as well. He is trouble."

I show amusement, "Most of the time, but we grew up together and have saved each other many times."

"We have lost many friends as well, but count ourselves fortunate that you have arrived. So much knowledge has been lost. You are saving us hundreds of turns and many lives." I acknowledge the complement.

"I would like to meet the three."

She pauses, "You will when they return."

"Do you know where they are?"

"Not here. Not on our world. That is why we work so hard to make things ready for their return."

"Everyone is accountable to them?"

"To the One."

"The Sali?" She affirms.

I continue, "We never had such as Her where I came from. It would have helped a lot. Too many meetings with nothing decided and nothing done."

"Too many species. Here we have one. Much easier."

"What about the Streakers?" She shows amusement. Yeah, they are not ready to rule. They make good helpers, most of the time, but cannot always be counted on. Even Roger.

"What you learned about keeping communities small is important. We can use that here. We do not want to end up with large monster cities that try to rule each other and end up destroying the world."

"We learned the hard way too. Guess you have to have gone through it to appreciate the difference." She affirms.

"Tell me more about ships and trading."

"Having the Northern Sea is a real plus for world trade, but it is still hard to move things north and south from there. The south has less mountains and great agricultural areas, but it will be some time before tech will allow transporting more than grain north."

"Local crops only. I want to see ninety percent of all food grown

locally.”

“Then spices and smaller trade items will do.” She affirms.

“The winds are steady.” I look out over the sea. We are on the southern shore. “The narrows will prevent trade except for west to east.”

“Except over land. Always have that available. The lines are still there. Again, if only small items move it will not be a problem.” I affirm. Could we run around our entire world in one years time? I doubt it.

“Ideas are more important than items anyway. How soon do you want a communications network?”

“Let's leave it with us for the moment. Bad ideas can move as fast as good. Right now we need to watch carefully. Most communities are just started and far from steady. It will take some experimenting to find the right balance and methods for each region.”

“A lot of work to do.” She affirms.

I start to show her how a small trade ship, based on two masts and square rigging, goes together and works.

“It will need to be adapted to our form. We would not be good at climbing rigging.”

“Streakers may be able to help there?”

“Not strong enough. They are great for lookouts and vermin control.” And not much else. I show amusement.

“That means pulleys and that means metal if you want it to work more than a few times. Wood is still fairly scarce and rots easily. We have rain nearly every day. Nothing stays dry for long.” Forests were not part of my childhood, but I know they are important. But, trees of any worthwhile size, take time to grow. It will be hundreds of years before any kind of forest industry will be sustainable.

“And pottery is heavy. We are using too much burning stone as it is. It will pollute our world.” I affirm.

“You want ships, but wood is scarce. What do you intend to build them out of?”

She shows amusement, “Lots of building materials inside what is left of the cities. Not going to do anything there but rot. People are afraid of living there after all that has happened.”

“Most are afraid of even going inside one. Danger of cave ins.” They really blasted the hell out of their world.

“Once they see the first ship they will be eager to get the materials. Just need to train a few on how to avoid the hazards. There is a city entrance every days run in the north. Besides, we are used to danger. Would not seem the same without it.”

“What about that big fish?”

“The grumpf?” I affirm.

“Were there not something called, ah, . . .”

“Sea monsters.”

“Sea monsters. We need them to provide dignity to the ones running the ships as well as test the young ones.”

“Sailors. The ones sailing the ships are called sailors.”

“We may need different names for this world.” I shrug. We need teachers for all the young ones who are hatching. Going to be a population explosion soon. There are still a lot of hold outs to the old way of doing things. But, without the line runs, what is there to hold on to?

“Let's see what we can find in the Cities that we can build a fleet of ships out of.” I build a ship from the water and wind in front of us. Sort of a small scale version of what I want to see here soon. It can act as a teaching opportunity to show Offik at the same time.

“This is a two thirds scale model. It will only take the two of us to operate.”

“Excellent. Show me.”

I pop both of us onto the main deck and start to point out and demonstrate what everything does. Of course, we will be using TK, not hands. Every time I show Offik a device she messes with it until it can be operated by one of the people. We are alone for now, but by the time we return we will be ready to train the first generation of 'water runners'. Yeah, that name might work.

Ku Eden

I hear someone calling, but I can't quite make out what they are saying. I am in a cool pool floating alone, very much at peace. I want to stay here, but the voice is becoming more insistent. It becomes irritating. I turn quickly to face it and tell it to leave me alone. That's when I wake up.

+Fa'lan! Wake up!+

+What?+ I shake myself again. It is dark. I am outside. Daniel is above me.

+What is it Daniel? I must have fallen asleep. How could that have happened?+

+We all did. Try to scan around you.+

+Huh?+ I stand and look around. The hall is nearby. I scan to see who is still inside. I feel the necessary mental switch happen, but no information comes back to me.

+Nothing huh?+ I nod. +None of us can at the moment. Barb is working on it. She was closest to Silver and we are hoping she can break through.+

+Is everyone asleep?+

+TKs have woken up first. You are the last of us, oh except Zigm. Seems to be related to how long you have been TK. Barb woke first.+

+WHAT ABOUT QU'THN?!+

+We don't know where she is Fa. No one has seen her.+

+It must be a limiter of some kind.+ Hei Long comes in with Rachael next to him.

Daniel nods to him, +Yeah, but we can defeat most of those. This is something new though. Nothing I have seen before.+

+Where is Barb?+ I ask.

They point to the small clearing, really an intersection of two roads. I walk over carefully. I am not used to being totally dependent on normal senses. Disturbing. I need to practice more with a dampened TK field. I don't like being dependent, especially since I was once so good without it, even in the dark.

I nearly run into Barb and squat down next to her to wait. Her eyes are closed and she is breathing very slowly. I wish I had that concentration.

It is nearly dawn and I have almost fallen asleep again when I hear her stir. I feel a strange sensation wash over me. I come alive again. All the tiredness is gone. I scan and can 'see' again. It feels wonderful.

She holds up her hand and opens it. In it is some gray dusty material. Daniel, Rachael and Hei Long pop over. She must have done them as well.

