



The Guardians of Br'thn Nobody

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Disclosure:

I am not of the Hopi Nation. I do not personally know anyone from the Hopi Nation. I have only visited once some twenty years ago with a friend who worked there as a social worker to vision challenged children. I have read their newsletter, have a copy of the 3rd Mesa dialect dictionary (where half of the proceeds went to the Hopi Nation), and have read of the Hopi prophecy which speaks of the concerns of the traditionalists in relation to the progressives. I am a nobody. Really.

Remember how this series works. This book is a record of but one incarnation among an infinite series. Who is to say that this is not an actual recording of one of these incarnations.

Don't let the divergence from your reality bother you. Enjoy the flow. It is just a story. Don't worry, be Hopi. (pun intended).

Rock Ridge

There are predators about. Damn Cats. There are getting to be too many of them. They won't hurt a person, though there have been close encounters. They will bully someone if they are desperate. Mostly though they eat everything they can catch and leave nothing for us. They tell us we have our herds of buffalo and sheep. They are free to everything else. If we complain too much they would be happy to start hunting our livestock too.

The elders say this is the way it should be. They are all well fed though. Better than most of us. It is those of us in the marginal lands that suffer the most. I don't know what is worse the man bullies or the Cat ones. Mostly I am just hungry and don't care who is responsible. I just want something to eat.

I rub my turtle fetish. I have been called Turtle since I was grass high. It is not a compliment. I am shorter than most and wider than most. Turtle shaped in other words. I am not the smartest either. Slow like a turtle. I think things out before acting. Others just jump.

Out of desperation I tried trading with the Wood Bridge tribe, but being out numbered was cheated out of what little I brought with me. They made me pay tribute to cross the redwood bridge to their village and then again when I left. Thus leaving only their worthless bark dolls I was to bring back and trade with my own village. All of the obsidian is gone. I don't think they ever intended to let it go.

I look up. That light brown and white Cat has been following me for some time. I cross the small stream I have been following hoping that it will give up, but it is much rockier on this side, if that were even possible, and I soon give up and return to the Cat side. The Cat is waiting for me. I am guessing a female. Great. The only female I can get the attention of is a Cat. Cats love to play with turtles.

“Don't think I have not see your kind rolling a poor turtle over on its back to watch it try and upright itself.” She ignores what I have said. Just sits watching me slowly walk past her.

When I was young, bullies did the same to me by strapping a heavy backpack on my back that I could not remove and then pushing me down to watch me try and roll over. It was not until an adult came by that they scattered and I was saved. Nothing happened to any of them of course. I heard the adults talking and laughing about me later.

Maybe she is hoping that I will lead her to food. Though I know it has

never happened that Cat would share a kill with a person.

I ignore the Cat and slowly make my way along. It will be another two days at least before I am back with my own tribe. A runner could make it in less than a day, but I am not in any hurry to get back, even as hungry as I am.

I have nothing to show for my trip except that I am as stupid as everyone has been saying of me. Maybe I should not go back? But where else would I go?

“Ow! Fire weed!” My hand hurts like it has been held in a fire. Why didn't I see it? I am not concentrating and feeling sorry for myself. I dip my hand in the stream and try and wash the pain away. It helps some, but only because the water is cool. I will just have to live for it for a half day or more. I really am a turtle! If I was back at my village the healer could put salve on it and relieve the pain at least.

I stumble and hit my little toe badly on a rock sticking up. Now I am limping as well. I will be lucky to even make it back. Maybe that Cat is waiting for me to die of my own stupidity so she can eat me. They are forbidden to kill us, but once dead they are free to be sure the meat does not go to waste. Same for us. We cannot kill one of them, except to protect ourselves or our livestock. Best not to test that one though. Kill a Cat without some strong evidence and you are likely to find children missing soon after. Not that I have to worry about that. I sigh.

One other rule. If you bury or burn a dead person, then it is forbidden to dig them up for any reason. Cats have taken to burying their dead for the same reason. Guess they do love those close to them. They always seemed such loners to me. Question is how do I bury myself before I die so that she won't eat me afterward?

Oh what does it matter. At least I would finally serve a purpose. Getting dark. Need to find a place to hole up for the night. Not a lot of choices up here. If I had not crippled myself I would be further down from the ridge and into the forest. Up here I am very exposed. Best to push on I guess.

The sun is in front of me as I descend. This will give me light longer than I expected.

Stumbling and aching badly I make it to the edge of the forest before I dare not go any further. Bears would not feel bad about eating me at all. Traveling alone is really stupid. I shake my head and look for a place that might be reasonably safe from them. They climb trees so that is out unless I am really desperate. Trees are still too small here yet anyway.

A fire, I need a fire. Duh! I would say that spider woman had

confused me, but I think I did enough on my own not to blame her. I gather small twigs and branches. I don't need to light up the sky, just have some light and warmth. Bears are afraid of fire for good reason. Their fur catches fire easily unless it is wet. I am far enough from the stream I might be lucky here.

I chose a rock face to lean against and place the fire in front of me. More defensible and the rock will reflect some of the heat from the fire. At least I was smart enough not to give up my flint and knife. I kept the flint hidden and even the Redwood tribe would not expect anyone to give up their knife. I look at it. Old and chipped. It has seen many owners, but I can still cut or mostly tear at meat or hide when I need to. They might have thought not even any of their people would want it.

The fire is going well. I have nothing to eat though. Best to rest as much as I can. It will be a long day tomorrow. I curl up against the rock and hope for the best. There is life here. An owl, raccoons fighting, something scurries near by and then leaves. Nothing to eat here little ones. I am tired and my eyes slowly close lulled by the flames in front of me.

I wake suddenly, having heard something. False dawn tells me it will be daylight soon. I smell something burning and check the fire that has died down to embers. I stir the fire and add more branches. When it gets light enough to see better I find a dead and partially cooked rock hen. The feathers have burned off.

I pull it from the side of the fire and examine it. It has been expertly cleaned, though I am hungry enough now that I would have even eaten or tried to eat the gizzard. Not waiting for it to cool I bite into the cooked flesh. It tastes like the best bird I have ever eaten. What ever fortune places this meal before me I am thankful. Remembering at last to thank Great Spirit I hold up the remains of my meal and give thanks properly.

It is too rocky here to leave clear prints, so I don't know how the bird ended up near the fire. Maybe a hawk dropped it by mistake and was too afraid of me to retrieve it. But hawks don't hunt at night and the bird was too big for most owls, who prefer mice anyway.

I start my days journey and enter the forest proper. I notice the Cat above me looking down from a large tree. She does not move, but watches me pass. What does she want? Why follow me of all people?

The path is still in good shape. Only been a hand full of days since I was last here. Does not appear that anyone else has come this way since I was here. I see no footprints but my own. Given that the tribe cheat anyone from outside their tribe, I now know why. Then why the path? It

is maintained, so who does come this way and why? Certainly not for the rock. No obsidian or flint. No trees, no game. I have no idea. Others have come this way, I heard them talking about the Redwood Bridge tribe, ah, and beyond. Shit, I stopped listening once I heard of the tribe. There must be something further ahead. I missed it.

I am not going back there now. Maybe there is a path around the tribe. Stupid again. I pause and lean against a tree. The birds are singing, the sky is clear, the day is warm, and I am feeling like a slug in the sun on a bed of salt.

Food. I need food. I sigh. Forget it. I am too close to the Red Leaf clan of our tribe. This area will have been cleared out of anything easy to catch. Maybe someone will take pity on me.

I make my way into the village. The hogans have smoke so people are around. I see people in the fields. Planting season. We had plenty of rain this winter, so we should have good harvests later in the year. The hard part will be the limited amount of food left over from last harvest. Ah, sheep. At least the sheep are filling themselves up on grass coming up. They especially love the new grass. I smile until I realize I have done so.

I must have been seen, but no one comes out to greet me. I walk right through the center of the village, but I am alone. I walk past the fields and it is as if I am invisible. Maybe I died and I am just a spirit? Foot still hurts a bit. My belly growls. I don't think I am a ghost. I look around. No Cat anyway.

I doubt I will die of starvation today as hungry as I am. At least I have water. Glad I had the rock hen though. Still wonder how it got there. Did not make me sick. Maybe some bird stole it from a camp fire and dropped it near mine. Just luck. Such a rare thing for me I almost did not recognize it.

Our tribe are farmers. On these foothills there is supposed to be good soil. The open marshes are close by so we do not have to raise our own meat. All the birds you can eat. We grow corn, beans, melons and squashes. Or rather they grow these things. I can't seem to grow a thing. And what I do grow those same birds come and eat it. I need to sleep at night. They don't appear to. At least not near any field I tried.

Of course other workers are needed. If I was good at fixing hogans, digging trenches or even woman's work, making baskets or pots. Failed at all of them.

I climb a tree outside the village and look back at it. People are coming out and going about their daily tasks. Once out of sight they come out. Who am I kidding? I am worthless. I am nobody. Nobody is ever

missed and I won't be either.

I climb down and run right into the Cat again. Scares me good. I was not expecting her here at the base of the tree.

“Are you ready to eat me now? Won't be long to wait.” I walk past her down the path and then change my mind and head south through the pasture. No point in going home. I won't be wanted there. The advice I received to go to the Redwood tribe was probably given to get rid of me.

No large rocks and an easy walk. I suppose I will run into another tribe sooner or later. I look up once I get out of the trees and see a few vultures circling overhead. “Stay close Cat. You would not want them to get all of me before you do.” I don't bother looking back to see if she is following.

I walk and walk. My water sack is dry. I don't care any more. My stomach has stopped growling anyway. I walk aimlessly. I stumble a few times, but keep going.

It eventually grows dark. Once I can't see in front of me, I curl up against the nearest tree to sleep and am soon covered in ants. I shake them off and find another tree, checking first to see if any other surprise awaits me. Nothing obvious.

I awaken to sun in my eyes. Out of habit I sit up and greet the yellow ball.

“Well, this is silly on probably my last day of life.” I laugh out loud and reach down to get up to my feet and fall back down instantly. Too weak to rise. “Today is a good day to die!” I shout and then cough on the last word. I turn around and lie down again. I am soon asleep.

Something hits my leg and I jerk away to hear the sudden rush of feathers moving away from me.

“Not yet my dear friends. Not yet.”

I fall on my back to look up and see her staring down at me. She sees me watching her and makes her way down.

“I'm not dead yet. Didn't you hear me tell the others?”

She lies down next to me. Her face is a hands width away from mine.

We are quiet for some time, just looking into each others eyes.

A vulture decides to test me again and makes a lunge for my face. Blind, it would be harder for me to defend myself. Wrong move. Swift as an arrow, she strikes and kills the vulture instantly. The others scatter quickly.

“I hope you are not expecting me to eat that?” She stares at me. I am not even sure it is safe to eat a vulture. They have to taste horrible. Certainly smell horrible. Death eaters. You are what you eat. It would be

an interesting twist on fate that I live by eating the death eaters.

Ba Eden

^Where is she? That lazy mouse is always trying to get out of work. I have never in all my life seen someone as good for nothing as she is.^

My younger brother shows amusement and points in the direction he saw me go. Dirty snake! I scrunch down tighter into the rags in hopes of hiding. I am as skinny as a drowned rat and as tired as a slug in the sun. When does it stop? Why am I always the one asked to do every filthy chore around here. My brothers never have to do anything except look pretty and eat fatty food. I get leftover food that even the rodent stock would not eat.

I hear my mother leave the room looking for me. I sigh relief. I will have to wait as long as I can before exiting. I settle down for a nap. Bladder is full. That could be a real problem. With what I eat my piss stinks and would give me away instantly. The pain will be intense before I can escape.

Shit! The cabinet door opens. My little brother peaks his head in. He sniffs the air. Snake.

^She's in here!^ He shouts. He closes the door and stands in front of it so I can't escape in time. My mother opens the door reaches in and feels around until she grabs my leg and pulls me out violently. Hanging upside down I am beaten until I have bruises on bruises. She then throws me back into the cabinet and closes it. I hear her attach something to the outside. I suspect I am locked in.

The lantern is turned down. I can't see anything through the crack any longer. Hearing nothing I try the door. I meet resistance as I expected. I really need to pee. If I pee in here I will get another beating for sure. The rags are not important, it will be because I soiled them. I can't do anything right no matter what I do. I have taken to hiding more and more just to make it stop.

I have a small knife I stole some time ago. No one has noticed it missing or at least they have not thought I took it. Yet. I slip the knife through the crack in the door and after several attempts I manage to loosen the stick holding the door shut. I quietly move the door back and forth until it drops to the floor. I wait a few moments to hear if anyone is coming to investigate. I slip out and quickly leave the enclosure. Out on the cliff I relieve myself as quickly as I can.

If I stay I will be killed. If not today, then tomorrow or the next. I am sore all over, hungry, tired and scared. If I was whole I would unfold my

arm flaps and glide down to the meadow below. There are predators down there waiting for someone stupid enough to fall or be pushed over the side. I don't try. They slit my flaps long ago to prevent me from making an easy escape.

I go around to the back of my mother's enclosure and stuff a sack with pressed grain meant for the livestock. Better than what I have been getting and harder to notice some is missing. Next I run as fast as I can and as quietly as I can to the far edge of this ledge and start climbing. I have mapped out my route a hundred times. I hid my thoughts by spending most of my time studying other routes to throw them off.

They will find out I am missing by first light at least. Most likely in the early hours when they would wake me to do chores. I am sure they still expect me to do my work even if I am being punished.

My dark coat blends in well with the crack I am climbing. I am careful not to dislodge rocks, testing each step before adding weight. It takes time, but getting away cleanly will give a greater lead than instantly drawing attention to myself. Many are faster climbers than I am, especially if they don't have to worry about being quiet, or falling.

I have never been up here of course. I can only guess that the path that I have chosen will work. Already I am having doubts. It did not look that steep or difficult. Soon I am tired and sore. Hungry too, but I am always hungry. Usually my stomach is acting up, growling, threatening to let loose, that sort of thing, but for some reason is not. However this is not the place to open my sack. I need both hands and feet free to prevent falling.

I am worried that my muscles are going to fail me when I reach a small ledge with a short cave of sorts. I can hide in here to rest for a bit. There are plenty of vines and other plants around the entrance. I rearrange them a bit after entering to make it harder to see in and find me. I fall asleep almost instantly.

Waking I am hungry and now thirsty as well. I reach to my sack only it is gone! I search frantically, but it is not here. I look over the side and see it split open at the bottom of the cliff. Some creature must have gotten to it while I slept. Lacking food, I lick the damp off the stems and walls of my temporary home. That helps. It will be light soon. I would most certainly be noticed now if I tried to climb further. Likely someone has noticed that I am gone and will soon find the sack below. Probably my younger brother.

I doubt they will miss me other than the work I did. I wonder who will be forced to do it now? Used to be, or so I have heard, that we would

have had servants, a Dia or even a young Hu, to do all the dirty work. Now they are so rare that I have only seen a Hu once from a distance when I was very young and we are not so high that we could afford a Dia for our family. I was the next best thing I guess. A worthless female.

Females used to run our society. Some have said it was the Hu influence that brought males up in strength and females lower. Males are stupid. They are always fighting each other for silly reasons. But it only takes one to make many females pregnant, so with fewer around they become special. They are having to learn to share. Most are not willing. Some females still attempt to form a harem. Only the very high of course. They are usually shouted down by the hoard of jealous lower females with no males.

It is getting much lighter now and enough is getting through the vines to see my surroundings. I haven't dare ping for fear they would hear me. There are insects in here! I can't believe my luck. Quietly I gather as many as I can can, quickly stuffing them into my mouth. Their succulent juices filling my belly for the first time in a very long time. I probably did not actually find that many, but after so long on just moldy grains, they are heaven.

I sleep again and wake near dark. People will be home making their last meal of the day. I take a chance and peak out to see what is going on. I certainly heard no search parties. I can see the enclosures, though I do not recognize them at first. I had never seen them from above before. The smoke coming out of each was what convinced me of what I was seeing. Some light is coming out of windows and portals.

I am fascinated watching the changing patterns of lights and shadows moving behind them. I almost miss the creatures coming towards me. Seekers! A large rodent with a long snout. They use them to hunt for runaways. Not usually Ba, but they don't care. You are lucky if you survive with all your limbs. I think they purposely let them gnaw off one just to teach them a lesson. No one attempts to escape for a year after a cripple comes home half dead with an arm missing.

I should have left my cave some time ago. My scent here will be strong. It will be easy to follow me from here. My only chance is to go up. Seekers aren't their best at climbing on stone and rock. Given a tree, they can out climb most Ba, but are lousy on rock.

I leave my cave. I can hear pings in the distance. I climb like I am on fire. I am fresh from my meal and lots of rest. They will be tired from searching. At least I hope so. They have less to lose as well. Their arm flaps still work, so if they make a mistake they will likely live. For me it

would be a quick end. The idea of losing an arm makes me scramble faster.

I hear their screams that they have found my cave. I am many lengths above them now. They will wait until the Ba handlers catch up with them and ride on their backs until they get to a less steep area. This allows them to rest as well. In the mean time I am going full out. The wind will turn rapidly if I am not lucky.

I am panting rapidly now. I will have to stop soon or risk falling for sure. Already I have slipped a few times. They will lose a worker, but the example will still be set. I hesitate only a second. I would rather die than be caught. I renew my climb.

Guano! I am running out of rock face. The area ahead is more dirty, less rock and not as steep. I scramble as fast as I can and see another rock face up ahead. Can I get there in time though. Seekers can jump two of my lengths. Their bite, even, if you get away, can become infected and kill you slowly. I can remember the screams of the last one they refused to treat. He still had his arm, but it did him no good at all. I guess they figure if you lose an arm that is enough. Nice to now there are limits to their cruelty.

I am nearly to the rock face, but I can hear them coming behind me. They are fast on a flat surface. I am not going to make it! I give it the last of my strength. The seekers are way ahead of the handlers. They love to watch from a distance so as not to get any blood on themselves. I can hear them in my mind, ^Well I guess we just were not fast enough. By the time we arrived it was all over.^

^Over here quickly!^

I look around and see nothing. I hear the seekers running towards me.

^Come with me if you want to live. If you claim sanctuary they will not harm you.^

I don't know what it is, but they clearly already know where I am. I would not be giving myself away now. So, what the pit, I shout at the full capacity of my breath, ^I claim sanctuary!^

I hear swearing and then a sharp whistle. It suddenly goes silent. The seekers have stopped.

^Come quickly. That will not stop them for long from trying to get you back. We need to be gone from here.^

I finally place the sound and see a small portal open in the side of hill. I scramble towards it and scoot inside. Then I nearly scream. What faces me is an old Dia with half her teeth missing.

Stupidly I say, ^You speak Ba.^

She closes the portal. Darkness descends. Scary. I hear her breathing. Not the same as a Ba. I had never been this close to a Dia before. I don't know if this is normal or because of her age or if she is ill.

I hear a flint struck and a candle lights. The Dia leaves and I follow.

We walk for some time. No one follows, though they must have seen me enter the cave. What is sanctuary? I don't even know the word. I don't believe in magic, even though I heard the same stories of the wizards and evil ones of old. They are just stories.

We enter a chamber with a small table and a single chair.

^Stay here. Food will be brought.^ She leaves the candle on the table and leaves the chamber. I am thankful for the candle.

A moment later a young Ba comes in and gently places a bowl on the table and places a cleaning cloth and a spoon next to it. I notice she is missing fingers on one hand, though she does not cover her shame. She leaves without a sound.

I give thanks. Not something that I would normally do willingly, but it looks and smells so good. No one is chasing me! That alone is worth it.

I slowly and carefully enjoy the meal. I don't know where I am or what is going on. Is this my last meal before they give me to some group worse than I have left?

I find myself very sleepy and lacking a normal sleeping arrangement here and curl up in a corner and fall asleep.

I awaken to soft voices. I decide to pretend to still be asleep and listen.

^What do we know about her?^

^We have a complete plate on her. She is the third of five. The other four are all male. From the beginning she was set to serve the males. We have seen this pattern before, though maybe not this extreme. As you can see from the healer examination she has been beaten badly and repeatedly.^

When did they examine me? Was there something in my food?

^What training does she have? Any skills?^

She sighs, ^None as usual. She seems intelligent enough. She did make it here on her own without any help. But, she has had no schooling and learned no mech or ag.^

The other sighs too, ^Put her into service then.^

^Is that wise, considering what has happened to her?^

^You have another idea? Everyone has to work. I served most of my life. I know what she faces.^

They leave.

I am not surprised that I am to work. I expected to. I might have hoped that it might be different, but I had no expectations other than avoiding being ripped to death at the moment I claimed sanctuary.

I get up. I see that there is a sweep in one corner and begin cleaning out the room I am in. The table is already clear. The room is clean, but it feels good to be doing something.

^Ah, you are awake. Please follow me.^ The old Dia again.

I set the sweep aside and follow.

^Since you are to be with us, may I ask what you wish to be called?^
Huh?

^I do not have a call. I am nobody. Mostly they just shook me and pointed. Enough beatings and you figured it out.^ She affirms.

^But honored one. I did not ask what others called you, but rather what you would like to be called.^

^I . . .^ I faint.

^What did you do to her?^

^Nothing. I asked her what she wished to be called and she fainted.^

^Most unusual. It would appear we will need to figure that one out ourselves. Let's bubble.^ They press their heads together and think. At least that is what it looks like they are doing.

I rise and step away from them and wait. I am curious. Honored one? A call? What is this place.

They whisper among themselves too quiet for me to hear.

^You are to be called Alessa.^

I show respect and they seem pleased.

The old Dia comes closer to me and the others leave in both directions.

^Are you ready to proceed?^ I affirm.

^Will you teach me how to sign Alessa?^ Her face changes, but I don't know what it means. She is the first Dia I have been this close too.

^You will learn, but first we need to repair some of the damage. We are limited in what can be done however it will be an improvement.^

I am led into a strange chamber with lots of jars in it. The Dia falls to the ground in a sort of bow. Not sure what I should do so I try and imitate her. When I raise my eyes to see what is happening I notice that the Dia is gone. I rise and look around. Opening a few jars I look inside and smell some of them. Strange smells. Some not nice. Fascinating though.

I sense movement and look towards the perceived movement and see nothing. Strange. I catch it again and quickly look in the same location. I move closer to the corner. There are shelves with jars, brushes, pieces of

cloth, metal things. Lots of metal things. I look down closer to the floor. What a strange pattern. I am not sure what it is. I reach out to touch it and it suddenly changes color and moves away from me. I jump back!

^What is it?^ I ask the air.

Someone behind me, ^Forgive me. I forgot that you had never met a Ceph, much less know how to com with one. This is Nease, our healer. I will help you understand what is being shown.^

^What is a ceph?^ I look closely. It has two eyes and many root like things.

^Ceph, say with honor. They are smarter than either of our species. We are deeply honored that Nease has chosen to serve her apprenticeship with us.^

^She is alive?^ I am feeling faint again, but this time wake myself up before falling.

^Good you are learning. Nease show you are very curious. Most would have left the room and none have ever looked in her jars. She likes you. But to our task. Nease will do what she can to heal you.^

^I feel fine. The meal was wonderful.^

^Hold up your arms.^

I do so. The flaps hang loosely at my sides. I feel something gently touching me and my flaps. They rise on their own. I am astonished. Then I realize the she is behind me.

^You may lower your right arm for the moment.^ I do so, hoping that I have chosen the correct arm.

I feel something cool and numbing on my flaps. I don't have a lot of feeling there and don't even notice them most of the time. I usually tuck them into my work cloths to keep them out of the way.

^Don't lower your arm please. Best not to look until it is done.^

^What is done? What is she doing to me?^ The skin on my arms has grown numb as well. I have to look. I turn my head and see very small arms or fingers, I am not sure what, sewing my flaps back to my left arm. Salve is being carefully applied to the edges. It stings a little and I see a small amount of blood. The edges are then pressed together at these points and a quick stitch is made to hold them together.

I turn further to see Nease. Very strange. I am not sure she has any bones at all, yet she managed to raise many root like arms. I count, eight total. That is certainly a lot of arms. I don't see any legs, but notice that she is able to raise herself on any convenient arm present. Changing arms as needed. I look more closely at what she has done. She is having trouble being on both sides of my flap at the same time as it comes

together. I start to assist by passing the needle back through my skin to the other side. She instantly noticed my assistance and speeds up her work.

Soon we are finished with the left side. I lower that arm carefully and raise the other one. We do the second arm quickly. I help with the salve now as well, using my repaired arm to apply the salve to this front side as well as helping with the needle.

I turn to Nease and ask, ^All done? Will it hold? How soon until I can glide? I am not even sure I can glide. They did this to me so young I never really learned.^ I await a response.

She waves her arms and they change shape and colors rapidly. I am fascinated.

^She show it would best to rest for now. No pressure on the arms until they stop being sore.^

^They are not sore. I can't even feel them.^

^They will be sore in a few eighths. Wait until the soreness goes away before working your arms.^ I affirm, not entirely understanding.

^Nease says we named you well.^

^I like having a call. I have never had one before.^

^A 'call' is the same as a name. Your name is Alessa.^ I affirm.

^Alessa.^ I try saying it. Not a word I know.

I am taken to a chamber. There is bedding material far finer than I have ever experienced. Must be for someone else and I am to assist them. The healing has made me tired and I want to fall asleep. There is not much light. Some comes from the corridor openings to the sky. There is no candle or lamp in this room.

I notice that the light is going. I am having a very hard time staying awake. I just hope that when the one I will serve comes in I will wake up in time to avoid a beating. I curl up in the corner just inside the portal. I should hear them and they should not see me until I have had a chance to get up.

I wake just before first light. I can see a flicker coming from the corridor. I make my way along until I find the food prep area. No one here yet. I go outside and gather wood for the oven wood boxes. Sweep the area and hang a few pots that were out of place. I estimate the area could prepare food for a couple of dozen people. Then I remember the Dia and the Ceph. I have no idea how many there are or what they eat.

I set a pot to heat on a small fire. The one I serve will likely want to wash before coming to eat. I will take a bowl of warm water back to the chamber. I am surprised that other servants have not arrived to prepare

for their charges. I fill the bowl and invert the pot to dry. I carefully carry the small bowl back to the chamber.

When I arrive there is still no one there. No matter. If I had not done the work and they were here I would have been beaten. I stand in the corner and await their return.

Eventually I hear others moving about, but I remain where I am.

Finally I hear and see someone come into the chamber, but they apparently do not see me and leave immediately. Must be looking for the one I am to serve. They did not ask me nor would I have expected them to have. Not my purpose to know what the one I will serve does.

The old Dia comes in with three Ba behind her. There is plenty of light to see by now.

^This is Alessa, a new arrival.^ The three behind her bow to me. I am shocked. Why are they bowing to me? I bow even lower than they have. Their coverings look much nicer than mine does. I am clearly the lower.

They come the rest of the way in and look around.

^Alessa, did you sleep here last night?^ She asks gently. I affirm. I have already dropped to my knees to make myself lower than she is.

She examines the comfortable bedding, then turns back to me.

^Where did you sleep Alessa?^

I look puzzled. She did not expect me to sleep in the bedding did she? I point to the corner near the portal. It is clean of course. No one would be able to determine that is where I was if I did not tell them.

She goes to the bowl on the small table and sticks a finger into the water.

^Who is this water for Alessa?^ Who? Who else? This is confusing. Maybe this is a test?

^For the one I serve.^ I hope I have answered without emotion.

The three look around to see if anyone else is present.

One speaks out of turn, ^Who do you serve?^ I am shocked that she was allowed to speak and expect her to be hit by the Dia, but she is not.

I look back to the Dia and answer, ^I have not met the one I serve yet. I am waiting, as I should, for their arrival.^ Again without emotion. I am a servant. Emotions bring pain.

The three show amusement. I am not sure why.

^Shhh.^

She turns to the others, but asks me another question.

^Alessa, when did you have your last meal? Are you not hungry?^

^When I arrived yesterday, in the receiving chamber. That was more food than I have seen in my life. You were more than generous. I am not

hungry.^

^And the quality of the food?^

^I have never tasted such. Beyond imagining.^

Now speaking to the other three.

^She was given the left over burnt pot scrapings. That was all that was available at the time. What do you three think of that? Would any of you like that for your next meal?^

They all cower as if offered excrement for food. I have eaten worse. Yesterday was much, much better. What is wrong with them?

She turns to me, ^And yet, that was the best she has ever had. She slept on a stone floor with an empty bed within an arm's reach. She cleaned the food preparation area and brought warm water to the one she serves, even before any of you were awake. She kneels now in the presence of a superior. You could learn much from her. Now leave us.^ The three bow and leave at once.

She turns to me, ^I am sorry to have used you in this way. I wanted to teach those three in particular a lesson in humility. They will tell the others, but it was important that they see and experience your lesson themselves.^

^I don't understand.^

^Come with me. Let's get something to eat.^ She reaches out to me. I accept her hand and she lifts me up. I am shaking at the honor of someone higher than me assisting me. What will happen to me?

When we reach the food preparation area everyone stops what they are doing and waits at attention.

She scoffs, ^They would not have done that an eighth ago.^

She turns to what I presume is the head cook, ^I want breakfast for two.^ She scurries off to do as told. Several others assist and very quickly two bowls of steaming food are brought. In the meantime we have sat at a table in the area. The materials present were quickly removed.

The food is brought before us. One bowl for each. The Dia growls at the server and quickly more food is added to each bowl.

^Good enough, barely.^ She then rises. I am confused again. Each bowl has more food than has ever been in my presence before. More than I was allowed to prepare for my family even.

^No one leaves this area until she has finished both bowls.^ They all affirm instantly.

I want to protest, but don't dare. I have never protested aloud to anyone before. I would be beaten beyond measure if I had.

When she is gone, they all look to me. I am guessing they all have

tasks elsewhere or need to finish what they were doing. They are waiting for something. I am afraid to say anything.

A small Ba comes over to me. She is held back, but she twists free and comes over to me.

^If there is anything else you need Alessa, please let us know.^

I close my mouth. No one has ever asked me what I needed before.

Barely speaking I manage to say, ^Water?^ in a squeaky voice.

Immediately a large mug is filled and brought to me.

I look around at everyone, but still no one else moves.

I taste the food by sticking my hand into it and bringing some to my mouth. I have no idea what the sticks next to the bowl are for. My own family used only wooden spoons. The mixture of flavors is strange. I have never tasted anything like it.

I look up.

I sigh and say, ^It is not possible for me to eat even one bowl, much less two. Maybe some of you could assist me? I would be most thankful.^

The young one who asked about my needs, sits down next to me and grabs the sticks and proceeds slowly to show me how to eat the contents. The others go back to their work at least. I relax and watch her.

She looks up at me to see if I understand. I reach for the stick and try to hold them as she has.

^Takes practice. It was what the Hu used before they left. Most efficient actually. Oh, except for soups. We use spoons or straws for those.^ I affirm. When I reach for the mug to drink some water I realize that my arms are sore from the healing. My companion notices my condition.

^Who did that to you?^ I decide to wait on the water and try the sticks again. I finally manage to get some food into my mouth.

^My family, so I would not escape. I did not know of this place before I came.^ I would have tried to escape much earlier if I had known.

^My name is Pegger on account of I am very good at the peg wall.^ I affirm, but have no idea what a peg wall is.

She continues, ^Most of us have new names after arriving. You never have to tell anyone what your name was before. You never have to say anything from before. You have a new life now.^ She has finished her bowl. I am amazed.

^I did not have a call, I mean name. Do you know what Alessa means?^ She shows unknown.

^Might be Ceph. Ask Nease when you see her again.^

Braver, I ask another question quietly, ^Everyone here appears to be

female.^

^Of course, this is Sanctuary. Only females are allowed. Males don't need Sanctuary.^ I show amusement.

She continues, ^Most of us were born here so have not experienced what you have. What is it like outside?^

^I did not see much until I escaped and then most of that was at night so they would not find me as easily. Inside was not as nice as here. I only saw a couple of the chambers my family used. I was not allowed into the other chambers.^

Even with the sticks I am stuffed. There is still a small amount in the bowl. I stare at it with worry.

^I am afraid.^

^Why?^

^I can't eat any more, but I am afraid of being beaten for not finishing.^

^Beaten? No one is ever beaten here!^ She is clearly upset.

^But you all showed fear when she gave orders.^

^We show respect. Hattie founded Sanctuary. None of us would be alive now if she had not. But, no one here fears her or anyone else here.^

^I am tired again. I don't understand why. Normally I would have worked for several eighths by now.^

^The healing and all that you have experienced since you have arrived. I can take you back to your room if you like.^ If I like? What is this place?

^Am I not expected to work as everyone else is?^

^They will find work for you. Never fear. But, for now it is more important that you be healed. Healing takes time.^

We arrive back at the room I was brought to last night.

^Do you know who it is that I serve? The one who lives here?^ I prepare to curl up near the door to rest in wait.

^Alessa, this is your room. No one else will use this room unless you die. That may be a long time yet we all hope.^ She leaves astonished. Guess they have not all heard my story yet. Pegger was nice though.

I tentatively feel the bedding. I have never slept on anything but rags at best. Mostly on floors, dirt or even stone when I was being punished. I lie down on the bedding. It is very soft and comfortable. I fall asleep dreaming of the meal I have just had and the new people I have met.

I awake near sunset from night ghosts! I dreamed of being chased by my brothers. They were carrying knives and intended to cut me to pieces slowly. They were taunting me with descriptions of what they intended to

do. It is hard to believe that I am safe.

^You have been through much little one.^ I am startled by her voice. I rise and then kneel before her.

^It is good that you show respect, but you need not do so. We are all equal here. I have been chosen to lead because of my knowledge and abilities to lead. I am afraid I took some liberties with the cook staff today to insure you had enough to eat. I am sure they would have given you anything after seeing how thin you are.^

She removes some cloth from a bag.

^I have new clothing for you. How are your arms?^

^Sore, but not as bad as a beating.^

^That won't happen here at least.^ I affirm.

She looks startled, ^I have been very rude. I have not given you my name.^

^Pegger told me your name is Hattie.^ She affirms and relaxes.

^Do you have any questions?^

^Many.^ She shows amusement.

^Ask me two for now then. I do have work to do as well.^

^I have never met a Dia before and have many questions about Dia, but mostly I want to know what Sanctuary is and what will happen to me.^

^I am the last Dia on Ba Eden, I think. Certainly the last in this area. Dia used to be the servants of the Ba. Other species did other tasks, but we served mostly in the living areas and work offices. When the persecutions came we were hunted down and delivered to concentration camps. The leaders no longer trusted us, thinking we were evil aliens bent on destroying them.