+This is all the dust limiters I removed from the five of us. Study it so you can recognize them. Then go out and remove it from the rest.+

Daniel again comments, +I have certainly never seen these before. Who did it?+

+That is the question isn't it. Twenty five million years of experience across several galaxies and froths and none of us have.+

Hei Long asks, +How did you defeat them?+

+I didn't. They self destructed to a level I could then sense and remove. I think eventually even Zigm will be able to defeat his.+

Rachael says, +We need to tell the others. I volunteer to go to Brown to spread the word that the Pink and the tattletales are not our only worries.+ Barb nods and she disappears.

+What next?+ Hei Long asks. I wonder too.

I ask, +Why? What is the point of taking us out for a few hours. We need to scan our surroundings down to this level to see what they did.+ I indicate the nano limiters.

Barb orders us, +Daniel and Hei Long, go to the other side of the world and scan back this way. Take your time. No one is going anywhere soon.+ They nod and pop out.

She turns to me, +We scan from this side. By comparing our findings we will overlap, but from different perspectives.+

+This might not be the best location to do the scan. Might I suggest the hills nearby?+ She smiles and nods. We pop over to the hills. An unused area that won't draw attention. We begin our scans. We each go over the same area and each others area three times. It takes us nearly the entire daytime.

+Nothing again.+ I announce.

+Me neither. I am calling the boys back.+ They appear a moment later.

+Nada.+

+Then what did they do and why? You don't put ten TKs asleep for nearly an entire night for no reason.+

+Using novel tech at that. They wanted to be sure we would not defeat it before they were done. Where's Rachael? She should have been back by now.+

Barb says, +She may have encountered problems at the other end. I doubt we were the only target. We are nothing here and threaten no one.+

+I took this assignment because I wanted to settle down for a bit. Learn a culture and people well for a change. I have had ten assignments in a thousand years. That is nuts.+ Twenty lifetimes, two at each location. We are spoiled. Of course being 'lan means my only assignment is the Ku.

+Any sign of Qu'thn?+

+We can be pretty sure she is not on Ku. But why would she leave you? She is still a new born.+

Something crashes into the ground a couple of kilometers away.

Whoops. Sorry about that folks.

Rachael pops in looking like hell. Feathers singed and messed up. A bit wobbly too.

+What happened to you?+

+First, did you find anything?+ We all indicate no.

+Well I did. I have no idea where we are.+ She pauses to let that sink in.

Hei Long finally asks what we are all thinking, +We are on Ku Eden Rachael. What do you mean?+

+Where is Ku Eden?+ Huh?

She continues, +I looked everywhere. There is not a single world in line with us on thousands of froth coordinates. I can't even match with Paradise and I tried Hu first. Nothing. Nothing but space. I almost got lost coming back and miscalculated a bit. I made a bubble right off and was flying in high orbit in case I popped into the middle of a world. I was closer than I thought when I can in, still moving. Nearly lost it.+

Barb orders, +Hei and Dan, check it out. Be careful and nothing heroic. Make it quick. Just a few froths that you remember well.+ They pop out.

Zigm comes up to us, +There you are. What's going on? I thought I was done sleeping. I am so behind in my chores. Lost eight hours at least. + He wipes his hands on an apron. Must have been in the kitchen again.

I tell him, +We did not do it. Someone put us all to sleep. It looks like they moved Ku Eden during that time. We don't know where we are.+

He shrugs, +Makes no difference to me. Here is where I serve. Never expected to leave.+ He goes back to work.

+He's right. We have time. Let's get back to work. Even if it takes years, we have plenty to do. They will come looking for us as well.+

+But where is Qu'thn? I am responsible for her.+

+The 'thn take care of their own. Whatever they did, at least they did not harm her I am sure. No one would risk the wrath of the 'THN. Just be

patient Fa.+

Hu Eden

Finally we are alone. No other TKs. All they want to do is talk.

Pushy Paws is present.

Where? I don't find her Pu'thn. Where is she?

At the Galactic launch point. She is in slow time.

Still? She has been there for years and years.

I pop us there.

She is here all right. Absolutely still. Does not even appear to be breathing. I remember the stories about the battles between Owa and the Hu. What was his name? Metal or something like stupid like that. Been too long since I attended those boring classes.

I sniff her. Not rotting yet anyway.

I don't want to go back to Brown.

Where should we go Pu'thn?

She just sits there in front of me. Nice and quiet. TKs have been banned from most sentient worlds, but of course that is for the others. Cats are not part of the ban of course. We go where we want. Would not do any good to try and ban us.

Well, nothing exciting is happening here.

We pop.

Brown

~Order, order!~

Never should have allowed a male Ceph to be leader. I know it needs to be rotated, but they could have chosen a fem Ceph at least.

~We will have the report now.~

Oh good, Mandhi. She will know what's going on. First we get a report that Ku Eden has disappeared, then we all fall asleep. Imagine that? We fell asleep. Then everyone who tried to leave came back immediately saying that the other worlds are all gone, not just Ku.

~Attention to Ceph Mandhi please.~ Oh, back off Tissal.

~It has been determined that this world has been taken out of the froth matrix we were in. We are no longer orbiting what we knew of as the sun. It is of similar size and color. More analysis is coming. It should support life on this world at least at the level it was before.

However, it is not the other worlds that have disappeared, it is we who have disappeared. There are no references known that tell us where we are in relation to the rest of the universe. We appear to be several thousand light years away from the nearest galaxy. How this star came to be here is unknown. It should not have been possible.

Long distance probes are being prepared. They will use the latest thirteen dimensional drives to reach the nearest clusters and beyond. It is hoped we will eventually find familiar territory.~

“Any idea how we got here? I certainly know of no tech that could have done this so quickly.”

!You know of a tech that could have done it at all? Move entire worlds?! Amusement is shown by many. Not in any records that I have seen.