There, we were grouped with Hu, Dio and a few Ceph. The Ceph did not last long without the necessary access to water and salt. The Dio went next. They kept trying to escape and being big and powerful they scared the Ba the most. Most were killed with the bang sticks or in deep traps. The Hu were the strange ones. They acquiesced at first.

They became very thin, just as we did. We were not given enough food. We were told we were to eat the dead, but none of us would. Finally the Hu broke and killed themselves rather than suffer any longer.

That was when we realized that if we did not escape we would be next. I am one of two who managed to break free with the help of the others. The remaining Dia were killed as punishment for our escape. We watched from a distance.

We had hoped to be able to gain support on the outside and then

rescue the remaining Dia. Now we ran. Eventually we ended up here. Digging into the hill here we came across some chambers which we have added to since. We were able to hide long enough to be forgotten.

Later we rescued any who were treated as we were. Some you will notice are missing arms or legs. I suspect you know why.^ I affirm.

^This was some twenty years ago now. I was a young female at the time. Now I am quickly approaching the last of my moons.

Sanctuary came about when we approached the local communities and agreed to offer service in exchange for food or metals we lacked or were not able to grow here. Eventually the agreement became tradition. They needed servants now that the other species were gone. All of our outside workers are excellent well trained workers. Much better than their own surplus females whose motivation is deprivation and beatings.^

^Don't these workers get beaten in turn? What prevents them from being captured and held?^

^Ah, if they did, then all of our people would stop working at once. You see if we are not allowed to return for one day every eight day, then we know the agreement has ended. If anyone returns beaten we withdraw all workers for one eight day. If killed, then for twelve moons. They have become very dependent on our skills.^

^How come I have never seen one of these workers?^

^We had not reached your section of your settlement yet. We start with the leaders and work our way down. You will never have to work in your own settlement again. That would be too much to ask. If you ever work on the outside, then it will be to another settlement. It is important that no one recognize you. We all wear the same uniform when outside. They may beat their own, but they do not touch one of us. We can live without them. They cannot live without us.^

^Why don't they just come here and kill everyone then?^

Her face changes, but I don't know what she is feeling.

^There is a secret you may be told in time. We are not undefended. Let's leave it at that for now. If you are able I would like you to see the healer again. It is important that your healing be monitored for signs of infection or other problems.^

^You want me to go to the chamber of Nease right now?^

^If you able. I can take you so you do not get lost.^

^I remember. Three portals to the right there is a cross path. I take the left side, go fifteen portals, turn right, go two more, up the stairs, eight portals on the left is where the healing was done.^

She bows to me for some reason and leaves. What have I done now?

If I did not remember instructions correctly I was beaten. I learned never to forget.

As I make my way to Ceph Nease I am careful not to look into any open portals. If I was meant to know something, then I would be told. Otherwise I am not to notice or remember anything seen by accident.

I was correct about the location at least. I thought for a moment I was going to be embarrassed.

The portal is open and there are lights inside. I enter part way and ask, ^May I enter? It is Alessa. I have come to have your work checked.^

A Ceph, I assume is Nease comes up to me, grabs my hand with one of her arms. How do you know the gender of a Ceph? Pegger said only females here. Does not matter, everyone has seen everything there is to see on me. I go with Nease into the center of the chamber.

^I don't understand Ceph, so I am not sure what to do. I have been thinking about it though. Could you show me the way you say yes and then no?^

Nease makes patterns on her large section and also waves her arms. First one way and then the next.

^Okay, do you need to do both patterns and arm movements?^ What I take for no appears on her body, but she does not move her arms.

^Got it. Either method works. So if I can't see your body I might see your arm and understand what you said.^ A yes appears.

^Only you are silent, so it can't be called said. That is why Hattie said show instead of said.^ Another yes.

^I assume you need to examine me.^ Yes. I drop my covers and raise my arms somewhat. It hurts to raise them too high. She mimics raising them higher.

I raise them as high as I can without fainting from the pain. She comes up to me and carefully touches the area where the fold is mended. It is red and sore. She goes over to the wall and opens a jar. She dips an arm inside and covers it with whatever is inside. She comes over to me and touches the red areas. It stings at first and then a moment later feels wonderful.

She backs away from me and turns her body away from me.

^Are you done?^ A yes, done with an arm coming from her backside.

^That is interesting. You don't even need to see me to show me. Thank you Ceph Nease for your healing. First time anyone has ever cared enough to try.^ I bow low and back out.

On my way back to my chamber, what a strange thought, my chamber. I try showing yes and no using my arms and don't do very well. When I

try using my feet and legs I think I get a better result. If a Ceph can say yes and no with any arm, why not me?

I am nearly back to my chamber when I see Hattie. I stop and bow to her.

She sees me and comes closer.

^How was your visit with Ceph Nease?^

^She examined me and put some save on my repaired fold. It stung at first, but feels much better now.^

^You feel good enough to do some work?^

I answer by saying yes in Ceph using my feet. I look at her to see if she understood.

She pauses before answering, ^Maybe we gave you the wrong name. Come with me.^

I start to follow her.

^What else did you to com about?^

^I only learned how to show yes and no. That is how I knew what she wanted.^

^How did she show you what was yes and what was no?^

^Oh, I asked her to show me. She can com with either a pattern on her body or by using any arm available. I have never seen anything like it.^

^Interesting. I expected you to behave differently here at Sanctuary. I did not expect it to happen so fast. You feel safe here then?^

^Yes. I think so. Is there a reason I should not?^

^There are some here who resent your presence. You have suffered more than anyone here in a long time. Some have forgotten their former lives, even though many have seen it happen to others around them when on the outside. You remind them of that forgotten past and what could happen to them again if Sanctuary should fail.^

^May that never happen.^ I say softly. It does calm my excitement though. I will not get soft. I am resolved to sleep on the stone floor, not the bedding. Whatever task she is taking me to I will complete without complaint and to the best of my abilities. Servants who get soft die.

Mars

Temple duty again. I am getting so tired of temple duty. The Haojian must hate me. I can do nothing right. I try so hard, but he always finds an error. Most of the time I can't even see the error. How am I supposed to stop making an error I can't even see? As punishment I am here sweeping the floor with this tiny brush. Again. I even think the brush is smaller this time. Soon I will be down to a hair brush. Not that I have any hair.

I would really prefer to work in the food prep area. The flat bread is so good. Probably all gone by now. Sunset soon. One day gone. Yep, here comes the Gwong to light the lanterns. Not that I get a break. Just keep brushing. It won't get done fussing over it. The weird thing is that it must take a certain amount of time. If I try and go faster they just find more faults and I end up spending longer at the task than if I just took my time in the first place.

Cockroaches are coming out. One of the few bugs we have. I wonder why that is? A whole world and you would think there would be more kinds of life. I can imagine hundreds. Most of the differences are in the plants though. Why more plants than animals? Must be a hundred kinds of rock weed at least. Unfortunately all edible, barely. If I had a say they would not exist. Too much in the bread in my opinion. Wonder what the bread would taste like without it? Heaven I suspect.

Brush, brush, brush. They won't come for prayer and chanting until third light. Three lights for each triday. Eight tridays, seven work and one free triday. Six tridays away for me. I am sure it will never arrive. It was during my freeday that I got into trouble. Why do they call it freeday if you are not free? They expect everyone to work on freeday, spiritual work, not physical, but work all the same in my opinion.

I was trying to read the old texts. I should be thankful that they were at least translated into Standard. The originals were in something called Ceff or something like that. Picture of one on the front. A mythical monster meant to scare small ones. I think the Primes did it themselves just to exclude us. I slogged through the Standard version. Lots of text on duty, hierarchies and proper protocol for honoring a female leader. Got lots of those here. One similarity.

Brush, brush, brush. Am I in hell? Did I do something in a previous life to deserve this punishment? Why couldn't I have been born a wizard? Would that have been too much to ask? They say there are no wizards and never were any. But, then why do so many texts mention them? The

teachers say they weren't really wizards, just a way of saving time in the telling of the story. Imagine if they had to say everything that happened in a three eight triday journey. Boring!

“Look, a giant roach.”

“Bet it came from Luna City. All the big ones come from there.”

Pests! Those two have been after me since I was little. Never in front of any one in authority of course. The teachers stopped believing me. Two innocent looking native Martians against one from Luna City. Never mind that my ancestors came here hundreds of shut ins before now. Once a Loonie, always a Loonie. Heaven forbid that one of your daughters should fall in love with one. I have never heard of anyone bonding with one of us. Males are especially forbidden. Some of the females will attract Martian male attention for awhile, but they always end up with child and no bond. Some don't care. They hope that eventually they will have enough Martian blood in them to pass.

Never works though. All the young have black hair. Black hair means Loonie. Cutting it off during temple duty does not hide it. NO bonding during temple time. Three shut ins. Three shut ins. I will be brushing the stone here until it is a centimeter thinner than it is now. Brush, brush, brush.

Starting to get light. I try to look more intense. Sweat appears on my forehead just as the Gwong returns to trim the lights. I don't want him reporting that I was not working hard. The real incentive to work hard during dark periods is because of the cold. Working hard helps you stay warm. Must be twenty below at least. I can't imagine duty at one of the northern temples. They only get a few eight tridays of warmth before shut in comes again. They say the blue world gets as hot as forty, but I don't believe that. How would they know?

If it gets any warmer in here during the day they will have to open the shutters to the outside. It is rare that I actually get to see the sun itself. Past time that I had farm duty. I wonder why I haven't been sent there. Ah, right, I am a Loonie. Loonies are afraid of the surface. We get too scared and our piss freezes in our robes.

Brush, brush, brush. I may be going too fast. Better slow down some. Have to be especially careful around the altar. They are on their faces here so much they would certainly noticed any missed dust. Dust, it is everywhere. Can never get it out of anything for long. Hence I am here. Brush, brush, brush.

Shit, the prayer bell. I must be messed up. It can't be the third of day. No, definitely the second. It can only mean some special service of some

kind.

I scramble to gather my dust piles and collect everything for disposal in the pit. I am not done with the hall, but that would really do it for me if they found the piles I created. Here they come. I can see the flames of light. Too far from the exit. I hide in the back corner and hunch down. Our robes are the same color as the wall and in the low light, shit, the light that is growing brighter by the moment. I will be seen for sure.

“Blood sacrifice. It is the only way.”

“We have not had a blood rite since the dark ages. Before the green period.”

“Have you been outside? The hills are losing their color. It will be called the new red period if this keeps up.”

“We don't have any townies to cull this time.”

“It will have to be one of us then. Someone no one will miss.”

“Be careful what you say. If word got out.”

“No prayers scheduled here. This is the last place anyone would be.”

A diffuse beam of light slowly comes closer to me. I can't back up much more.

“Have we heard from the other temples?”

“They are all reporting the same. Each has agreed that it is the only way.”

I hear a sigh, “Then we have no choice.”

“This is barbaric. It is not of the way of light.”

“Sometimes we have no choice. We will do penance later to atone.”

“Better than everyone starving. Many more would die without the sacrifice now. Is the preparatory ready to receive the gift?”

“Everything is ready.”

My heart is beating so loud they must hear it. The sun touches my foot and I bring it closer to me carefully. I am out of room. I will be found out for sure. Who else would they choose? I am nobody. Nobody would miss me. No one cares if I die or go missing. I am the best choice for them. Maybe that is why they have been keeping me around the temple so much lately.

“Leave by different routes. Best if we are not seen together. People will talk, even in a monastery.”

I realize that I had not been breathing and take a deep breath. Going into stasis right now would not serve me well. I take a few more extra breaths quickly to be sure. I can't stay. I must get out. Wish it was not so light, but I have no choice. We will soon see how a Loonie does on the surface.

There are no surface exits near the temple, even if I can see the sun through the portals on the high ceiling. Who knows how many hallways it has reflected down before coming here. The Makers were very clever in forming the temple. The Makers. So much attributed to them. How could two, no matter how talented, have done so much?

I bring my cowl up over my head. Normally I am not noticed, but I am sure that now that I don't want to be, I will be. The important thing is to not rush. No one moves fast unless there is an emergency or training for one.

I will need food and something to carry it in. That could be a problem. Someone is bound to ask what I am doing. No one eats outside of the normal serving times. There are all those prayers that need to be done. Still, someone has to be doing work while prayers are going on. A worker may have a smaller prayer set for when they are on.

One advantage is that most of us wear the same robe and look very similar.

I find my way to the food preparation area. I took a couple of wrong turns being disoriented from leaving by a different portal that I arrived at the temple at. I can smell the food cooking.

I have an idea that might solve several problems at once.

I make my way to the server counter.

“Third Chantor has a sore throat and wants to eat in her rooms to avoid giving any one the infection. I have been asked to bring food to her.”

“One moment. Wish they would tell us ahead of time. No matter. Only take a moment.” He turns and goes into the prep area. Comes back in a moment. I really expected it to take longer.

“Third Cantor. Her rooms are some distance. Will you need a basket to carry it in?” I affirm. He leaves again. It takes longer this time. Finally he returns. The basket is huge. He places it on the counter. I say a prayer of thanks and reach up.

“You sure you can handle it? I could go with you.” No, please.

“Part of my penance. Better if I do it myself.”

“Ah, sorry to hear. You should have upset a smaller Cantor.” I manage to get the basket to the floor. It does weigh a lot. I purposely picked the Third Cantor because of her size. I was not wrong in guessing she eats enough to maintain her size. There is enough here to sustain me for an eight of thirds.

As soon as I get out of sight I look through the basket and stuff the solid breads and tubers into my robe pockets. That makes it easier to

handle the basket, some.

Next I need to find a storage closet or something near an exit. I want to make my actual escape during a dark period. Not easy on me. I do not have surface clothing, but if I go during a light period I will be easy to see near the exit.

There are lots of storage chambers. I choose one with lots of stuff already in it. I manage to make my way around a couple of large jars. There is not much light in here. I have to feel and smell the contents still in the basket to try and figure out what is there. I choose the delicate sweet bowl. No real cover. I am sure I would spill the contents if I had to travel far.

Unfortunately, being sweet I am soon wide awake when I should be resting.

By the time the sweetness leaves me, I am dopey and ready to sleep a full three day. Just when it becomes dark. I can't stay here another light dark period. I repack the basket and look around the jars. I hear soft voices and hesitate.

Two people come in, and with difficulty, move one of the large jars near me.

“You smell food?”

“Just wishful thinking Jerd. Move it before we miss another meal.”

They slowly get the jar out of the enclosure. Once out, they are able to tilt it and roll it away.

I am fully awake now. That was close. I walk out of the chamber calmly and then walk past the jar rollers as if on an errand.

“Where did he come from?”

“Don't care, just move the jar. Hey, watch what your doing. Nearly took my foot off.”

“Sorry.” Back to just the sound of grunting and the jar rolling. That has to take a lot of concentration. What if it tips over?

The bells ring for third day prayers. It is now quiet.

I find the exit door. This one has been rarely used. Probably an emergency exit. I have to move a couple of containers aside. I am sweating when I am done. I open the portal a bit. Cold air enters and chills me. I don't have a choice. I open it quickly and scoot through. Within moments I am shivering.

Still dark outside I can't see much but the horizon. I suddenly feel faint and disoriented. I quickly sit down and reach out with my arms to stabilize myself. There are no walls other than the side of the hill behind me. Only it is not straight, but sloping away from me. I am not sure

which way is up. This was never a problem inside. Not all the walls inside are straight. Why am I messed up outside? I am freezing out here.

I remember from training that I need to get into a slow state to survive. I say my mantra to center my mind. Practiced since childhood it comes on me quickly. Never thought I would actually need it. I feel warmer, but at the cost of moving much slower. I can speed up once it gets light. I could stop, but at some point maybe even a nobody would be noticed as not there to finish brushing the temple floor.

I rise carefully and center my thoughts on the horizon. Placing one step in front of the other I start my journey.

As it gets light I can make out the fields before me. They seem to stretch on forever. I never realized that they were so big. I almost faint again, but center on the horizon and I calm down. At temple there are only a couple of hundred people at any one time. My previous life seemed so small now. How many temples are there? How many layers of people for how much distance?

I look back and realize that I have barely left the exit. Slow time, really is slow time. It is not meant for travel, but survival. It takes me nearly an eight to bring myself back to normal time. I am cold, but I am moving faster.

As I walk, I eat some more of the basket contents. This time I open a water jar and drink some of the precious liquid. It is getting lighter. I speed up. My moving faster is helping me to keep warm. I am glad that this happened during the spring and not the middle of shut in. Would I have survived this long during shut in? Might not have even gotten the portal open. I remember something about packing the exits to keep out the cold air. Only a few kept for minimal travel. Most people are in hibernation during shut in. No fires, no hazards, no need for emergency exits.

I look behind me again and am thankful that I am much further away now. I will be soon into the fields themselves. I hurry.

I reach the fields and stop to examine the greening plant life. Hidden in pockets I see the dried encysted shut in life forms. Not enough warmth for them yet to germinate. I reach in and carefully touch one. It pops! What have I done?

Then I realize I am warmer than the stone around me. I must have set it off. I don't touch any more.

I look into the basket and notice that some of the bowls have tipped over and messed the basket. Some of the juices drip through to the ground. Precious food wasted. I try and eat as much of the spilled

material as I can. I taste basket as well. Another few light dark periods and I will abandon the basket.

I begin again. In the distance I see people working in the fields. No one comes toward me. My balance is getting better at least. It actually seems to be getting warm. I drink some water. Nearly empty. I know about rain, though I have never seen it. There are also supposed to be lakes and streams on the outside. We have some water storage basins inside, but the water does not move. Unless someone fills a jar or something of course.