Bernice comes up to me, #!Jordan, what do you think about all this? Who could have done this?!#

^Not even the two could have done this and they are the most powerful I have ever seen. Of course the Bugs were able to start the froth. So maybe they did this? To get even for what we did, or more likely, to prevent us from causing any more trouble.^

#!We have gone out of our way to try and be good. To make up for our mistakes. And without the two how much trouble could we cause?!#

^Mandhi up there knows almost as much. Sometimes the fear is not what we are likely to go, but what we could do. That danger is enough, especially when you are talking about the entire froth universe, to be

cautious. Does it really mean anything that we have been taken out of action for the time being? Most will give a sigh of relief and go back to caring for their own worlds rather than worrying about what we are up to.^

#!You are cynical.!#

^Seen too much I guess. Have you noticed through all this that you are no longer so proud of your own species? I used to think the Ba we so much more noble than the Hu. I mean look at them, they destroyed their world through over population, pollution, greed and fear. Then I watched the Ba destroy every other species on home world. How could they? Each species added so much to our diversity, to our knowledge, to our future. They threw it all away.^

#!The rest of them did it too. It is amazing to me that we still have the three sen species on my home world. They got rid of the other sentients, why stop there? Why not decide that the world was only big enough for one sentient and force the other two to some unclaimed world. We certainly found enough for it to have been done.!#

^Probably because they had already kicked all of us out, so no one could have helped them remove the offending species.^ Benice shows amusement.

~We are going to have to make do here for the time being. Join a group and set up shop. We need food prep, tech services, astro of course, etc. We have done it all before for others, this time it is for us. Record time folks. I want to see the best we can do.~

!!You want orbitals?!!

~Yes, definitely. Start with a kilometer array and we will work up from there.~

^We are going to need one a thousand times that is my guess.^

#!Well it looks like we will be here awhile. Best to get to work. At least I will feel like we are doing something constructive, no pun intended. Too much time trying to help the ungrateful. Do you think they will learn?!#

^I suspect many have already figured it out. Did you hear what Mei and Simone did?^

#!No, what did they do?!#

!Come on you two. No slackers.!

^Tell you later. Find me at the next meal.^ She affirms.

Hu Eden

We come back to the beginning. What is it exactly that you want dear? It has taken me most of my life to figure that out. This time with you has been most helpful. Thank you. I will ask the easiest first.

Who is Silver?

And I have to answer, who do you mean?

Silver, you know. You met him. He spent millions of years with your froth sister.

You mean the Hu Silver then.

Wait, what do you mean the Hu Silver? There are more of them?

Oh yes dear. Hu Silver is but one face seen.

How many others are there?

Countless.

Gee, and I thought that was the easy question. I will think on this and ask my second question in the mean time. I have experienced the clash of a tech culture with a spirit culture in my own life. My people where butchered by the tech culture. I don't understand why this is. I believe in the totality of my being that the spirit culture is the better path. Why then did they fail? That is not my question though.

With permission, this world is now set up such that the tech culture present, the Ceph, are not a threat to the seed spirit culture that has been brought back to the interior of this continent. They will not give tech to any of my people who ask. Nor will they venture into the interior for any reason. They are a very careful, very slow to change culture. Fine.

In the interior the people have returned to their roots and have become the spirit culture they had reached several thousand years ago. We can thus begin again.

What I need to know is two things. You will desire to reproduce. Will you thwart my efforts and force tech on the people so they reach the spore stage? And related to this, is it possible for a spirit culture to reach the necessary end state that you desire?

Since it is possible for a spirit culture to reach the necessary understandings I will not interfere.

Then why did we have to go through this mess of the tech culture in the first place?

Sauron of course. This was not my decision. On the contrary, a spirit produced sporulation is far superior and much sought by my kind. From what the future TKs have told us, they only had a few people even reach

the spore stage. Satisfies the requirement, but not a great result after billions of years of effort. I hope to achieve a much better result.

Sauron. He wanted a tech culture so he could attack the 'thn. What a foolish quest. What a waste of life.

True.

So we are agreed that I can try and guide the people in a spirit culture means.

You understand that you, yourself, are tainted. You have never experienced this culture yourself. You still carry much pain.

Can you help me?

I would be delighted to assist.

How often should I come back to you?

Oh, every thousand years or so should do for now. We can adjust as we see the results.

Then I should get back to work. Thank you!

You are welcome. Go in peace dear.

It is sunrise when I come back to normal time. Normal time. What a concept. Maybe it would be better to call it Hu time. No such thing as normal time.

Finally! I have been here for ages and ages.

There is a large Cat and a baby 'thn staring at me when I open my eyes.

"Hello Pu and Pu'thn. To what honor am I being visited?"

They are all gone. We can't find them.

"Who can't you find Pu?"

All of them. I can't find a single one. I came back here from the Brown meeting. Those things are so boring. I had given my report of the new species world that Oz is still on and then I left. Clearly they did not see the importance of what I was saying. Anyway, I decided I had better make myself more clear. The other TKs can be so dense at times. So, when I went back to Brown, it was not there! The entire world is missing.

"You did not make a mistake somehow in your jump?" Pu gives me a dirty look.

"You said all of them."

While you were vacationing with OM, the other TKs were asked to leave all of the sentient worlds. There were wars on some of them. Ethnic cleansing of all non native sentients. This was started because the Pink went crazy and started impersonating TKs and causing much mischief. It was actually quite amusing to watch.

I am not amused by the Cat ego centric way of thinking. I sigh.
They were even kicked off of the Moon and Mars. Not that I ever wanted to go there.

That could be dangerous. The colonies were almost completely dependent of TKs filling in the gaps. And we on asteroid protection from them. The failure of tech is inevitable for them. They don't have the necessary infrastructure to maintain everything without TK help.

Most of the TKs were on Brown for the meeting. Now they are gone. I can't find any on dozens of worlds I have been to. Probably one or two other worlds you mean.

"I am sorry for your loss Pu, but this really does not mean anything for me. I have my work here and here is where I intend to stay and work."

He gives me the most forlorn look I have ever seen. Must have been practicing.

"I have been around Cats most of my life. That won't work with me."

Fine. I will have to find them all by myself. He turns, sticking his tail and his nose up in the air. A moment later he and Pu'thn pop out. I suspect that I have not seen the last of them. Better for my own sanity if I think of them as comic relief.

I still want or need to know what OM meant by the many Silvers. I thought the second froth Silver had died. Was that a lie or did she mean something else?

I have neglected my people long enough. Time to get to work. Spider Woman is back!

"Shit. Who's that?" A Di pops in and turns to face me.

!Sorry. I always seem to be disoriented when doing cross world hops. Ah, Pushy, glad to see you awake.!

I sigh, "What's up White?" I was not asleep.