I keep thinking I see what must be water in the distance, but when I get closer I see it is just more fields. Is the entire outside green? Everything looks the same. I am not even sure where the inside is any more. Have I been this way before? Inside there are clues to where you are. Otherwise everyone would get lost. No sector markers here. Nothing but green hills and a few larger rocks. Even those seem similar to each other. I am sure I have seen that one before. Have I?

I sit. What am I doing? I am thirsty, but have not seen any water. I have avoided the outside people so well I don't see any of them any more. The sun is about to set. Already getting cold. I had better slow down. The wind is getting stronger. That really messed with me at first until I realized what it was. The air never moves much inside. Sand is in everything. I can't eat anything without getting a mouthful of sand as well. No water and I have eaten all the items that had water in them. All that is left is dry bread and hard vegetables.

I do not even try to move this time during slow time. I make a hollow in the sand and green lichens and curl up in it.

When I wake the sun is already high in the sky. A beautiful pink sky. I am nearly covered in sand. When I get up, sand pours out of my pockets. I don't try and eat anything. I need to find water.

Water flows down hill. I start by finding a path that leads down and follow the curves and hills in which ever direction leads me lower.

I lose track of time. One foot in front of another. At some point I lost the basket. I don't even know why I carried it for so long.

I don't remember it getting dark. I wake to another night of silence and cold. I try to stand, but can't. I am too weak. I fall asleep again.

I cough sand out of my mouth. I can't feel my swollen tongue. I can barely breathe. I see the sun, but I don't know if it is rising or falling.

Death must be near. All this running away to try to save myself, to die alone in the empty outside. Can't change fate. Not even sure I postponed it any. My eyes close. I want to scratch the sand out, but can't raise my

arms. I breathe in sand. I must already be lying down. My breathing slows and I fall asleep again.

Dreams come of living a normal life. It seems silly or even a nightmare. I see the Cantors and other leaders. The Haojian appears sitting on a stone chair in fine clothing. Silly. What is the point? The farmers work continuously on the outside to supply food for those in the inside.

We were told that the purpose of the temple system was so we could reach ever closer to understanding the universe, the purpose of life, the meaning of everything. Seen now from the outside, it looks futile. I laugh, no one is really doing anything more than brushing the temple floor. It is all just brushing the temple floor.

Far Out

It is silent, but it is not quiet. This world started out a brown world. That was so long ago I barely remember. Thousands of years I suppose. How long does Hell last? A Hu concept I know, but it matches this place. I was a young TK barely qualifying when it was decided to give me a chance and bring me to the All TK Meeting. If I attended the meeting maybe I would understand and then grow.

Then the world shifted. To the far edge of the universe. Thousands of years and we have not found home yet. On a nearly infinite universe that is not surprising. If we had found home I would have been much more surprised.

I look out one of the few portals. 'thn metal of course. Most of the ship is made of the stuff in various matter states. I am only a six and though expected to be immortal, I cannot work this stuff easily. Nor can I make it. Just push it around a little. Yeah, still a six. After this time I should be an eight at least. My guess is they really needed to have some lower level sens to do the dirty work. I do the dirty work. The work no one would volunteer for, not even the nice ones.

The brown world where I have spent most of my life recedes from me. Must be at many times the speed of light by now. I am too weak to be in the push sector of course. They never named the world. Oh, there was some number assigned to it, but even that is long forgotten. Just brown, no respect brown. To name it would indicate that we accepted our sentence of banishment and that this was now our new home. Home for me, really the only place I remember. Guess it looks different if you are a seven, eight or nine.

Now I am leaving it. A long way to the edge of the universe. Brown is outside the universe. Strange idea. It must be a construct. Equally spaced at nearly one billion light years apart, but expanding as predicted by the expansion of the universe. They appear to be here to define or somehow control the universe. Like a colossal cage. None of the high TKs has figured it out yet. I don't think they will.

Pre TK we all knew there were things beyond our comprehension. Why did the comet hit our world of all the froth worlds? Were we somehow unworthy? I was born during the crazy years. My father was a seer. He was convinced that it was divine retribution for the sin of letting the off worlders settle. Mostly just Ceph I know now, but every time he saw another sen he went into his act. Shaking and yelling like he was on

fire. Many believed him. It brought us food without much work at a time when food was scarce.

Then the gathering brought us all to the settlement. My father disappeared soon after we arrived. No one ever saw him again. Happiest day of my life.

I don't know what was worse the lectures about how I was the worst sinner on the planet or the beatings to make the lesson stick to my skin. From then on I was alone. My mother did not survive the journey to settlement. A random accident. Tripped and fell right on her head. Dead instantly. Lucky I guess.

Not attached to any elders I did tasks for anyone who would let me try. I was not very good at anything, but a lot of Di, we were mostly Di then, were not good at what needed to be done. I was just one of many.

The Fish Eaters were in charge back then. A closed group that gave orders that we all followed. No one complained at first. Just having a safe place to sleep and any food to eat was enough. The glory days for me.

Don't get me wrong, when I was selected for the gifts I was overjoyed at first. Soon I realized how hard it was. I was always the last one in class to finish an assignment or learn a new skill. Guess that's why I am still a six.

Only became a six after I started to grow old on brown. Guess they felt sorry for me or got tired of renewing me. This way I am on my own. Try to stay out of the way most of the time. Hard when you are trying to find some task to do just to avoid going rap.

I remember raps a little. We were told tales of them chasing us when we were young hatchlings, then after the comet I saw and ran from them for real. Was nearly rap chow several times. I suspect that is what really happened to my mother, but no one at the time would tell me. She was big enough to easily take on a single and maybe a tag team, but they were running in whole pods before gathering.

How's it hanging Droopy Tail? Snap, my only friend. Can't hide from anyone on a ship.

Got any work for me to do? Nice for a Crusta. Could have done much worse for a mentor I suppose.

Only Push and Nav are on duty at the moment. Want to get something to eat?

I don't remember much about Di Eden, yet I miss it.

We all miss the Edens. Not much water here for my kind or the Ceph.

We could make our own food anywhere we are and do so when on duty or just do sys main and not even bother, but off duty tradition says

we have to eat in something called the mess hall. Not sure why it is called that. One of the cleanest places on board ship. Not that I have spent much time in one. Third trip out bound. I would rather be on brown than here, but rules say we all have to put in time. Distribute the risk or different sets of sensors on the problem. I don't know which. Not something that I need to worry about. We never get anywhere near the action.

Off duty sens eat when they want, so only a few are here at any given time. We got em all, Ceph, Cat, Di, Dia, Dio, Ba, Blu, Hu and Crusta, but no Pink or Bugs of course. Nor those bag like floating things. Only heard about the bag creatures. There were supposed to have been a few at the great meeting, but I did not see one. Fist would have been a better place for me than here. Bugs I could handle. Boredom and no reason for me existing are a bad rap.

Bowls, never could abide bowls. A good sized plate of well aged meat is my choice.

Snap, if you keep eating as much as you want there won't be enough mass on board to satisfy you.

*Or fit me I am afraid. You are not so small yourself. Been gaining?
I exhale, Bored. I eat when I am bored.*

I eat period. Always hungry. What made our culture succeed. Have to be creative to get enough to eat when everyone else is trying to do the same.

Hey, at least we are not like the Hu or Cat. I hear the Hu mated all the time. No season, always ready.

At least the TKs don't. Well the Hu don't. Some of the Cats have gone off of their meds. Talk about letting everyone know what's going on. Ever seen a Ku mate?

I shake my head like a Hu. She understands though.

Make more noise than the Hu, if you can believe it. None around now. All on Ku Eden. Heard theirs was the first world to disappear. Guess we were the second. Wonder if all the rest are in the same position?

If they had no TKs would it make any difference?

*No moon could be a problem. How would they know when to mate?
Ceph would be upset at least.*

Maybe we were the only two. We'll never know so it doesn't matter.

This TK chow is horrible. Hope we are successful this trip.

Some are making meat by duping each other.

Do you really want to get the taste for your friends?

I tease her, The Ceph say the Crusta are very tasty.

She clacks her forward claws, They aren't bad either, if you let them

sit in their own juices for a few eight days. She clacks her claws again. Their way of showing amusement.

Some of my best friends are Ceph though. Never thought I would like them when I was small, but once you get to know them, they still seem better rotting on a plate.

They are a bit retentive. I can never clean an area clean enough to pass inspection.

That's because we are both messy species. We are used to leaving our mess and moving on. Pitty the poor Hu. They seem to like to live in their own waste.

Nine on deck!

We put down our TK chow and come to attention. Another reason the nines annoy me.

Pay attention everyone. We are getting close to our objective. Assume battle stations.

Battle stations? I thought this was a leaf chase not a rap fest.

Snap and I look at each other and then scatter to our respective positions. I make a lot of noise stomping down the corridor. Make me a seven and I can pop like a Cat. Yeah, I could use TK to float but that is no fun at all. We pride ourselves on the amount of noise we make going into battle. It is hoped that if we make enough noise we will scare the enemy into not trying. Of course out here they can't hear us.

About time Droopy. Made enough noise. I could hear you halfway across the ship.

Thank you Randy. A Hu who is trying to spit me. I turn it around to poke him instead. We have to work together as a team, but we are not happy about it. Not mad at each other really, more at the task we have to do. Since we are closest to non TK, we have the most experience without abilities. Therefore we are in charge of distributing solid weapons in the event of a limiter attack. Very heavy bulky weapons that everyone will be going crazy to get at the same time.

TKs are not used to waiting their turn, especially when stressed. The training drills we went through were painful. They used actual limiters. That freaked everyone into thinking it was a real attack. Ship got hulled in several places from weapons fire. They had to dupe two Ceph who got sucked out. Their bodies were too badly messed up to be worth saving. They were wet heads for an eight day.

!Randy, did you hear anything about our assignment this run?!

He sighs, "Not a thing. Not that we ever do." He goes back to some art work on his knees.

!What are you doing?!

“Called scrimshaw. On Hu Eden sailors used to do it on voyages to pass the time.”

!As a six you could do that in a moment.!

He laughs, “Then what would I do? This is to pass time, not to accomplish anything.”

!Sort of like the Ba leaf art.!

“Similar. This would last a few hundred years if treated properly.”

!By that time you will have a room full of them.!

“I give them away. I'll make you one if you want. What's your favorite sea creature? Traditional to do sea creatures.”

!Snap and I get along some.!

He looks worried, “Not sure I could do a Crusta. They are pretty complicated. This art form is not that high rez. How about a Ceph? I am getting pretty good at Ceph.”

!Sure. . . ! A loud thump shakes the ship. We both stop and scan. Even a six can scan the entire ship.

“Too far away. There is a dent on the port side near the stern.”

!I sense it. The area has been sealed off and the sen evacuated. What could possibly have done that? Hard enough to get a high velocity pebble through.!

“If it was bigger it would have taken us out. Looks more like a broad TK pulse. Are our nines asleep?”

!Augmented nines attacking us? We are entering 'thn space. They could have linked?!

“If a large group of nines hit us we would not even know it. Just cease to exist.”

We go to red light. This has happened in training exercises so we know what to do. Randy puts away his art and we unlatch the weapon lockers. We pull down and latch tables to the floor. We then lay out weapons in species order and latch them to the table. Sure enough we lose gravity. We are already wearing mag shoes. That happened when we went to battle stations.

!You still have TK?! He nods, but keeps his eyes on the open side of our space.

“Here they come.” Sentients want a weapon before they are limited. Most just pop in, grunt and grab what they want. We replace what is taken as fast as we can.

“Shit, someone has taken the last Hu weapon. That means someone has taken two.”

!They would only do that if it was real. Wait, there is a Ceph scatter gun here. No one has grabbed that.!

“Do I look like I have eight arms?” He waves his arms about trying to simulate having more.

!I would not have any better luck than you, but you are welcome to the last Di blaster.!

“I could not lift that without TK. Better if you take it. I can operate the Ceph weapon, just less efficiently than a Ceph could.”

!Hopefully . . .! We start leaning towards the right wall and the floor starts to tilt.

“The outer shell is getting warm. We are going down! There is a planet below us. Did not realize we were that close to one.” They leave us out of everything.

Sure enough, the abandon ship signal sounds. We don't talk. Randy and I have an assigned escape craft. More of a pod. Light enough we can push it with our abilities if the engines fail and our TK doesn't. I scan and can still see things through the walls. At least we are not limited. I wonder what happened? I would like to TP Snap, but don't want to distract her.

We have drilled so many times we are in the pod before I even realize it. Guess this is the way it is supposed to work. Randy is the pilot. I don't fit in the chair. For a species that has no biology for flying Hu seem to do really well. That sure upsets the Ba. I show amusement as I do my own checkout.

“Velocity is increasing.” I acknowledge. Going to be a rough ride.

“Shit! We can't release!” He looks frantic.

!Can we do it manually?!

“Not strong enough. We are going down!”

I unstrap, reach up and grab the release bars and pull with all my strength. Nothing. I try again and again. I manage a little. I pull again at it comes crashing down with a loud bang. I can feel us dropping. I TK myself back into my seat and strap in.

!All clear. Go for it!! I yell.

The jets cut in and I am slammed against the seat. Out of the front window I can see the land approaching fast, then we turn to the right and level out. As we turn I look down and see the ship going down.

!Did everyone get out?! The ship crashes into a hill in a ball of shards scattered over kilometers. We don't have much that is volatile in our engines.

He does not answer. We can't be the only ones?

He comes around again and we land near the edge of the crash site.

There are a lot of plants, but they are not green. Everything is a shade of magenta or purple. Erythrocyanin based is my guess. Before getting out we check air and scan for large wildlife nearby.

“A little higher in halides that I personally like. Will smell bad, but we can breathe it for a time. Might want to bring breathers just in case we get hit.” By limiters he means.

!I don't scan any thing large within a few km.!

“Well, let's go see if we can find anything. It is a long way home.”

!Home?! He gives me a dirty look. Brown is not home, it is hell.

When the back port opens, the hot stinky air hits us. I may have a new definition of hell. I cough a few times and try to hold it. Instinctively I start to use TK to filter out the nasties.

Randy is ahead of me and already into the rubble. You think 'thn metal is pretty indestructible, but nothing is if you apply enough force. Hitting the surface at high speed, even a glancing blow, is enough. The ground smokes and many of the trees are gone or on fire. The fire has a green cast I am not used to. Must be the halides. The ground is too hot for my bare feet. I TK up a meter, then two.

I catch up with Randy. He is looking among the twisted beams and plates. 'thn metal does not burn and only melts at extreme temperatures. Some of this is melted, as is the rock around it. I look, but I do not recognize any of what I am looking at, it is so distorted.

We spend several eighths gradually moving down the path of destruction. We think we identify seven pods among the destruction. They embedded themselves deep into the ground, being on the bottom of the ship.

“Look here. An eighth one. The docking clamps have released. They almost made it.” Bodies are not seen. They would have been incinerated and indistinguishable from the local char. The sun is setting, but we had gone to TK mode some time ago. Instinctive I guess.

!I have been scanning. Hoping for something. Any sign at all of other survivors. I have found nothing.!

“Pretty moon.” I look up quickly. I have not seen a moon since I was a young runner. Smaller than our lost moon. Markings are not the same of course. Still, it is a wonderful sight. I stare at it for some moments.

“You notice that none of the life around here has DNA anything like ours?” I affirm.

!Between the two of us we should be able to cope. Not going to eat any of this though. We should get back.!

“I suppose so.” There were thirty pods and we have only found remnants of eight. There may still be twenty one more in here somewhere, just too many pieces to locate.

We make it a little less than half way. Suddenly we are falling and both hit the ground hard. Fortunately we were not very high.

“I am limited. Can't summon anything.”

!I can't either.!

We start to run, but Randy is so pathetic I finally get frustrated and scoop him up and he rides my back as I leap over smaller rubble. The ground is still warm and I know I will be sorry, but staying here is not an option. Without the moon I would not have been able to see well enough to make it.

“I have activated the beacon.” A moment later I hear, “There it is, more to the right.” Tired and in much pain in my feet I turn towards the right.

“Too far.” I adjust. I finally see the beacon myself. We don't see red all that well and he was higher up than my eyes are.

My feet are smoking when we arrive at the pod. Randy jumps down and immediately gets the first aid kit out.

“You made a mess of them Droop.” I am not convinced that I will survive.

“Best if you lay down. I will get us some food.”

!Water would be good.!

“Right. I should have thought of that.”

!I wonder why we are limited. I have not seen nor scanned anything larger than a mouse.!

“Nor I. It doesn't matter. We will just have to deal with it. Well, if the local wildlife is not edible to us, maybe we are not edible to it.”

!You don't mean the larger creatures do you?!

He nods no. It is the danger of infection that I face now. I can no longer feel my feet. Randy must have shot me full of anesthetics. I don't dare look. Up until we were limited I had been maintaining my bios.

“You saved our lives Droop. I will not lose you now.”

!You mean there is something worse than living with me?!

“Hard to believe isn't it?” We both show amusement. I finish my water and fall asleep.

When I wake, it is very clear that the meds have worn off. I bump a foot against something and faint for a moment. Tough dino huh? I have grown so soft I disgust myself. Randy is snoring next to me. I don't remember him snoring before. Right, we didn't used to sleep as TKs. I try

to reach the med kit and knock it off the table. Randy snorts and is quiet only for a moment.

I know that if I try and reach for the kit now I will have to put pressure on at least one foot. Not worth it yet.

Unfortunately I am not able to sleep either. Pain does that.