!You remember, I was keeping a claw on things while you are under. Does this mean I can leave now?!

They are all gone! Pu comes back. Pu'thn pops in a moment later.

"I heard that Pu. Now go."

I turn to White, "You had better go too. It is likely Di Eden is understaffed and will need your help. Pu, Pu'thn and I will take care of Hu Eden now. We thank you for your service." He nods and pops out looking concerned.

I look at Pu and give him a dirty look, "Stay out of the way. Got it?" He slowly nods. I don't believe him for a moment, "Better yet. Go play with the Ceph. You still have friends there don't you?"

He looks up excited and pops out. It won't last, Cats get bored easily. I

scan the coast to be sure and find them near where Silver and company started on their Hu Eden. Far prefer the desert myself. Too cold and humid on the coast. I do admire the Ceph for their slow and careful changes to their culture. They are a good example for me to follow.

Now I had better make an assessment of what has happened while I was gone and plan corrections and the new path I have in mind. No more making TKs. I intend to raise them so it happens naturally. I am in it for the long haul.

Honorable one, this unit requests your assistance.

Oh shit, what does Pu'thn want now?

“How may I help you Pu'thn?”

Mother has gone to rescue Guardian Oz. This unit needs supervision until his return. This calling males mother still bothers me.

I sigh, “Fine. Just ask before doing anything other than be near me.” This is going to make it harder to visit people. 'thn are not exactly part of the mythology.

Pu'thn will hide.

I feel her snuggle into one of my carry pouches. That should work for the moment.

Okay, who first? I suppose I should start with the local cliff dwellers.

Ku Eden

Fa is very depressed at Qu'thn being gone. We have all searched and found no trace of her, so I am sure she got away or was taken to a safer place. Yes, we did look for corpses, though we did not tell Fa that.

All of us have tried to find out where we are, in dimensional space that is. The nearest I can determine is we are outside 'THN space entirely. Even at the highest dimensions we can find no trace of them. I suspect that alone would have killed Qu'thn had she remained. She has not reached sentience. I hope she has a new teacher worthy of her.

So, here we are. Six nines and Zigm. He seems to be comfortable at level four and we are fine with that for the time being as well. It is enough to work with the Ku and keep a watch on the two promising species on the main continents without worrying about him going rogue.

I miss the stars. A night there is only darkness. Even the moon is missing. Some species will be negatively affected. We will adapt. Maybe that is why Fa is so depressed. Next to Qu'thn, astronomy was her love. There are two gas giants further out. They each have a few moons. We have not had time to investigate them for life forms yet. No doubt they are there, but it is unlikely they are at a high tech level. Likely not even sentient, but that is trickier. Not wise to underestimate a life form likely in a different time reference. Better not to disturb them anyway.

Are we in green space? Are we even in froth space? Being outside the 'THN would suggest we are, outside at least. What does that mean? My abilities seem to be intact. I am guessing the only reason the 'thn don't like this space is because they are cut off from the collective. It can't be because of the lack of psiotics.

+Barbara, they are waiting.+ I am taking Fa'lan's place tonight. This is happening far too often. She needs to come out of this. Of course she does not have twenty five mill of experience to fall back on. I can remember many times I was at least this bad. Still, it is dangerous. I would hate to lose her to the sun, lonely as it must be. OM still seems to be fine here. The asteroid did a lot of damage of course. It will be millennia still before she is whole again.

I go inside. The council is waiting. I assume my spot on the end. They would prefer I sat in the middle, but I will not do that. I will advise, but I will not rule. I grin, I even try to give advice that does not give an easy answer. I am sure they miss Fa. They need to be weaned of our direct influence. We need to get back to serving in the background, back to the

myth level. More than anything a Guardian needs to be patient. There will be a lot of wrong turns. Time will eventually get them out and back on the path. Patience.

+First on the agenda. We need to find a new source of copper. We have the water available for hydroelectric, but lack enough copper for the generator windings. All we can make is small ones good for special purposes. It would be better if all of us could benefit.+

They look to me. I show amusement, but say nothing. They do not know what to think of my expression. They are trying to get back to the tech level they were at with the Ba. They have the knowledge for the moment. One or two generations from now and it will be lost. If I was them I would be worrying more about long term knowledge. Writing things on stone or something. Not perfect, but their numbers are too small in each location to put back the infrastructure needed to maintain the old knowledge.

Teachers are what they think will do the task, but without actual tech to show students, they can only learn by rote. A generation from now and they will have no idea what they are talking about. It will become a religion set in stone with no spirit. Writing things in actual stone can have the same side effect though, so I do not complain.

What they really want of course is for me or another Guardian to make them spools of copper wire ready to go. That would only postpone the fall, not prevent it. You can only recycle old generators for so long before nothing works.

+Look for green rock.+ I say. Let them mine their own.

+There is green rock up near salt pine ridge.+

They look at me again. I pretend to not know anything more. They let it go for the moment. They will try and get more information out of us when we are alone. I go for long walks in different directions each day for that reason.

Talk about construction techniques and what held up best to recent storms ensues. They don't need my help there. Eventually the discussion turns to food and talk about who will be bringing what to the next feast day. So many were fooders that it is not surprising that they still retain more expertise here than anywhere else. Heart disease would be a concern if they were not so physically active. That would change if they succeed with the hydro power. Well, they can be slowed down easy enough. I show amusement to myself. The hall turns quiet to look at me. I shake my head. They slowly continue.

After wards I go outside. I scan for Fa. She is not in her hutch. That is

an improvement at least. I scan further out and finally find her on top of a nearby hill. After looking to be sure no one is watching me, I pop closer to her and walk in making enough noise so she knows I am coming.

I should have known. She has made a meter sized reflector farseer. I look up. She is looking at the only thing in the sky at the moment. They have called the largest gas giant from our perspective Sabow after the bow plant that causes one to emit large quantities of gas naturally. I wonder how many generations before they forget that Sabow is a gas giant?

+The third moon may contain life. I think I should visit.+

+Could be interesting. It will still be here a hundred years from now too.+

She looks at me, +Everyone one needs a break. We have been working non stop for fifteen years now. I need a rest, even if you don't.+

+It gets easier the longer you live. Eventually everything you do is vacation and work. No difference.+

She shakes her head, +I am not there yet. Are you coming with me?+ I had better. I don't trust her alone for too long just yet.

I drag out the prep as long as I think I can get away with. I want to be sure she is really interested in going and not just looking for an excuse not to think about Qu'thn. She really wants to go. We will be comfortable.

Making a space ship for a Ku is definitely not the same as one for a cetacean. Too long since I was Hu to remember much about their designs. Would have needed Rachel or James' help there. Perches are much easier to deal with than chairs at least, as long as we don't have to deal with actual acceleration.

The trip out is uneventful. Point and shoot. Nothing to see. Our world looks the same as the last low orbit checks we did a few eight days ago.

Sabow does not have a large spot as our Jupiter did. Only a little variation in cloud colors. A lot of beige. Closer to the sun than Jupiter too. About the same position as Mars was. That means we do get some effect on Ku Eden. We will have to watch that. Over time it could lead to a real imbalance and throw us out of proper orbit. I hope we have the means to make the necessary corrections. I have not told Fa yet. She has had enough on her mind.

The smallest moon is closest to us as we come in. Trest. Nothing but stone. We get within scanning range just out of curiosity. No water. Just silicates, iron oxides and some magnesium. Traces of everything else, even carbon. Diamonds are not enough to make a life form though. If life is here it is way out of our time frame, as in very slow. Not enough time

to find out.

Moon number seven is up next. A small gas giant in itself. Heavy gases anyway. It is warm enough to keep mixed hydrocarbons afloat. No hydrogen as you might expect. Heavy metal core explains it. Trapped a lot of gases when the system condensed. The core might have come from out of the system?

Gapos is next. Our goal this trip. The second gas giant is a third of an orbit away at the moment and is some distance out. Four moons that we have noticed so far. May be more smaller ones once we get there. Gapos has a small misshapen moon itself. As we loop around it we notice the moon has an even smaller moon around it.

+That is really strange, a moon with a moon with a moon. I would have thought the tidal forces would have knocked that apart long ago.+

+Let's check it out. The smallest first.+

We chase it around Gapos' moon.

+We will need a name for them.+

+Plenty of time. You and I are the only ones who even know they exist yet.+

She does not seem to mind, intent on the smallest moonlet.

Once we get within scanning distance we both concentrate.

+Oh, very strange. That is definitely not natural.+

Pure 'thn shield metal, nearly transparent as we get close.

We move close enough to nearly touch it. Minimal gravity. We each weigh only a few grams. Wait long enough and we will drop towards it, but easy to maintain our distance.

+Scan at the quantum level. Make sure this thing is not some level fifteen 'thn.+

+Not alive at least. I don't think a fifteen could even exist without collapsing on itself. It certain could not play this dead.+

+A fifteen could probably do anything it wanted including changing our thoughts.+

Think about that dear.

+You ever heard of a fifteen before?+ Touche. I show amusement.

+No quantum neural pathways. This thing was never alive. Not even a psiotic collector or power supply. Just mass. But why? If a culture could make this, why put it here?+

+Would make one hell of a lens.+

I offer.

+At 'thn shield density it would focus well within itself. No point that I can see.+

She does know her optics.

I turn my attention to Gapos' moon below us. Within range.

+Not 'thn shield metal at least.+

Fa announces. Silicates mostly. Some carbon. Traces of other elements.

+Someone made the satellite. There might be tech left behind below us.+

The moonlet is small enough to scan it in its entirety. Smaller than our own missing moon. Maybe half as big. Takes awhile to do a careful scan at the one meter level.

+Nothing. Why do it? Why place a 'thn ball around a small moon around a moon?+

+Kilroy was here.+

+What?+

+And old Earth saying I somehow remembered. Don't ask me why. It means they placed it here as proof that they had been here. So that anyone else who made it here would know someone came before them.+

+Do we leave our mark on the 'thn moon to prove we have been here then?+

I show amusement, +Please, do so. Who knows where we really are. Maybe in a billion years someone else will arrive. I don't know of much else that could survive that long. Leave space for others to write something as well.+

She gives me a dirty look, +You really think anyone else will make it here?+

+No, I don't. But we are here and someone was here before. That already breaks the odds. The moonlet shows nothing interesting that I can find. Let's go to Gapos itself. Nearly Ku Eden in size. Has an atmosphere. Maybe they left the ball up here as a marker for us to go look on Gapos itself.+

+What could I write that would mean anything?+

+Just do a drawing of a typical Ku. Words are not likely to mean anything. No species other than a 'thn would live long enough to be able to interpret.+

She spends a few moments drawing an entire scene with one Ku shown larger because of perspective. I would not have spent so much effort on it. We have never left the spaceship of course. No point.

+This time I want to leave the ship. She says. Physical contact is overrated in my opinion. You don't live to be twenty five mill by taking chances all the time. Of course sometimes you just can't resist and sometimes it is actually necessary. I consider those times to be failures. If it gets to that point to solve a problem, it means you did not do adequate planning and preparation.

+Don't pop us down. I want to take air sample on the way in. Why?

She fills canisters with the air as we descend.

+For the scientists back home.+ Ah. Will probably want rocks too.
I scan ahead. Small seas of water, bit salty. Very salty actually. Would be poison to us, but could provide water to colonists if the necessary filtration equipment was available.

She is frustrated, +Is there nothing alive below?+

+Not now, maybe never, go below the surface though.+

+We land first.+ She really has to get over this using physical clues to do TK. Ku are different I guess. She doesn't point to move things at least.

Windy and dusty.

+Air is not breathable, but the pressure is good enough.+ I knew that Fa. She goes outside and walks around. I shrug and continue my scan below.

+There are chambers we need to investigate. Artifacts that need a closer look. Hard to tell with the amount of time that has likely passed.+

+Go ahead. I want to walk a bit.+ Oh no you don't. I pop both of us down to the larger chamber.

+Why did you do that?+

+You were the one who wanted to go on this trip. You were the one who wanted to come to the surface. Finish it Fa'lan.+

+Okay. Where do we start?+ Not very enthusiastic.

I make a light globe and move it to the center of the chamber.

It takes both of us some time to make sense of it. Finally it clicks and I see it.