Finally I see light coming in the front portal. Night seemed to last forever. As soon as the light hits Randy he snorts and wakes up. Confused at first he does not seem to know where he is.

“Wow. I have not slept like that in thousands of years. Guess I needed it.” He looks at the front instrument panel and shows shock.

!What is it?!

“We have been asleep for thirty hours!” Thirty hours? Ah, we have been so long on brown that I had not realized. Of course. Any other planet would have a different day length. He consults the computer.

“Says here that the day length is only four hours with thirty one hours of darkness. Only took you an hour to move us seven kilometers. Over that terrain it is impressive. How are your feet this morning?”

!Pain, a lot of pain.!

“Oh, sorry. Right.” He finds the kit on the floor and gets the meds out. He sprays my feet and the pain resides.

“No infection that I can see at least. Good thing you lizards heal well. If it had been me I would be looking at amputation about now.” Good thing.

“Still it could be a couple of weeks before you are completely healed. Just think you will never have to walk again!” Meaning we will run out of food and starve before then. I get it. He hands me some TK chow. I accept it absentmindedly.

The sun rises and I start to feel stronger. Strange. Maybe because of all the sleep or because the meds have made their way deep into my feet. I try tapping a foot experimentally on the rest surface. No pain. I should be feeling something. I lean over the surface and try putting one on the floor. Okay so far. Second foot. No pain either. Strange.

Randy has gone outside to look around. Being cooped up in here for the only four hours of light we have would be cruel.

I make it to the exit and tentatively place a foot on the ground. It is only then, in the light, that I can see them clearly. Feathers are mostly gone. I turn one up. Expecting to see charred flesh I squint, but it looks normal! What the? I stomp down harder. Fine. They are fine.

I hear a noise and immediately shield myself. There are not supposed to be any creatures about larger than beetles. I scan and sense Randy

coming back. I scanned! I look down at my feet and do a thorough scan of their condition.

!Easy enough to regrow the feathers now.!

“What are you doing outside?” He runs up to me. I rise a meter off the ground.

“Oh!” He rises and twirls as well.

We both come down.

!Only another hour of light left I am guessing.!

“When we will be limited again. A natural phenomenon not a sen trying to get us then. Best decide what we need before then and work quickly. More water and more food. We used up a lot of energy getting down. Need to top off the capacitors as well.”

!You are better at the pod stuff. Dinos can't do the atomic stuff at six. I will work on the food. Basic building blocks are here even if they are not combined in anything like what we are used to.!

“Avoid living things if you can. I suspect this place has more surprises. Next light we should think about moving. If this is winter I would hate to think what summer is like.”

!Might explain why we have not seen any large animals. Hibernating and in this confusion of unfamiliar life forms we missed them, thinking they are just more plants.!

“Color would indicate plantimals.” He raises an insect like creature to look at with eye sight. “But these are clearly not like any plantimals I have heard about. Never having seen one of course. They sure lectured us on the Pinks of course.”

!Not everything pink is a Pink. We are billions of light years from them anyway. I will be careful though.!

Foley Leaf Coop

I remember Ba Eden. I was mistreated there by all the Ba I met. I really thought it would be different here. A new start. Oh, I was not on Ba Eden. None of us now living were. Our distant ancestors were. It is just that I feel like I was there. How else can I explain to myself why I am treated this way.

+Back to work slacker!+

I sigh and get up. +Yes sir!+ I am so tired.

We are on for four eighths and off for four. Never ending. On Ba we got one day in eight off. One freeday every eight day. That sounds like heaven to me. Too bad we can't go back in time like Silver and Owa did in the myths. Both of their body shapes seems so weird. How did they stand or move? Myth. Remember they were only a myth. Myths don't have to make sense.

+Hey, Princess, what part of get back to work do you not understand? Would you rather be on the rag line?+

+No sir. Sorry sir. Getting back to work sir.+

The shift ends finally. I am sore all over. I limp my way back to the worker's coop. Faley Leaf Coop. Make it sounds like a nice place to sleep. The door fell on the hinges years ago. We just prop it up. The latrine should have been moved years ago. The straw, well the straw is non existence. We roost on dirt. Main reason we all have foot problems. Don't need feet to move tiny pieces from a tray to some device we aren't told anything about. Need to know. We don't need to know.

+Your turn on guard duty tonight Flor.+

Guano. Completely forgotten.

+Where's Long Feather?+

+Sick. You are on your own.+

Long Flower is always sick. I find my perch and close my eyes. It is not dark yet and I can't really sleep, but if I don't get some rest I will not stay awake tonight.

+Are you Flor?+ I am shaken wake. Must be just dark. I climb down from my muddy perch and make my way to the guard station. We have been having trouble with rats lately. Hence the need for guards. They could fix the door and all the holes in the coop, but making us stand guard duty after working all day is somehow better. Don't ask me why.

Only problem is the rats can see really well in the dark and we can't. Being grubs we are not allowed anything sharp or projectile like. So we

have a club. Ooh, might turn against the pecking order. More likely to kill a rat from falling over on it because we can't walk.

First circuit around I find three places they are likely to get in, besides the door of course. Why they want to I can't imagine. I don't want to go back in there why should they? Good climbers, one of the places is beyond my reach.

Second circuit a rat nose is sticking out the hard to reach place high up. Probably figures I can't reach it. I pretend to not notice it, but I'm ready. At just the right time I swing my club. Miss the whole and the rat ducks for cover.

Third round, the rat is back. Probably clucking at me. I lean against the wall right under the hole. It notices and shoves refuge out the hole on top of me. I remain quiet. I can hear it easily. When I feel it is part way out of the hole ready to make run for it I swing the club up with all my strength and peg it clean. I can hear the crunch. And I make a large dent in the side of the coop and wake up nearly everyone inside. A hear a lot of squawking inside. Then a shriek as someone undoubtedly finds the now expired rat with the flat nose.

I go inside the coup to retrieve my victim. We get extra rations for getting one.

+You the one who killed the rat?+ The coop master. Saves me trying to find him.

+Yes sir.+ First good thing to happen to me in many eight days.

+Two ration deducted for waking everyone up.+ He turns to leave.

+Oh and I claim the rat credit because I am the one who will turn it in.+ And shrieked your scrawny throat out when it landed on you no doubt. May you choke on your own lies.

Coop master used to be one of us. That is why we hate them so much. Not uncommon for a coop master to suddenly die of unknown causes. I am mad enough to make it a very known cause. I stalked that rat. I killed it not him.

I go back outside before I lose any more rations and to cool off. There are worse duties than what we do here. Ones with a very low survival rate.

Just as I am coming back around there are three cooper, what we call the others we live with, waiting for me.

+Flor, what you did was incredible. You would not believe the look on the CM's face when it landed on him. Gren here saw the whole thing. Tell her Gren.+

+The horror. It was the best most fantastic look of horror I have ever

seen in my life. The rat even jerked a little in it's death. Fantastic. I will never ever forget.+

+Could not have happened to a better guy Flor, but you know that. You are a hero. Don't worry about the ration loss. In our nest you are the best. We will cover for you. Go on in. Gren and I will do the rest of your guard duty. Maybe we will catch another one.+ They both show amusement.

The third, Lass, comes up to me. +We have ah, moved your perch. I'll show you where it is now.+ She shows amusement.

She takes me in the female side of the coop. Where I was sleeping has been cleaned out. That's nice. Everyone is awake and running about.

+Oh, no. Not there. Come in further. Away from the cold door.+

The perch is right next to the Coop Master's perch. Only all the refuge from several perches is now scattered around his perch. Only male allowed on the female side. We all resent it. Like he has exclusive rights to mate with us whenever he wants. Let him try. He would be sucking his own eggs if he tried to mount me.

+Don't worry. He won't be back. He was so upset I am sure they will transfer him. You got Old Sneak Flor. Yeah, Old Sneak. The Rat King himself. You should have seen him up close. That was one very ugly rat. You are now the High Perch Rat Master Flor.+

Several others gather around. They should be sleeping.

One comes forward.

She ties an emblem around my neck. On the front is a dead rat. Cute.

+We have not had a rat master until now. You are our first. Wear it proudly Flor.+

+Ah, Flor. Certain, ah, privileges go with the honor. No more guard duty, unless you want to of course. No more perch cleaning either. No more fussing with ration cards. You are covered.+

+Wait, hens, I did not do that much. It was only a rat.+

+Depends on which rat you were talking about. Rat King or Coop Master. You got rid of both you know. Sleep now Flor. You earned it many times over. Sleep.+

They lower the lantern and I climb into my new perch. It is wonderful.

When I awaken there is a fuss near the door. Many are gathered around me looking up at me.

+What's wrong? Did I oversleep. Is the Line Master out to get me?+ I quickly get down and groom myself.

+They are waiting for us outside Master.+

+Stop calling me Master. What you did last night was much

appreciated, but I am no different than you are. Anyone here could have done what I did. I was lucky. Nothing more.+

+Talk to them for us Flor. Please?+

I fluff my feathers. Can't get in much more trouble.

When I exit the coop, the males are already on the line at attention.

I shout, +Fall in hens. Line to the right of me.+ They quickly and efficiently form a line. That raises a comb on the Line Master.

He walks down both lines now, as if inspecting us.

+Coop inspection. You will remain here. Don't turn around or leave the line. The longer this takes the less time for sleep you will have tonight.+ Great. I will not make any friends today.

Of course what they do is trash the place. We can't do a thing.

He comes out.

+This place is a disgrace. Worst I have ever seen. Clean it up immediately. Deduct the time taken from rest periods. That is all. Dismissed.+

No one moves. What are we waiting for. Lass nudges me. Guano, they want me to do it. Talk about painting an eat me sign on my back. Oh well.

I take two steps forward, turn around to face them.

+About beak!+ They do it beautifully. You would think we were in defense and not line detail.

+Cocks first. Enter single file. Proceed.+

Very orderly, though it takes more time, they enter. The hens follow.

When I enter. I see them waiting just inside.

In a low voice.

+They are waiting for us to make a fuss over what they have done. We are not going to give them the worm. Appoint section leaders among yourselves. Form a line and work together. Assign me to the worst detail. Let's move. Quietly. No sound.+

I spend the next eighth shoveling perch poop into a barrow that someone else takes out. A new barrow arrives and works along side of me. My arms are sore by the end, but it happens in remarkable speed. The place looks great. Not just my perch.

We move outside in single file just as the barrow operators lean the barrows against the coop and join the ends.

The Line Master looks confused and pissed. He turns and goes.

The Second yells, +Dismissed. Work starts in an eighth of an eighth. Anyone late loses a ration.+

When we get to the line coop we file in. Quiet. No fuss.

Everyone goes to their assigned place.

I make my way to the end where I was yesterday. Someone is already there. The old Coop Master. Interesting. He is not looking so fine today. He is already assembling trays and does not look at me.

I turn. No one else has started work. Guano. We will all starve to death.

I go down the line and nudge everyone to get to work. No one does until I arrive at their station. The Line Master is at the end waiting for me. He is not one happy duck.

He glares at me, then turns and leaves.

+Let's see how well you do without our help.+

Everyone begins. We are in trouble now. I shake out my feathers and I watch how everyone works. Each person has to gather their own materials to do their work. Same as I was doing yesterday. Not very efficient. I have an idea.

I stop two cocks.

+I want you two to use those carts over there. Fill them up with un-assembled parts and bring them to those assembling trays. Your job is to make sure everyone is stocked with what they need.+

+Got it Rat Master.+

+I am not your master and you are not rats.+

+Could have fooled me Flor. We have certainly been treated like rats.

+

+Things might just change. Now get to work. I want this to work.+

+So do we.+ They run off to get the carts.

I go to two more, hens this time. They are the strongest in our coop. Bet Coop Master never topped them.

+I want you two to take what has been assembled and bring it over to that corner over there.+ They affirm and move.

I need packers now. That is something I can do. Be nice to be off my feet.

When the first trays arrive at the corner I place them carefully into the packing crates. Soon someone comes and helps me.

Not only do we do all of the assigned work, but we use up all the supplies on site and do it before the normal quitting time, in spite of the setbacks from this morning.

+Good idea you had Flor.+

+Not my idea. I noticed how everyone worked back at the coop. I just adapted that to what we were doing here.+

Several gather around.

+What do we do now Flor?+ There is nothing left to do. More

supplies will come in, but until then we are likely to get into trouble for slacking.

+Clean up. Whenever we run out of supplies, we clean up. Sort out details just like we did in the coop and the work line. I will work on the latrines. No favorites here. Leaders lead by example, not threats.+

By the time the Line Master comes back the place is clean. Well, as well as we can do with the materials at hand.

+Who authorized all of you to stop working!+

I go up to him and speak in a low voice.

+Sir. We have run out of supplies.+

He is shocked. I lead him to the finished and packed materials. He then looks around and finds everything is neatly stacked and ready for the next arrival. The floors are clean.

+I suspect the latrine is clean too.+

+Yes sir. Supervised that personally.+

+This is not good.+ What?

+What am I going to tell my supervisor?+

I show amusement. I have an idea.

+Oh, you could tell her that you have figured out a way to improve efficiency two wings and are now prepared to do twice the work that was assigned to this coop as before.+

+They will think it is some kind of illusion.+

+Bring them here and show them. I am guessing they will reassign you to the lake shore facility. Could end up showing others how to do the same without ever having to supervise a line again.+

+This will require some thought.+ The bell clangs indicating the end of what would have been our normal work day.

+You are all required to stay late to make up for the time it took to clean the coop.+ He is still using a quiet voice though.

+Yes sir. We await your directions.+ Nothing left to do.

He goes up to the former coop master.

+You had something to do with this Frew?+

+No Master. Or rather everyone did it Master. It was like everyone just knew what needed to be done and did it Master.+ Guano, we have spent enough time doing it. We should know how its done.

+It would appear I will need to see this myself.+

He turns and leaves.

The Second looks confused.

+Ah, dismissed.+ and runs after the Master.

They assemble around me after the two have left.

+You did it again. You have gotten rid of another rat.+ I look over at the former coop master. He is attentive and not complaining.

I go up to him.

+You are not well liked in this flock, yet you did not try and destroy our work.+

+I did what I was told, same as all of you. No one likes being mean. It was how we were taught. We got punished if we did not act that way. As new coop master you will see.+

Others are suspicious, but I believe him. It makes sense.

+We learned a lot today. Probably more than we can make sense of all at once.+

Gren comes up, +We never talked after work before. We were always so tired all we could do was stumble back to eat and sleep. This is nice.+

Lass says, +And could serve a purpose. At the end of shift is when you best remember what did not work right.+ Of course. Cluck!

+Then this is how we will do it from now on. At the end of the day we discuss the problems. Sleep on it. The next day we assemble early at the coop entrance. We don't wait for them to come get us. If someone has come up with an idea to try from the night before we try it on a downy feather first and then if it works we move up to full flight feathers. I don't know about the rest of you, but I need to put my beak into some seed. Let's go to the trough.+

We all slept well that night. No rat patrol either. When the place was filthy they were interested. Now that it is clean, maybe they will look elsewhere.

We all woke early and were restless to get going, to see if we could do even better today. Brief stop at the latrine and feed trough. They have not changed the seed any. Low grade not even good for livestock. Either that or starve. Though some have looked twice at those rats. Get better rations for turning one in than it would be worth though.

We arrive at the line coop. The door is open and waiting for us.

Foss comes up to me, +I have an idea I would like to try.+

+Small feather first. Take the far line and a fifth of the workers. Choose randomly. This has to be a fair test. We need to be able scale it up if it works.+

+Flor, there are no supplies here yet.+

+Attention everyone, Foss has an idea she would like to try. Line up and count off by fives.+ They do so quickly.

+All the ah, threes, go with Foss to the far line. She will explain what she has in mind. Feel free to offer her suggestions if something does not

seem right.+ I nod at Foss, but she gets it.

+Here they come. Guano, there is twice as much as yesterday.+

+I am impressed they could change the supply line so quickly.+

+Probably took someone else's shipment just to see what would happen.+

I yell, +Attention!+ The Line Master comes in.

+Hump. Very well. As you can see I am trying a little experiment of my own. You know what to do. I will observe, but not interfere. Proceed.
+

+Okay birdies. You know the drill. Everyone helps get the trays loaded for the first go.+ I help line people up so we aren't all in one place at one time.

I look over at Foss' line. She has only one tray loaded. Strange. The rest of her birds are lined up down the line waiting for something. She gives the signal to go. Each Ku does only one action and pushes the tray along to the next person. Seems like extra movement to me. And boring. A new tray appears in the first position by loaders and gets pushed into place. Wow! The line really starts to move. Oh, snag on the first part. Those spring clamps can be tricky and hard to place quickly. She grabs another worker and assigned them to the same station. Each doing half of a tray. Interesting.

I move back to my own lines. Things are moving smoothly, just like yesterday. Though with twice as many parts to assemble, we are going to be exhausted soon.

I go down the line. +Pace yourself. Everyone's doing fine. It is a long day.+

I see a one Ku fading already and take her position. +Hya, could you check the latrines. I want to declare a break soon and want everything to be ready.+

+Dismiss only one line at time. It will go faster.+

+Great idea. I knew I picked the right Ku for the job.+

The Line Master wanders around, intimidating more often than not. One worker drops a tray. The others quickly clean it up. The Line Master nearly faints when this happened. I go up to him.

+Maybe it would be better if you observed from the side. You have instructed us well. We all properly fear you.+ He acknowledges and goes to the side. The line five side. But, funny thing, is they are so concentrated that they don't even notice. They are doing well. I go back to my station.