+I don't get it.+

+Stop thinking like a Ku. These people were not Ku, not Hu either. Not from any froth Eden or even our own galaxy. It was also a very long time ago. The forms have eroded even down this far. No way of knowing how long ago though without a lot of special equipment we will likely not have access to for some time. Best if we don't disturb anything and let future Ku explorers figure it out.+

She points at various structures, +So, you are saying that even though we don't know the function we can tell by the angles and such that there is no way for these shapes to be natural?+

I affirm.

+But if these were the same people that did the 'thn sphere why no evidence of them down here?+

I show amusement, +Would we? Think about it. Unless we were forced to leave suddenly and forever we would clean up. But maybe not completely. They got lazy and did not fill in the structures.+

+Probably thought the same thing as we do that the chances of

someone else coming along would be unlikely. They left the sphere as a point of honor, but either took everything else with them or dissolved it. I have a question though. We came somehow on our home world. Do you think this was their home world?+

+No way of knowing. It could have been, but the new location was not conducive. We may have gotten temporarily lucky. I am still worried about the tidal effects of the gas giant on our orbit in the long term. Or they were explorers like Mei and others. They stayed here for a time to investigate and then left.+

+If they came here of their own choosing, they knew where they were at least.+

+But we don't know that. The other possibility is they lived on this world before it was moved here. We have no way of knowing.+

+We know we were not the only world moved here?+

+You mean some thing evolved here and died out? I suppose that is yet another possibility.+

+Then we have really learned nothing.+

+It is a start Fa. Just a start. The others will be told and there will be many more trips out here. Who knows, maybe there are artifacts on one of the other moons.+

+We should go look.+

+We have responsibilities at home. Better to do this in rotation. We each have our talents and will see different things.+

+You were the lead for the whales. What kind of artifacts did they leave behind?+

+They have not happened yet remember. They will leave no artifacts. They built no tech, no structures, and left no writing.+

+What? How did they achieve such a high culture without reading and writing?+

I show amusement, +They remembered.+

+Guano! They remembered. Oh my. They remembered. We have a long way to go.+

+And a long time to achieve it. Patience.+

+Especially now that there is little possibility of interference.+

+Until we want it. There is value in interacting with others. But it looks like it will be limited to this froth shell unless we find a world we particularly like and decide to examine it in more detail.+

+It will be some time before we find others. It is my guess we are outside the normal universe. That means with a sufficiently large farseer we should be able to see it. From Mei's voyage we know she was not able

to leave the light sphere and still have psiotic ability. We have the ability, so we are still within the light sphere.+

+We could be up to the edge, or approximately fourteen billion light years out. Even using folded dimensional space it will take some time. None of us have Silver and Rooi's abilities.+

+We will have to learn then.+

+By the time we do, our population will be too large to move. You want to leave them behind?+

+A lot of problems. Better get started then.+ She starts stowing the gas cylinders and rocks she has collected in hermetically sealed shock resistant containers. This I like to see. She has gotten a purpose again.

Brown

I can't believe they voted me in. I just hope I don't soil all the good work. We have been here eight hundred plus years now. They all seem to blend together.

A lot has happened. Mistakes were made, more on that in a minute, and some successes as well.

We know to some extent where we are. We are outside the normal universe. A two kilometer telescope confirmed this. We can see the ball of galactic clusters from orbit with the telescope, but far from seeing it with normal vision. Not even a Cat can. Never realized how much space is between the clusters.

We are not the only world orbiting this sun. There are two smaller airless worlds closer in. Visits have shown them to be nothing special. Sort of like Mercury was back home. Sorry, used the Hu term. Council agreed on common names for ideas so we could all know what we were talking about. Most species can pronounce Hu terms, so they are used more often. We call the two inner worlds Sundance and Riptide. Sundance is the closer of the two. Riptide is very tectonic. Earthquakes full time. This causes enough friction that a small percentage of the crust is liquid at any given time. The oldest rock on the surface is barely a million years old for this reason.

Outward from us is one world very similar to Brown, but being further out, what little water there is, is frozen solid most of the time. Air is not breathable. Likely it never saw enough life to produce the necessary oxygen levels we animals prefer. Edwin has spent most of his time there studying arctic like plantimal lichens, at its equator. They are totally unique Edwin says. Not part of the OM diaspora. Must have actually evolved there. Poor Garfield tried for a few months and came running back. Too cold for him. He spends most of his time in the desert regions here now trying to get warm again.

Next comes a small gas giant, then a larger one. Both have moons. No one has bothered to investigate them. They are on the agenda, but no one has volunteered, so it has not happened. Problem when nearly everyone is equal in abilities. A few more rock worlds and that is it. No asteroid belt like we had. Just as well. Don't have to worry about meteors or comets striking us.

For the first few years we kept getting reports of 'ghosts' of some past inhabitants of this solar system, but on closer examination we never

found anything. My guess is we are the first sentients here.

We have two other systems like ours. We appear to be evenly spaced at approximately nine hundred and sixty million light years distance. No sentients on the two near us. We are alone out here it would appear. We were going to search more of them, but then a concern was raised that if we were put here by someone or some force, it is likely the same happened to others. Do we really want to run into hundreds of high level TKs pissed off about their situation as we are? Not all groups are into cooperation. Better to take it slow and easy as Sam says.

We have had enough trouble from the few sentients we have reached at the edge of the universe, that soft glow only visible to the enhanced. How I miss the warriors that are stuck on Ku Eden somewhere. The fact that Ku Eden disappeared before we did suggests they are also on some lost outpost. We lost several TKs on one such mission to the edge. They were overdue for twenty three years. There were only two survivors of the five who went. I did not really know any of them other than their names. They took so long to come back to be sure their path was kept from their pursuers, not likely considering where we are. We still keep vigilance in case they do finally make it here. My hope is that they did not understand the higher dimensions well.

The Froth. There is no froth here. The dimensions are here, but not the froth. It is not until you get to the edge of the visible universe that the froth returns. It is as if we are really outside the universe. Some have taken to calling these systems sentinels.

What it does for some though is to suggest that maybe, just maybe, the universe is a manufactured entity. Certainly if a force did make all of this then it would be strong enough to move us to our current location. Best not to piss them off more than we have. That was when we tried to find and succeeded in finding other sentinels around us, as I have already mentioned. Did I say we are precisely between them? We are. Well, at least as far as we can determine.

All that have taken on a 'thn, of which none are present, 'thn that is, know that we serve The Question. The question of why were are here, why all of this exists. Are we on some kind of colossal calculator? A machine designed to answer the question? Are we mere cogs in this machine. If there is one machine are there others? Is it possible somehow to go to other universes? Are they similar, as we would build our computers, or is diversity the pattern? Trying every possible permutation in hopes one will reach the conclusion sought?

Can we, as participants, even know the answer? Does a brain cell

comprehend the entire brain and all of its possibilities and thoughts?

I still don't understand why they chose me to lead. Probably because no one else would accept, fool that I am.

Hu Eden

A long cold night. Apricot gave birth finally. A little girl who will be well loved. Eleven hundred years since the disappearance of the others. I am not sure if I miss them or are thankful. Definitely quieter.

Pu'thn pops in.

One approaches.

Took me the longest time to find uses for Pu'thn. At first she drove me nuts hovering all the time. I am trying to remain hidden and her popping in all the time made that much harder. Several times I had to pretend to be just as shocked as those around me all the while using TP to talk to her. No wonder I never had kids. She is my door bell now. Or I will send her out on errands. Hard for me to watch everything that is going on from here. Mostly I have her watch over the Ceph. They don't mind her and so little changes with them it is safe if she misses something.

I stir the fire pit and add fresh kindling. It comes up slowly. I am well covered in furs and wool. I look outside through a slit in the cloth door cover. A few hands of snow are on the ground. I put a pot on the fire and start to boil some water for Hopi tea.

“Report what you learned.” I continue with my morning chores.

Issel continues as Matriarch of the Middle Bay clan. The physics lab is operational.

I laugh, “They have been saying that for a hundred years, but something always comes up to make them rethink it.”

There are three scientists working there now. A professor and two graduate students. Translated into old Hu terms. I still won't believe it until they are there for at least a year.

“What did you do for your benefit?” I am trying to trick her into using an 'I' at some point. She always catches me though.

This unit spent time in the ceramics center. The trilaminar glazes are particularly interesting.

A start. I am convinced that curiosity is the door to sentience. “Any danger that with some of the latent TK abilities they could make something psiotic?”

Maybe in a few thousand years. Progress is slow. This formula has been used for over ten thousand years on Ceph Prime. Only the smallest deviations has been allowed so far.

“Mark this as something to watch over time.”

Noted.

I hear footsteps in the snow outside. They stop someways out. Not New Hopi then. They would just come right in. An old lady has no privacy and young couples had better limit their marital activities to the darkest of night. Very hard on the newly paired. Teaching them restraint is good though and the older people love coming up with excuses to interrupt them. Not for me.

Best if you leave for awhile Pu'thn. She pops out. She has many chores, so I am sure she can find something to keep busy.

I rise, pretending to be old and arthritic. I am fine of course. I open the wool door cover and blink at the morning sun already up. The storm has passed for the moment. Missed greeting the sun.

Seeing another old lady a few tens of arm lengths away I wave her towards me. A plains tribe judging from the clothing and manners. Buffalo hide coat and deerskin clothing. Far from her family in the middle of winter. I am surprised she does not have a hoard of curious. Probably watching her from their homes. Too cold to venture out yet. I see a little boy peeking out from one doorway to suddenly disappear again when he notices me looking at him. Tosak, the new girl's brother. Surprising since I am sure he must have been up nearly all night with the rest of us.

Our tribe gives nonsense names to the young. They will get formal names when they are accepted as first level adults, around thirteen. There are three levels for normal adults. There are two more levels for a secret society that I run without anyone's knowledge. The pre psiotics as you might have guessed. I am being very Ceph about this, going slowly.

She finally arrives at my door and I motion her in. Neither of us has said anything yet. At the pace she is moving she must have left the plains two years ago.

I motion for her to the most comfortable corner of my home. I then pour a cup of tea and offer it to her. She bows and accepts, blowing on the hot liquid and warming her hands she has removed from gloves. I then stoke the fire and add more wood to warm the room further.

It is not until we both finish our tea that we speak.

“Welcome to my home. Our path gives you food and a safe stay for as long as you wish.”

“Most generous of you Pushy Paws, but I can take care of myself and can offer generous compensation for my intrusion.” How does she know my old name? I have been using the name Gray Sage Flower for some time now.

“I'm sorry, this humble home is the home of Gray Sage Flower. I will

make some inquiries to see if anyone knows Pushy Paws.”

“No matter what you call yourself at the moment. I would know you anywhere and I have come a long way to check in with you.”

I search her face but do not recognize her. Darker than a New Hopi, but a plains tribe member would be pretty cooked in the sun, especially at her apparent age.

She laughs, “Still confused. You have been alone for too long Pushy. You may be able to hide from the norms . . .” My shields go up instinctively, then I relax again. If she meant harm she would have already done so. I do a pulse scan but sense no TK.

She smiles wider.

“I have been practicing. Not easy to hide from you and the 'thn for so long.”

“Then you were not with the others?”

“No, I was here, as I have been for most of my life. Of course this is not Iran.”

“Malak!” I rise to hug her and laughing she rises to hug me back.

“You can't believe how happy I am to see you. Actually anyone from the old times. What do you mean you have never left? How?”

“I just wanted to live a normal life. You know, one without war, without TK and Bugs. I guess I just got carried away. I liked it. Since the only Hu were on this continent I have been moving slowly from tribe to tribe and have visited all of them except this one.”

“What no Ceph infiltrations?” I smile. Actually I have not stopped smiling.

A head pops in, “Grandma, we have enough hot rabbit mush with squash for you and your friend.” Shy Hawk is anything but. Just one of the curious trying to find out who the stranger is. I am sure the entire Pueblo knows she is here.

“Not much excitement around here.” Malak smiles.

“We can make time for ourselves later.”

“Don't count on it. Figure about ten years before they lose interest.”

She laughs. Feels really good to hear another TK laugh.

“What I don't understand is how Pu'thn did not find you.”

“Oh she did, probably the first day Pu left.”

“Then why didn't she tell me?”

“Did you ever ask her?”

I am dumbfounded. I think back.

“You know, I don't think I ever did. I ran a few scans myself the first year and then forgot about it. Figured if anyone came back they would

announce themselves.”