One advantage of our current system is if someone needs to leave

their tray for a moment, it does not upset anything. If someone did that on the five line everything would come to a halt. I have an idea. We all know each part of the process. I go up to Foss.

+What happens if someone needs a break? Not all of us are young chicks anymore. I have an idea. Have them raise an arm. Once you see it you can substitute someone in for them.+

+Could work, if they don't all want to go on break at the same time.+

+Ah, true. I am thinking special circumstances. Break time is coming up. You want to take your line to the latrine first?+

+One line at a time. Finally have enough time to go without five Ku waiting for you to do your business.+

+We won't really have more time, just less congestion.+

+Okay, we'll go first.+

+Hya is in charge of the latrine.+

+Latrine Master now? Soon we will all have titles.+ I cluck amusement.

+Big improvement over Rat Master huh?+

By the end of the day we have done all the assembling and cleaned up, with nearly an eighth of an eighth to spare.

I go up to the Line Master, +What do you think?+

+You have no idea what you are assembling. Do you?+

+We were never told. Just to do.+

+Rightly so. Let's just say there is a reason we have you Ku do this work and not others. Don't drop another tray. Ever. These two methods may be fast, but could have unintended consequences.+

He continues, +You did two days work in one day. Just this once you can take tomorrow off. A freeday.+ He sneers at the end. Not likely to happen again in other words. He leaves as does his second.

+Gather round. Good news.+

Lots of murmuring while they gather.

+Foss' method looks very good. You were able to do nearly twice as many as the other lines did. How do all of you feel about it?+

One answers, +Not sure I would want to do it for a living.+ That gets a lot of clucks.

Foss then pips, +I am thinking we give it a longer trail. Maybe a full eight day. Do we really want to be doing four times as much assembly as before? And what the Line Master said disturbs me. What are these things we are making?+ No one knew, not even the former coop master.

+Well, the good news is we get a freeday tomorrow.+

+Oh, a freeday in paradise. We are so lucky.+ A lot of clucks for that.

Food will be the same though.

The next couple of eight days go fairly smoothly. Everyone is tired at the end of the day. We now receive twice the supplies we used to of course. And we never saw another freeday. Did not expect to actually. I thought it was strange that they found twice the supplies the first time we tried to do that many. We now have a second line using Foss' method. This gives everyone a little longer breaks.

We are much more careful now. After the Line Master's comments we got to investigating what we were building. Did not take long to figure it out.

Gathering outside we hold our meeting.

+We are not making much progress anymore.+

I cluck amusement, +You think the best minds in the universe are right here? We have infinite resources to try different things? We can work at nearly four times the rate from a few moons ago. We have done great, never doubt that. Let's get inside and get to work.+

But when we get in we know instantly that something is different. There are no supplies waiting for us.

+Maybe we are too far ahead. They had to make those parts somewhere. Maybe they can't keep up with us.+ We all turn as the main doors close. We here them being locked. This has not happened since the change. What's going on?

Someone hisses, +Black Vests!+ We all remember the night we were arrested and finally ended up here. Not nice birdies.

The Black Vests line up. We hear thump clang, thump clang. The Line Master is escorted in in heavy metal leg irons. His feathers are all disarranged. Beating. Typical Black Vest behavior.

One takes a step forward and speaks, +There seems to have been a misunderstanding here. Everyone seems to have been under the impression that we were running a vacation camp. As a consequence one of these the devices assembled at Foley Valley Coop caused a train car to explode, derailling the train at a busy intersection. Three Ku died. All of you are being held responsible.+

+Even prisoners get a trail.+

+Oh, he wants a trail. Fine I am judge, jury and executioner. Convince me I am wrong.+

We talk among ourselves for a moment and it is decided that I will present our case.

+May I ask when the accident happened?+

+The deliberate act of sabotage happened three days ago.+ He shows

amusement.

+An explosion at that. Most alarming. Only problem is that these pieces don't explode. They burn good when the red and blue capsules combine, but they definitely don't explode. We suspect that they are used to set off another explosive. Possibly one dropped from the air. The separate capsules are perfectly safe by the way. Don't burn or explode. I can't vouch for their chemical hazards, but none of us has noticed any reaction from years of handling.+

+Go on.+

+We were taught a simple little saying here. Dark side down or flight school follows. None of us has reached the point of being suicidal. We know that if even one assembly leaves here set to the armed position our goose is cooked. Further, I personally inspected most of the assemblies going out. The packing procedure makes it very easy to do so. The way they are all arranged on open racks before being lowered into the crates means one last chance of seeing all have 'dark side down'.

I can demonstrate what I am saying if you like.+

+This should be most amusing.+ The other Black Vest sneer at us in amusement.

+I will not use any functional components, so no loss of assemblies will result. In each shipment of parts there are a few that for whatever reason are just a little bit off and don't fit properly. They are sorted over here into red capsules, blue capsules, and everything else. Someone takes them away once in a while. I suppose the material can be recycled.+

I go over to the storage bins and remove what I need and proceed back to the center of the coop. I sit on the ground.

+Normal assembly procedure. I will slow it down so you won't think it is a trick.+ I slowly assemble a device and hold it up, turning it around so all of the Black Vests can see.

+Looks like a functional device, why did these parts end up in scrap?+ Suspicious one isn't he?

I sigh and point out, +You will see here at the bottom that the piece that would attach to our device has been cross threaded. Won't affect this demo, but could be lethal in the field. Each of the components has similar defects. I can disassemble and point out each defect if you wish.+

+That won't be necessary. This is taking too long as it is.+

I get up and pull a set of pliers off the nearest work bench. We have done this before, but I am hoping to get a reaction out of them all the same.

I sit back down next to my assemble device.

+They way it works is in this beak section is a sharp needle just long enough to go through the now sealed capsules. With the ring set dark side down, this needle is blocked from moving, at least by the forces likely encountered in normal transport to the war front.+ I grab the device with the pliers, turn it upside down and experimentally tap it on the stone floor. Nothing happens of course. I whack it even harder. Nothing happens.

+It is likely even falling from the sky at great altitude they might not all go off and the higher you are the less accurate you will be in hitting your target. You would definitely want something more, ah, sensitive.+

I set down the device, unscrew the beak, remove the locking ring and flip it over, then screw the beak back on.

Behind me I hear a chorus of +Dark side down or flight school follows.+

I hold it up with my pliers, +A fully functional device, which will not be leaving this coop. I know the rules.+ Then without warning I slam it beak down into the stone. The needle pierces the capsule and the ignition is instantaneous. Lasts a few arn. To their credit, none of the Black Vests had moved. Of course they were much further away than I was.

+We were surprised with the length of time for the burn when we first did the experiment. We thought it would be much faster. Our guess is that what ever the explosive is in the bombs, it only needs an ignition source. A very simple device really. Very effective, easy to make and safe to transport.

Now normally devices are packed with a non flammable ceramic bottom. I am guessing this is so if one should go off accidentally, it would not likely start a fire.

Therefore I have to conclude that it is impossible for these devices to have caused a train car to explode.+

There are murmurs of agreement among us.

+Very astute and well reasoned.+ He glares at us, shows amusement and then says, +And very damming. I could not have done a better job myself. You are all guilty of high treason.+ He lets that blow through us.

+Possession of classified information obtained by any means is a crime against the state.+

Someone behind me, +We won't tell about your little illegal war if you don't tell about us.+ That does not make him happier and he tries to search out who said it, but the group is too deep to be sure.

+Since the school teacher is the apparent ring leader I will let her choose five others to come with us for a little re-education.+ Another

sneer. We all know what that means.

+Wouldn't your time be better spent trying to find the Ku who placed a live bomb on your train car? We can't hurt anyone from in here. If anything, through our increased productivity we have helped your cause.

+

+SILENCE!+ Now his true nature comes out.

I know better than delay this.

+Volunteers?+ Every single one steps forward. That does get a reaction out of the Black Vests. They interpret as a threat and raise weapons on us.

There is some discussion among themselves and five emerge to stand near me. The five oldest, most broken and with the lowest life expectancy. Also the slowest ones on the lines. They knew their time was coming soon anyway. A few eight days one way or another did not make any difference.

+There never was a train explosion was there?+

+Very good traitor. Just a little ruse to get you to come out into the open.+ He looks around to the rest.

+This is not a campground. Life here is not supposed to be fun. It supposed to be pain, because you are being punished. We can't very well let our prisoners start running our prison camps now can we?+

The six of us are bound by leg irons, same as the Line Master. Sorry about that sir. I may have hated you, but I would not wish this on anyone.

The outer door starts to open.

+That door was locked. Are you all incompetent fools?+ He shouts to whomever is coming in, +Go away. This is a Black Vest operation and you are interfering. Interfering is a capital offense.+

Silhouetted by the light coming in the door, we can't make out the five entering well. The Black Vests can though. They surround their leader and raise weapons against the five.

+Unless you want those weapons made inoperative or worse, put them down.+

The Black Vest leader hisses, +What are you doing here?+

+A little sight seeing. And gee what do I see, Black Vests abusing defenseless Ku again. Old story. Oh my, six, no seven in leg irons. What have these poor pathetic creatures done to bruise your precious egos?+

+High treason!+ He hisses back at her. They really don't like each other and the Black Vests actually fear these five, who appear to be entirely defenseless. What is their secret?

+From inside an illegal secret forced labor camp?+

+They discovered forbidden knowledge?+

+Of your illegal secret war preparations? It seems to me it is the ten of you who are guilty of high treason, not the Ku here.+

+You have no right to interfere in our affairs!+ He is actually spitting mad now.

+You know I have every right. Still, it might be best to question these seven further. Most Black Vests are not completely mad.+ She motions to the leader that there is spit on his beak. Good one. Insult in the form of kindness. She then motions to the other four who come up to us and lead us out doors. Partly overcast day. Beautiful. Like to remember my last day.

I ask, +What will happen to the others?+

+They will be released in a short while to go back to their families.+

+At least we bought them that much. No matter what happens now.+

We are loaded onto a transport truck and bolted in. What I should have asked was what would happen to the Black Vests.

Base of Echo Mountain

“At least the initiation ceremonies are done for the season. We can get some rest and quiet now.” I tear off a leg and give it to Cat. She softly growls when eating. She is content.

Finished with our meal we both fall asleep in the gentle light of a fall afternoon. I had covered myself with colored leaves to hide better. Cat blends in well without. Only her ears twitching to give us away.

I wake with a snort. Cat has already risen. I slowly rise next to her to avoid giving the impression of their being two of us. I look to where she is looking.

“Ah shit. I really thought we would be alone for a bit. Who is crazy enough to hunt near the base of Echo Mountain? This is a sacred area off limits most of the year.”

She scratches the ground.

“Okay, not hunting. But this is not a travel path. Why come this way? Nothing up here anyone would want.” I look around to help illustrate.

I start to pack our stuff when she places a paw on my knee to stop me.

“What you want them to see us?” The paw remains.

“Ah, you want to meet this one. Remember what happened last time. Hope this one tastes better at least. Looks old from here though. Look at all the gray hair. Going to be tough too. Even you won't want to eat her.” We never eat Hu or Cat, but tease each other about it anyway. The last visitor thought we were crazy. Not nice to be judged that way. We are different and choose to be. Nothing wrong with that.

Old woman, taking her time. Seems to be examining every plant and looking under every rock on the way here. Not distracted though, coming straight towards us. At this rate I might need another nap. Cat is fully attentive though. Her eyes never stray from the woman.

I get up and start a small fire to heat water. Normally we would not bother, but Cat seems to think this one is important. Going to be dark soon anyway.

Finally she comes up over a small rise and appears before us. We wait. Still stopping at every plant and rock. Even looks at the stuff on the trees. Without even a hello, or as most react when they meet us, revulsion, she plops down next to us.

She does not address me, but Cat.

“So you are Sylvy. You really are beautiful. Pleased to have finally met you. I have heard so much about you. I feel like I already know you.

You have done such a fine job with your Hu as well I see.” Cat leaves my side and rubs her head against the old woman purring very loudly. She then settles between us. The old woman gently rubs her behind the ears.

I rise to leave them alone. First time for everything I guess.

“While you are up, get us some water for tea if you will.” Now I am a servant. I don't think so. I do go to the stream, but take my time getting water. We can't afford the weight of pots, therefore are limited to what I can carry in a sewn skin or bladder. Of course Cat does not carry anything. She thinks there is no need. Well, not as long as she has her own personal servant she is right. Still she has saved our lives many times over. A fair trade.

I guess you could say she is the brave and I am the squaw. Outweighs me too.

“You know she is pregnant.” A voice behind me says. I try not to jump. Damn she is quiet. I nod that I know. Kits are fine when they are young, but once they get about two thirds my weight they soon learn they are stronger and try to beat me up all the time. Cat tries to protect me and bops them hard, when they are caught. Eventually she drives them off. The males are particularly bad of course. They hold grudges and will often try to hunt me years later. They usually end up being killed by the Hu settlements. Bad Cat is legal to kill.

“I don't know why she does it. Not good for them, hanging with me. They either learn to love Hu or hate Hu. Neither is a good thing.”

“True. If you have the water I have some nice herbs to make tea from. I did not intend to neglect you, but as you probably already know, best to make peace with the Cat first.”

I smile and nod.

“It is not a bad life with her. Better than before. She cares whether or not I live. More than I can say for the Hu.”

“You have quite a reputation you know?”

“Turtle boy was my first name. Then it became Vulture Boy, now most just call me Death Walker. I don't mind as long as they leave us alone.”

We make our way back to the fire. I add a few more branches and she accepts the water skin. We only have one small metal pot for making teas. Not sure it will be enough for three. Cat likes most teas too and sniffs what she pulls from her sacks.

She continues, “Still, in your position as an outsider, you must see and hear a lot.”

“Cat sees and hears more. She informs me of the important stuff.”

She raises her eyebrows and looks towards Cat, then she turns to me. "I can see what she sees in you now. A most unusual mind. Very unusual." The tea is ready. She pulls two clay cups out of her pack. She pours for the two of us and then leaves the open pot off the fire to cool near Cat. Sylvy? How did she learn that name? How is she hearing Cat that I can't hear.

We drink the tea quietly. I am glad she appreciates quiet. Night is starting. I rise and go to our food tree to retrieve another hunk of meat from the small deer we brought down earlier. Setting up our spit sticks, it starts to roast over the fire.

She collects the drippings, mixes them with more herbs and then adds this back to the top of the leg. Smells better anyway.

"Fancy food tonight Sylvy." She rolls over on her back and purrs. I reach over and scratch her chest.

"You keep the fire low?"

"No need to attract attention. The local shamans don't like us up here. Don't like anyone up here. The echos give them power and they don't want others to know the secret." She nods.

"I need to go to the Fire Stone lodge. What can you tell me about them?"

"Better to avoid them right now. They are in a power struggle." She stares at me to continue.

I sigh, "Night story then. There is an old man who is the official leader. He should have let go ten summers ago, but is afraid to because there are three groups trying to take his place. His age means that it is likely to occur suddenly without the necessary sharing time to insure a peaceful transition.

The first group are made up of young warriors. Eighteen to twenty eight. Full of buffalo piss. They are the strongest physically, but they sure are stupid. They react to everything as if it is an insult and usually react violently. They are the most hated and feared.

The second group is the women and male elders. Much wisdom there. This would be the safest group if nothing on the outside ever threatens. They lack the decisiveness to act quickly when needed though.

The last group is the largest. They just want to plant corn, squash and beans, raise sheep and rabbits. Lead a simple life, give thanks, die quietly."

"And what do you think?"

I turn to Cat. She nudges me in the knee.

"We think that all are part of the solution, none is the answer alone.

All three are needed to be a stable viable community. If the tribe splits, then they are doomed. Unless of course some manage to find another tribe to take them in. Those will be the lucky ones. Every community needs youthful energy and strength, but without wisdom, it is like a grass fire. Unnecessarily destructive. The largest group is the quiet way, the Earth Way, the ideal we should all be striving for, but never actually reach. Life is change. Wisdom and strength are needed to keep a balance necessary to live the Earth Way.”

“Well said.” Cat gets up and sniffs the meat.

“Alright kitty. You get yours with some blood still in it. She prefers hers to still run.” The old woman smiles. I cut off a large juicy portion and place it before Cat. She looks at me like I have cheated her.

“Hey, you get the bone and sinew afterwards. There will be plenty left. How much to you think she can eat anyways?” The old woman mimes an enlarging stomach, then smiles after Cat looks alarmed.

I cut smaller better done portions for the two of us and place them on large leaves. She accepts hers and starts in. Good teeth at least. I have to favor my left side some, having recently lost a tooth on the right. Good though. Kill gotten from chasing off the vultures is sometimes necessary, but I always feel better when we do our own work. Snare in this case. A quick kill. Fear pervades the meat making it less tasty. Nasty birds overhead fills the body with fear.

She pulls something from her pack and hands me one after letting Cat sniff it. Who then promptly turns up her nose.

I laugh, “She does not trust apples after getting a sour one once.” I bite into mine. Very sweet. I nod appreciation. Fall is a good time for apples.

Dark now, but with a partial moon. Good time to hunt if we needed more meat.

“Time to sleep?” She suggests.

“Better time to observe. If you want to see the Fire Lodge up close before announcing your presence this is a good time. They killed a buffalo a few days ago and are well fed right now. Most will be sleeping.”

“Good. You can show me the way and tell me more about individual people.” She rinses the cups and pot into the fire and smothers it. It is well contained. I will not be responsible for starting a fire up here. That kind of reputation I do not need. I dump the rest of the water skin onto it just to be sure.