“Here I am. Just a bit late with the announcement.”

“Shh, from here on out . . .”

“Understood.” She passes her hand over her lips. Have not seen that gesture in ages. I giggle. Her eyes go wide mocking me and giggles too.

Shy Hawk has been polite, against her desires I am sure, and has been waiting well away from my door. She smiles when we come out.

“Cold last night, but looks clear so far this morning.” She is fishing for a reading on the weather from me. I am more accurate than a guess, but try very hard not to be one hundred percent accurate.

I am generous this morning in thanks giving for a friend from the past coming back to me, “I think the snow will return early tomorrow morning.”

She runs off to tell the others. Hunting parties will go out while they can to hunt game and others will look for stores of nuts and edible ground roots. Repairs will be made to homes. In other words most people will be busy and we will be left largely alone.

We find the pot of food and serve ourselves.

“How long will you stay?”

She shrugs “Twenty years?”

“A short visit then. You probably know that I have visited many tribes across the continent, but never stayed long enough to get a good feeling for how the people themselves felt.”

“We don't open up to strangers well. Especially if they were recently at a neighbors fire.” She smiles wryly. “The people are well. There is friction when one tribe gets too close to another of course, but the population has stayed low enough to prevent any outright wars at least.”

I nod.

“I am so glad you are here. Having only Pu'thn for company was getting to me in more ways than I realized.”

“I made whomever was around me company. By not being TK I could live a life as it was expected to be lived.”

“Not entirely though.”

She sighs, “No, not entirely, but as close as I could get. I sensed you of course and stayed out of your way. I got so good that I could even hide from Pu'thn at times. I limited TK use to maintenance and emergencies. The latter I tried to avoid at all costs.”

“Was it hard watching others die around you, people who you were close to?”

“Of course, but that it the way it should be. Grief is not a bad thing if

a person has lived a good life. Of course, having lived so many lifetimes, not much surprises me any more. I guess I can say it feels level, not high or low, just level, as if that is the way it should be.”

“Then we are succeeding. Sorry. I made a deal with OM. This time I want to try a spiritual path to her ultimate goal instead of a tech one.”

“I noticed when I was near a coast that none of the Ceph will share tech with the People. Beads and simple tools that we could make if we tried, but nothing more than that. They are even careful not even to allow tech to be seen. The curious eventually get bored and come back to the tribe empty handed.”

“What happens if the People withhold desired metals or materials from the Ceph.”

“You may have noticed that they are very patient. We want their sea salt and seafood more than they want our small amounts of metals that can be found at the surface.” I nod understanding.

“Did the nomadic traditions bother you?”

“After being with nomads in the Arabian deserts? No, how do you handle being cooped up behind walls all the time, especially in winter?”

“We will all be very happy when spring comes. Fasting of any kind makes the break of that fast all that more sweet.” She smiles and nods.

Pu'thn pops in and hides in a carry sack on my hip.

“What got into her?” Malak asks, but I shush her and scan around us. Suddenly I feel a large presence arrive nearby.

I feel it too, Malak TPs.

I pop all of us nearby to the disturbance. There is a Hu in long white cloth robes staring away from us. A Cat pops next to him.

“Jesus, what brings you here? I am surprised you are not with the others.” I say loud enough for him to hear. He turns and smiles at us.

“Peace be with you. You both look well.”

“As do you,” Malak responds.

“I just missed the hijacking. I was nearby to a Qes. When she freaked and popped out I decided to do the same. When I tried to come back, there was nothing there.”

“What took you so long to come back home?”

He shrugs, “It took longer than I thought to help the few remaining Hu on the various sentient worlds.”

“I had completely forgotten about them.”

“I had thought all Hu had been evacuated before the 'hijacking'.”

“Unfortunately not all. It will not be much longer though before it is no longer a concern. In all cases, non local species have been

marginalized.”

“We have no problems with the Ceph that I am aware of.”

“You are regionally isolated and very few on a large world. Remember the tech is much higher on the other worlds.”

I turn to Malak, “That is one of the reasons I don't want fast tech here.”

“Fast tech?” Jesus asks.

“Tech advancement that goes ahead of spiritual development.”

“Wise choice. I might stick around to see how it turns out this time.”

“This time?” I ask.

He laughs, “You don't think this path has not been tried before?”

Malak nudges me and whispers, “Christianity Pushy.”

“That was one of the most bloody experiments ever tried.” I exclaim.

“True, that is why I would like to see if you are able to do any better.”

“Then I am doomed.”

“Note necessarily. Sauron is not around this time.” He smiles.

“His influence persists,” Malak comments.

I notice that the Cat has gone to sleep at his feet.

“Who is your friend?”

“A refugee from Ba Eden. He is home now. Level two.”

“Tell him to stay away from the People and he will do fine.”

“They are due any moment.”

“Who?”

A very subtle push in the psiotic balance occurs. Feels like a point five. A psychic Hu might do as much without realizing it or some of the naturals I have been working with. Before us, appearing on the hill above us, four figures stand.

“They look like Kachinas? Ant, Cat, Old Man and the more recent addition, Ceph.”

Jesus smiles at me. Malak looks confused.

“Oh shit, not again. I thought I was done with those pests!”

“Afraid not.”

“What do you mean?” Malak asks.

“Who do you know that matches a male Hu, a fem Cat, fem Ceph and unknown gender Bug?”

“But they are dead.”

Jesus shrugs, “What is death really?”

“Are they First Ones?”

“Probably.” Jesus answers. Fooled once he is not confident any more. Feathers and such move in the gentle wind, but they remain motionless.

Jesus, motionless as well is probably communicating with them.

Fear not Pushy Paws. You will do well and we will not interfere.

“May I ask a question?”

No response. Guess I can.

“What is the answer to the Question? Have you found out?”

You are.

They disappear.

“Shit, I hate those four.” I feel like a stupid Zen student given her first koan. How am I supposed to understand what they said?

“Jesus, will you stay for lunch?” Malak offers. The Cat looks up for the first time at the mention of food.

Malak pulls me aside and asks, “So what did they say?”

“You saw me go blank?” She nods.

“They said I am the answer.”

“So what does that mean?”

“No idea.” We both laugh. Jesus just smiles.