“I will refill it at the stream.” Not my only skin either.

With everything packed I look up at the remainder of the kill. Would hate to lose it, but others will benefit if we don't get back in time.

"I don't need to tell you we need to run silent. Cat will lead. Her sight is best in this light." Also knows what I am likely to trip over. The old woman takes second. And I take up the rear defensive position. I don't usually have to fight anyone, just give the alarm signal. Cat takes care of the rest. More dangerous spread out with the three of us.

I keep close just in case. It is not that far to their out lookers. The stupid ones are likely all in their hogans sleeping off too much food and drink. It is only the wannabees who get stuck with guard duty. Some are happy to do it, hoping to curry favor, which can never happen for a guard. Some know this and sleep most of the night. Cat knows how to sniff these out and we slip right past two snoring away. We leave no tracks to indicate we came this way. The old woman and I don't anyway. Cat does not care. The guards will see the Cat tracks in the morning and count themselves lucky to be alive.

We stop just outside the lodge proper. The sheep are corralled inside at night. Cat sniffs them and they get nervous moving to the other side. A strategy that has worked for us in the past. They won't raise the alarm.

We reach the center of the lodge structures. The remnants of the fire is burning low. The old woman indicates where she wants to go.

Once there she spreads a wool blanket on the ground. She then proceeds to sit on it with space for Cat and I. Cat takes up residence next to her, leaving me to the right side.

I whisper, "They won't like this." She indicates that I should be quiet. I am guessing she intends to be here at first light. Not a good idea.

When I need to rest, but stay vigilant I can go into a sort of meditative dream state. I do so now. Cat taught me. She can watch the left side as well. Soon I hear snoring from Cat though! She is feeling particularly confident of the situation. I don't take the risk.

The sheep stay away from us. They are not so confident of Cat's intentions, snoring not withstanding. Fine by me. No sentries question us. They are definitely over confident.

We are facing east when the sun begins to show. The old woman rises and offer prayers to the sun. Cat and I do ours silently. Silence has saved us more often than not. Interestingly we see no activity for some time. Finally some of the elders stumble out and bow to the sun cursively. Has everyone forgotten their thanks?

Prayers done we sit silently.

Finally someone seems to notice us and comes over. A young woman,

maybe twelve summers.

Addressing the old woman and very nervous of Cat she says, “Are you the Shaman promised.” The old woman nods and gets up. She motions for us to come as well. The young woman gathers the blanket and follow us. She seems to know right where to go. Not hard to figure out. The smell is something terrible. I have smelled day old death that smelled better.

We go past the lodge buildings to one outside the encampment. The sheep have judiciously moved to the other side now. The hogan will be burned down once he dies. No point in wasting an important structure inside is my guess. No dignity in death here. They have been waiting for ten years. Maybe they are tired of it too.

Unbelievably when we enter he is still alive.

He shouts, must be deaf as well as near dead, “You the special Shaman I sent for?” She nods and sets out her pouches and bags. The young woman has already started a small fire to boil the herbs. Probably had this duty for some time. The old woman adds stuff to the pot offering prayers. I know that smell and suppress a smile. She adds more herbs and the smell disappears. Hope the old man did not notice. The young woman looks nervous. Cat goes up to her. She backs off at first until she purrs. What is it about purring? They control us with purring I am convinced of it. We will do anything for a purring Cat.

The old man notices me suddenly and sighs.

“Death Watcher. Come to eat me then?”

“Too tough honored one.” He smiles and nods off some.

The old woman offers the old man the tea, which he complains about the taste of. He is soon sleeping soundly.

“How long do you estimate?” She smiles.

The young woman asks with a whisper, “Did you poison him?”

“No dear, just something to make the passing go easier for him. It has been fear and concern that has kept him alive. With all of us providing safety, he can let go now.” I did not want to be with this tribe during transfer of power. This is insane.

She looks at me, “Now don’t you go ruining it. Be at peace. I am here for more than him.” I relax. Apparently we are being used for part of that purpose. Should be interesting anyway.

The head bully suddenly comes running up to the hogan. I recognize his walk. Cat positions herself across the doorway. He nearly trips over her trying to get in. Then he sees me.

“Death Watcher. At least it will be over soon. Never thought I would

be happy to see you two.” Cat purrs, but he just sneers and leaves in a huff.

The old woman comments to Cat, “Does not work with that kind.”

“She does not purr for him, but for what will come next.” I smile. The old woman chuckles.

The young woman tugs at the old woman's sleeve.

“Yes dear, I know. Go out and tell the others. We will be out in a moment.”

She turns to me, “You know how to prepare a body properly.” I nod. Have seen it enough times anyway.

With deep respect I change his clothes and wash his body. The clothes he wanted to be buried in were already there on a shelf. He knew. Though there is a lot of dust on them. I blow most of it off.

Drums announcing the death have been beating for sometime when I finally emerge. The old woman is just outside facing the lodge. There is a small fire going in front of her. I gently place his death clothes on the fire and wait for them to burn completely.

She asks me, “What will they do with the body next?”

“The entire structure will be burned to the ground and nothing will be allowed to be built here or grown here again.”

“Explains why there is nothing but weeds just outside the lodge complex.” I nod. Forever is a long time. Eventually they will have to move entirely.

The young woman is a few paces ahead of us and waits for us to catch up. Everyone avoids us of course and will until a healing song is sung for us. Makes no difference for me of course. People avoid me on principal. I must have been near death recently and who would sing me well? I feel fine thank you very much.

We make our way back to the place we spent the night. The young woman spreads the blanket for us, but does not sit herself until offered a place.

The bully comes out with five of his henchmen.

“It is done. The old man took forever to die.” He looks around at everyone else gathered around us at a respectable distance. I am tempted to mention the old man's name, but that would probably get me into more trouble than it is worth. Never mention a person's name when they die. The name dies with them. I have had too many names to put much on it.

“I claim leadership of the Fire Rock Tribe. Anyone challenge me?”

This is not the way it should be done except during war and one of those has not happened in centuries.

No one does of course.

I whisper, "Our task here is done. We should leave." The old woman raises her hand to stop me, then gets up! Shit is she crazy?

"I challenge you."

"You are not of the tribe and besides, you stink of death. No one will fight you."

"Then I see no challenge to my claiming leadership. Some outside blood would be good for the tribe. Let the council decide what they would prefer."

Pissed, he hisses, "Fine we fight then." Only he leaves and he motions one of his followers to get in there to fight the old lady.

"Too afraid to fight yourself? What kind of leader is that? Even an old woman is too much for you?" That only gets him madder and stupider of course. I think they should cut the nut sacks of ones like this. Maybe they would behave then. Works for sheep anyway.

It has the desired effect though. He brushes aside his follower. I won't call him friend. No one can be a friend to a snake like this guy.

The old woman standing about three paces from him now says, "I believe I have choice of weapons."

"Fine, whatever. Let's get this over with. I have some changes I need to make. Yes, this place will be much different when I'm done."

She smiles and says, "Nothing but hands. No knives, clubs, rocks, sand, nothing but hands."

He looks at her like she is crazy. I feel the same. Cat does not seem worried though. Hasn't even growled once.

He gets suspicious and looks back at Cat and I, "No cheating. They can't help you in anyway."

I smile and nudge Cat who gets up. We go and sit with the rest of the bullies group. They really don't like this. We still stink of death. Especially the two of us.

"We will watch each other. If anyone moves, Cat gets to rip his throat out. Fair enough?" The ones next to us turn white. The bully just shakes his head. He has chosen craven because they are easy to control. Not much use to him now. He thinks he has an easy kill though and it does not concern him yet. I fear for her, but even in the partial day I have known her, I know she is much more than she appears to be.

Enough space is made for them to fight. No one expects this to take much time. A few people try and leave the circle and the bully glares at them. They reconsider and sit again. No doubt they wanted a chance to leave before he took control.

I smile to the bullies on each side of me and comment, "I do love a good fight. I am betting on the old woman. Your guy looks a little hung over from last night's feast. She on the other hand is well rested."

"None of your Shaman tricks either." She opens her hand to show they are empty. He lunges for her when she does this. She deftly turns aside and he stumbles past her and turns in rage.

"This is a fight not a dance old woman."

"We each have our own method. Unless you want to be accused of cheating I would recommend removing the knife from your back belt though." He instinctively reaches for it and finds it gone. She shows everyone that she now has it. She casually throws it backward and it sicks into the snake's eye on the totem pole in the center of the open area. This enrages the bully again. No one like being made a fool of. Now he will try and finish her as fast as he can.

Problem is, is that every time he tries he ends up on his back or face in the dust while she is left standing. He is sweating profusely, she looks like she just got up. She even makes a show of adjusting her skirt and shaking off imaginary dust. Cat loves this exchange. Best Cat and Rabbit show she has ever seen is my guess. Mostly she is all business. Quick kill and we eat, but sometimes when the game is plentiful, she does like a little play as well. Cruel in my mind, but then she is the better hunter, so it must work in some way.

The bully is accomplishing nothing more than becoming exhausted. People who were scared to death he might win are relaxing and cheering each time he makes a fool of himself. Even if he were to somehow win now it would be over for him. No one would take him seriously. He is fighting an old woman and losing badly.

Cat suddenly look up at my neighbor and gives him a big lick on the face. He must have moved. Now he has peed his clothes. Humiliating. Next she turns to the one on her other side and seems fascinated with the poor guys privates. Finally she settles down again.

What have I missed? The bully is panting heavy.

She walks up to him and takes his hand gently in hers. He does not resist.

"Now you have a choice to make my friend. You can continue this farce and die a humiliating death." She twists his hand ever so slightly and it is obvious his is in extreme pain. I want to learn how to do that. Could be useful in tight situations.

She continues, "Or you and your 'friends' can leave now never to be seen again." She points to us, "See the Cat and Death Watcher?" She lets

go of his hand. He nods still in pain rubbing his hand. "They are mine. Touch them and you will die a death that will be spoken of for the rest of time." I nod my thanks to her. She does not notice.

He puffs out somehow, "Even you will not live forever." Stupid. Maybe he really is just a nut sack in man cloth.

"I will live much longer than you. That is all that matters. So your answer?" He does not say a word, but comes over to us. He motions for them to rise. They don't want to at first, but one look of the old woman tells them they have no choice. They made their choice ages ago when they started to follow him. They had hoped for the drippings from his ill gotten feast. Now let them taste the droppings of his defeat.

They make for their lodgings when she shouts at them, "Take nothing with you. Everything you had you stole by force from others. None of it belongs to you." He turns to protest. Now that the six of them are together they are thinking they might stand a chance.

Suddenly the hogan the old man died in bursts into flames. That decides it for them. They leave in a hurry.

"Nice trick. How did you do that?"

"Not me." We see the young woman smiling at us. Good girl.

The council comes up to us after the bullies are out of sight.

"They will try some mischief." She nods.

"Crazy Turtle and Sly Sylvy will assist." We will? Cat looks up at me and purrs. What about our freedom? The freedom to be cold and hungry, to be unloved, to not do useful work in helping others. Okay I get the point. We can try this for a time. Cat bats me gently trying to look as cute as possible.

A courageous young male, urged on by others, asks, "Is she tame?"

I look aghast, "Of course not. I am the one tamed." They all laugh at that.

The council talks among themselves and comes to a conclusion in record time for a council.

"We have decided. First, we will sing a healing for the four of you. Then the council will meet to decide how we are to be lead. Then will will . . ."

"We will go back to the fields and flocks while you decide all this so we have something to eat this winter when you finally come to some decision." Everyone laughs at that and they disperse. We stay where we are to await the sing. Hope it is not one of those three day affairs.

Sanctuary

~How does your arm feel today Alessa?~

I answer him in my imperfect Ceph, ~Good. Not sore much think.~ I should not have been trying to learn gliding on my own. But, I am so embarrassed that I never learned. How could I share my shame with another? A clean break at least. Another moon in the cast I think.

^Ah, there you are Alessa. Please come with me.^ Hattie does a short bow to Nease. I do a much more formal bow to thank him for his time and follow Hattie out into the corridor.

We enter a conversation corner. A unique space at regular intervals. Once inside, no one will bother you until you come out. Sometimes it is just one person doing a mind seeing thing called meditation. Sometimes it is two people who need privacy. Privacy is such a joy to me. I could be alone for the rest of my life it is so wonderful.

^We need to talk.^ Trouble then.

She continues, ^Are you happy?^ Guano, no one has ever asked me that before.

^I do not understand.^

^I thought you might have trouble with the concept. Is the work that you do here satisfying?^ Again I am confused.

^I work hard.^ She sighs. I don't understand. Isn't working hard good?

^You understand that we all have to work on the outside in order to bring in necessary supplies that would otherwise be hard for us to obtain or live without.^

^Of course. I understand.^ I went through orientation several times to be sure I understood. Can't be too careful.

^Therefore I have decided that it is time you went outside.^

^I am ready to serve.^ I straighten up.

^Your assignment is different than others. I want you to supervise and help train new graduates assigned to a new community. They have not used our services for very long and some complaints have come back to us. I need you to go there, find out what is going wrong and fix it if possible.^ My head is faint.

She sees my reaction. I have never been able to hide my emotions from Hattie. I must have gotten lazy being here where emotions don't get you a beating.

^It will not be as hard as you think. What I need most is for you to be yourself. Your inner guide will tell you what needs to be done. You leave

tonight.^ We travel between at night to help disguise our location and comings and goings. But, it also means we will arrive tired.

^I had best get some rest then. Ah, I was supposed to meet with Nease again this afternoon.^

^I will explain to him that he will have to wait for your return to continue your lessons. You are not his only student. Time he spent some effort with the others as well.^ She shows amusement and I relax.

Took me forever to learn to feel right about sleeping on the soft bed. I tried closing the door like others do, but when someone came to the door I was startled too much. Now I leave it open. During the day though this is more of a problem. I decide to close it almost all the way. Stops some of the sound, but hopefully they will announce themselves before coming in.

I did not think I would actually sleep, but am startled when Fion announces herself.

^Alessa, time to get ready to go. Are you there? I am your escort for the trip between.^

I jump up, heart pounding, and quickly find my outside clothes. A sort of robe with the Sanctuary symbol on the front and back. No one will mistake us for a slave. Not that slaves wear much in the way of clothes. They had to make mine from scraps as I am too small for any of the normal ones.

^Hattie says you need to wear this emblem on your robe.^ She hands me an elaborate triangle design. I shake as I attach it to my robe. I am not worthy to be a supervisor. I have had no training. I don't know what to do.

Fion must have sensed my nervousness, ^It's okay Alessa. No one will judge you harshly on your first visit as a sup.^

We reach the kitchen and pick up supplies for our trip, then make our way to the north exit. Only those of us in Sanctuary can negotiate the way out safely. There are numerous traps for the ignorant. A raid was only tried once, but we learned never to be vulnerable again. Finally at the exit we give the signal to the sentry and are let out.

Once outside, you would think that is when we would be attacked. But, if we were, all the Sanctuary members would be recalled. They would only get two of us and lose a lot. Attacking Sanctuary itself is the big concern. They could get us all at once. Actually less than half. We never all gather at once, but they don't know that. A signal would be placed that would warn others not to come in if that ever happened. I look up instinctively. No signal. They could have attacked from the south without our knowing about it.

^No one is attacking us Alessa.^ Fion shows amusement. The moon is nearly full and the sky is only partly cloudy. Good travel weather.

^Keep a watch for seekers all the same. They know they will have to attack quickly and silently.^

^Seekers are anything but quiet. Nasty things.^ We carry bang staffs while traveling. I will relinquish it to Fion once we arrive. No weapons allowed while in a community. They would never be used on a Ba either. They can give a seeker a good knock, but unlikely to hurt a full grown Ba. The intent is not to kill, but to stun long enough to get away. One side effect is that other seekers will kill and eat a stunned seeker. Not our doing. All creatures make their own choices. Fortunately they have learned to avoid anyone carrying a stick. An escaped slave of course does not know this or have a stick available.

Fion says, ^We should place a stick that looks like ours near communities. That way if anyone escapes they have access.^

^We would spend a lot of time making them and the community would then use them to make stronger fences to keep slaves in.^

^Always a downside. You learn all this when you were, ah, younger?^ She almost said little. I may be the smallest at Sanctuary, but I work hard. No one complains about how hard I work.

^It is not specific, but how they think. The slaves are not stupid, just ignorant and untrained. The masters have to try and anticipate our actions to prevent our escaping or not working. How long till we get there?^

^Three nights if we make good time.^ I walk faster.

It must have just rained. The wet leaves smell good and quiet our movement. Dry leaves are so crunchy and hard to avoid in the dark. We have lanterns if we need them, but prefer to travel unseen. The time goes without incident. Which means I stress out about what I will find and what I will do about it.

^Sanctuary house up ahead. Looks safe to approach.^ We are still cautious, giving our call signal and waiting for a reply. The timing of the reply is as important as the reply itself. If the Ba inside were compromised they would only have to wait a little bit or rush it. If they gave the call under duress, the attackers would not know the timing.

We count off the time in our heads and the reply comes one count late. Well within error. We approach the portal and give the knock. This is for the protection of the occupants. An improper knock and the door remains closed.

After what seems too long to me, the door opens slowly. We wait until they see us fully. Our robes would not be that hard to make.

^My you are a small one, aren't you?^ The fattest Ba I have ever seen is before us.

Fion moves past me and gives the woman a hug.

^Good to see you again Hess. Are the little ones well? How is your stomach?^ Then Fion remember I am behind her. ^Oh, sorry, Hess, this is Alessa.^

^An auspicious name. May you rise to honor it.^ What does it mean? No one would tell me. Must not be Ba. Or at least not recent Ba.

^Come in, come in. You must be hungry.^ She specifically looks at me.

Fion teases me, ^You can try, but she can eat more than you and still stay tiny.^

Hess looks at me again, ^We shall see.^

I come forward with, ^We brought our own provisions. We need only a quiet place to sleep during the coming day.^

^Yeh, I know what kind of food they give you for traveling. Insures no one will steal it from you, because no one else on this world would eat it but you sisters.^ Fion shows amusement, but I am afraid that I show shock.

Fion says, ^Can you believe it, she actually likes the stuff.^

^That would explain your size dear. Come with me. Leave your packs there. My son will take them to your room.^ A son doing work? Very strange.

When we enter the kitchen area I see a very sleepy young female and an older male child. No father. Thought too soon. A male at least as large as Hess comes bounding in and gives her a hug, nearly enveloping her in his arm flaps.

He sees us, ^Welcome honored ones.^ He gives us a bow, which we return. ^Please join us for our morning meal.^ The young ones get up and lead us to seats, then proceed to gather food for us. Hess motions to the young male to keep adding more food to the bowl. I won't be able to move if I eat that much. Smells good though.

Hess leads us in thanks, ^May the wise ones guide us this day as we help dispel ignorance and reclaim our place in the universe.^ A lofty goal. Certainly goes way beyond what I had hoped to accomplish in Sanctuary.

The food is good. Certainly a lot of it. I can barely eat another bite when my bowl finally looks empty.

^Impressive. Does she eat this much at every meal?^

^Most, Mother Hattie insures she gets enough. She works harder than anyone, so maybe that is where it goes.^ I show embarrassment.

Hess looks at me and asks, ^But are you happy dear? Very important to be happy in your work. Working hard is not enough in itself.^ Huh? Why does everyone keep asking that? All this food is making me very sleepy.

Hess whispers to Fion, ^Looks like it is time for the little one to be bedded.^

I don't remember entering the room or falling asleep. I hope she did not carry me to the room. We are in the basement I think. Being below ground helps dampen the sound and hide us. So strange to see a Ba home not on a cliff or high up a tree. I wonder why? Aren't they afraid to be out in the open like this?

My dreams seem so real. I am being chased through a light forest by seekers and bounty hunters. I awake breathing fast, but I am safe. It is starting to get dark. Fion must already be up. I quickly get into my robe which is draped on a chair. Where is my bang stick? I look around but can't find it. My pack is missing also. I run up the stairs and see both near the door. Well, I am awake now.

Fion comes in and whispers, ^Ready to go?^

^Where is everyone else?^ I whisper back to her. She signals that they are asleep. We exit silently and carefully lock the door behind us. The moon is behind clouds tonight. Not as easy for us, but the path is wide. Most will not travel rural areas at night. There are creatures who might try and eat us or at least harm us out of fear or defense of territory. As the dream is still fresh in my mind I walk silently trying to find out what it means.

Finally Fion comments, ^Did you get enough to eat this morning?^

I answer, ^Please don't encourage our next host. Gave me bad dreams of being chased by seekers.^

^Yeah, I thought you ate quite a bit, even for you. But look at you. You have to admit you are the smallest one at Sanctuary.^ I sigh. Nothing I can do about it until someone smaller arrives. Even a child would help, though they would not be smaller for long.

^I am worried about Hattie. She is getting weaker and her memory is getting worse.^

Fion looks at me, ^And you saw all this in less than a year at Sanctuary?^ I affirm.

^She only has a few more summers left if we are lucky. I am worried about who will be her successor.^

I think about it for a moment, ^I am guessing Graph. She has the most experience organizing and is well liked in spite of that.^ Fion shows

amusement.

^Maybe. Being liked is not always a benefit though. Hattie is not liked by everyone, but she is respected even by those who do not agree with her.^

^You could be right. Who do you think then?^

^That is the problem. There is no one else. We can't afford to split up. We are just now getting big enough to not have to fear every community we approach. Most have heard of us before we arrive.^

^Like Yossop.^

^We are not there yet. Best if I remain silent and you form your own opinion.^ I affirm. Still, I was hoping for an easy answer.

We approach a cliff face. I look up. It is a long way up. The problem is my arm. How much weight can I put on it?

^Any other way up?^ She signs no.

There is a path of sorts. After all, the young and old also have to get up this face. We take it slow. Fion shows concern, but I sign that I am fine for the moment.

^I don't trust you behind me. Just follow the path. I will let you know if you are about to turn wrong.^ I affirm and squeeze past her.

There is light from above, but it does not reach into every corner. Soon I am confused and don't know which way to go.

I hear a sigh behind me, ^Up and to the left. Two steps, they lean right, grab the vine with your good hand.^ Normally we could clack to see by sound, but as most people do not climb cliffs by partial moon light we do not need to draw attention to ourselves.

^Thanks.^

It is light by the time we come up over the ridge.

^I am sorry I slowed us down so much.^

^There is no safe house here. We will rent a room at the hostile.^

^And arriving in the middle of the night would not have been good.^

She shows amusement. So, we would have had to hold up somewhere to wait anyway.

Morning fires are started, judging from the smoke rising from most structures. I am starting to smell food which makes my stomach growl.

^I would have thought you had enough food for an eight day.^

^Apparently not.^

^All we will get today is travel chow.^ She turns her hands up indicating disgust. I suspect now that she chose the Hess safe house because of the food.

Fion leads me through a maze of houses and other structures. Most

would be lost, but I know exactly where I am.

^Three meters that way and we would be back to where we started.
So, the purpose of this path is to show me the settlement?^

She shows surprise, ^Always good to know your way about a new settlement. Never know what might happen.^ True.

We take a more direct path this time and arrive in a few arn. We enter, Fion places a few travelers tokens in the receiving bowl. Since Fion works on the outside, she knows the ways of exchange. I do not, though many have tried to explain it to me. If someone works hard they should be obliged to food and shelter. What more is needed?

Fion leads us to the first available room and looks inside.

^The upper rooms are better, but no one will bother us down here or claim rank and make us move. We will however suffer from more noise.^

^I am practically asleep now.^

^We will attempt to eat first. Rest is easier during the day on a full stomach.^

We get the rations from our packs. After giving a brief thanks I start.

^Ah, must you make so much noise?^ Fion complains.

I pause, ^This is very dry, how am I supposed to eat quietly.^

She grumbles, ^By not eating it at all. I have had enough.^ She puts the rest back in the pack. I am still very hungry, but do not protest. In a sense I am a guest of Fion. I have been without food many times. One more will not cause harm. Besides, I did eat a considerable amount yesterday.

^Put your tarp over that window and I will place mine over this one.^ We do so and it gets much darker. Our eyes will adapt of course. But it might be enough to get us asleep at least. The other people staying here are just getting up. They make a lot of noise, but I am too tired to care and am soon asleep.

^ON YOUR FEET NOW!^ What the? Fortunately we sleep in our robes. You never know. I am up almost before he finishes saying to get up. Fion is somewhat slower. Lack of childhood beatings will do that.

^Sisters of Sanctuary huh.^ It is not a question and it was not a compliment. What is our reputation here?

He continues, ^I hate trouble makers. Sisters are trouble makers. Leave now.^ It was not said as optional. We arrive outside the hostile into full sun and half as much sleep as expected. Not strange to me, but Fion is very upset and groggy.

^Looks like the best choice is to continue. We could always sleep in a tree later?^

^You pick one out and I will gladly sleep there.^ We reach the edge of the settlement and I face a barren landscape of rock and sun.

^You knew the path was like this.^

^I am your escort. I had better know. We will die out here without water, lots of it, and protection from the sun.^

^Water is the problem then. How is water provided to the settlement?^

She points to the east, ^A ravine that gets deeper as we progress. They will be guarding the easy access points. They don't just want us gone, they want us dead.^

^Can we circle around?^ She signs no.

^We still have our tarps.^

^No, those are still covering the windows. We barely got our packs, after they searched them. Guess they like our food even less than we do.^

I look around the field. The path is easy to see and with no trees it will be easy to see at night. The problem is that we are drying out as we wait.

^First we need to get further from the settlement. We can't afford to be pushed out again.^ She shrugs and we move.

The rocks get larger as we progress. Soon they will be too big to move. I am getting worried.

^Good thing our robes are white. Our black skin and fur would have made it much worse. She turns and looks at me like she knows it will be much worse and I should stop talking.

We keep walking. Maybe we won't make it. So much for my first supervisor task.

I see something that does not make sense to me.

I point a few meters off the path, in the rock field, ^What's that?^

^Rock jumble. Are we dead yet?^

^I want to see it closer.^ I start to scramble over the rocks. Not easy with a robe on, but I am not taking it off in this sun. I am sweating under the hood and panting to try and remove the excess heat. Soon I will start to hallucinate, then faint and die.

It is more than a jumble. I work at a few rocks and it opens into a cave of some sort. I wiggle in, snagging my robe a few times. It much, much cooler inside. I leave my pack and come back out.

^Hey Fion. Come over here. I have found a nice cool dark cave.^

^Do you know what kinds of creatures inhabit these rocks? The scorpions here will kill you, painfully.^

^So will the sun.^ She shrugs and makes her way over to me.

^Down here.^ I lower myself back into the cave. It feels so much nicer down here. Fion comes in and sighs relief. Still, she investigates the

cave as well as she can.

^Too many crevices that a scorpion or spider could hide in.^ But she is asleep in a few arn. I follow quickly after.

I awake to the sound of Fion saying, ^Don't move a muscle.^ I stop breathing.

I see a quick movement of an arm and then a stomping sound.

^Scorpion?^

^Nope, poisonous millipede.^ She shows amusement. I can barely see her, I assume it was amusement.

^I can't see well enough to find the entrance. How did you know about the millipede?^

^It crawled across me first.^ Oh!

Once outside and back on the path we have the advantage of the partial moon. We check each other over to be sure we are not carrying any more guest travelers. We also finish the last of the water we still had.

^Want some travel chow?^ I ask. She accepts a square and starts to gnaw on it. I start on my own.

We walk for some time. I imagine we are on another planet. It looks so strange to me. Of course I have never been in a desert rock field before. Or another planet of course. I used to listen to the lessons my brothers had. And sneak looks at their books.

The passage of time seems to stretch out forever. I think I may have even been sleep walking. I want to stop and rest when Fion exclaims.

^We made it!^ I look around her body to see what she is seeing and see paradise. Well, comparatively. The day is showing first light. We are at the top of a ridge and looking down onto the wet side. A wonderful thick forest. A dark forest actually. The sun is coming up behind us to the right. That would mean we are facing north west.

^I don't want to spend any more time in the sun. Let's find some water. If I remember right we will cross a small stream soon.^ We practically run down the path, clacking to be sure of not running into anything by accident.

I catch up with her at the small creek and slack my own thirst.

^Slowly or you will get sick. Your body can't handle too much at once. Don't forget to fill your water pouch.^ I slow down. It feels wonderful though.

^A bath would be nice?^

^Not much water and we don't know what is down stream. Might be someones water supply.^ Guess I can wait.

^Rag bath should not matter as long as you don't put the rag back into

the creek.^ Better than not bathing. I sweat so much in the heat. I quickly get out of my robe and use a comparatively clean piece of clothing as a rag. It feels wonderful to get some of the dust and stink off.

Fion sniffs me and makes a disgusting face. Not that clean I guess. Might go away when I dry completely.

^Fion, you know more history than I do. What was it like before the evil ones left?^

^It was a savory age. Metal tracks went all over with mechanical carts powered by black stone that moved Ba and materials wherever they were needed. Homes had running water and some even had lights that worked whenever they were needed. Food came from some distance away, so if your area did not have a favorite food, you could trade with an area that did.^

^What happened?^

She shrugs, ^Not clear. Some say the evil ones sabotaged key systems. But they were so few and the systems so many. This is not a believable explanation. What I learned from Hattie was that most of the actual work was being done by others, Dia and Hu mostly. When they left, or were killed by fanatics, we lost the ability to work our own systems. You can sometimes still find ruins. Most of the metal has been salvaged, but the stone walls remain. With the lack of key systems, many Ba died of starvation or worse.^

^Worse?^ I know starvation, not so bad.

^Riots. Ba slaughtered each other. The blood ran deep. Streams were red for eight days. It did have the effect of reducing the population to the sustainable level.^

^That would explain why Hattie insists we are as self sustainable as possible.^ Fion affirms.

^How much further until we arrive?^

^Half day. We lost some time in the desert.^ Of course.

I offer her some travel chow. She accepts it again without even looking at it. Get hungry enough and even this stuff tastes good. Seli at Sanctuary says it reminds us of what could have happened to us. Travel chow tastes way better than what I lived on.

It is so nice to be back in a forest. Even the forest around Sanctuary is not this thick. I am surprised we don't see any Ba settlements. Could be a protected area. Desperate Ba will destroy a forest. If areas are set aside, they can act as a starting point to restore an abused area.

The smell is what I like the most. Pine and cedar trees. Wonderful.

^If I see another squirrel I might just have to go after it.^ Fion

announces. I show amusement. Fion scrambling up a tree in a rope chasing a small rodent is a funny thought. There are a lot of squirrels. Also says no one lives in this area.

^Another stream up ahead. Drink slowly.^ My own water pouch is empty. My belly sloshes. At the stream, bigger than the creek, I refill my pouch, but do not drink. Quick running. Not sure it is safe to cross.

^We don't cross. The settlement is on this side. Come we are almost there.^

We leave the forest suddenly. In front of us is a meadow. All the trees are gone. Even I know this is not natural. Too quick of a transition. Over a small set of low hills I see the settlement.

^I don't understand. Why is there a wall around it?^ Explains where the trees went to, but trees will eventually rot. This is not permanent, so why destroy part of the forest?

^They feel they need protection from others.^

^Or they are trying to keep something or someone in.^ She affirms.

^How did Sanctuary gain entrance?^

^Not enough workers. You don't feed them, they don't breed or last long. No supply run this way lasts. Now with their fears of others mounting, they are desperate.^

^What others? We have seen no one near us?^

^Remember the last place we were kicked out of? They hate us because we help out here. Though we would help them as well if they would accept us.^

^Ah, was it always a desert around their settlement?^

^Very perceptive of you. That side of the ridge never gets as much rain as this side, but there was a thin forest at one time. Now materials are scarce. The room we stayed in was one of the better ones. Yet, the wood is slowly decaying. It will be hard to replace.^

^They want the forest on this side? It would be some feat to bring the wood back.^

^They don't want to bring it back, they want to move here.^

^What is stopping them?^

^You did not see them? There were archers in many of the trees. They have instructions to kill anyone who attempts to pass without permission. If were not wearing our robes we would never have made it this far.^

^Surely the desert Ba know this. They could make robes like ours easy enough. Or steal them from us. The tarps we left behind would not help them.^

^Those tarps were worth a fortune. The inn keeper probably split the

reward with the enforcers. Supplies are scarce. But you are right, the tarps would not help them get here. The robes could have gotten them this far, but not to the gates. We are expected. I am known. If I had not shown up, they would have killed anyone in the robes.^

^That is crazy. Are they that paranoid?^ She affirms.

^Will they kill me?^ I have to ask.

^Not if we enter together. Once they know you, you could then bring in another. I was brought in by Bebe, who was brought in by Yassup, who was brought in my Lifig, a local baker on rotation in the forest.^

^Wow.^

We approach the gate. Fion looks up. Nothing happens. We wait.

She explains, ^Not everyone knows everyone allowed in. They have to find the ones who might know me.^

^And if they are not available?^

^Never happened. But in that case, as we obviously do not appear to be a threat, we would be left waiting or finally have to turn around and leave, to seek out food and water.^

A small door in the gate opens. I had not noticed it was there. A hand comes out and waves us toward it. Fion leads and enters.

Once inside Fion is taken away by two male Ba and I am held back.

^Don't worry. They just need to learn you.^

I am brought to a larger room where about twenty Ba are gathered. There is food and drink.

One bows to me politely, ^Welcome honored one. Please join us in refreshments. May I ask your calling?^

^You mean my name? I am called Alessa.^ He nods.

^An auspicious name. May you fill it well. I am called Geghj.^ Does everyone know it's meaning but me?

^Geghj, I am embarrassed, but no one has told me what my name means. Would you be so kind as to tell me?^

^I am afraid not. It is your name that tells me that I cannot. There are other special names as well. Fret not, you are not alone.^

^Do you know the original meaning of your name then?^

He shows amusement, ^My fur is gray. Though it took me some time, I did eventually understand. Fear not, you will succeed. Come, eat, meet the others. You are most welcome at Yossop.^

I do not get much chance to eat, everyone wants to talk with me.

^You are so small. Are you sure you are old enough to be out on your own? Have something to eat. You must try these termite snacks. My fem cousin made them.^ I only get a bite. Good, spicy, too spicy for me. I run

for the water. Only it is not water. Some kind of intoxicant. I want to spit it out. Not polite. I swallow, worried about what effect it will have on me. I don't drink any more. Maybe one swallow will be okay.

My head feels woozy. I try and maintain. I really need to get some food into me. There is a worm casserole with lots of tubers in it. That looks perfect. I serve myself a large bowl, find a quiet corner and concentrate on eating.

When I look up there are five faces looking down at me.

^They don't feed you well obviously. You will wish to rest now.^ I affirm. I am very tired.

Fion comes in finally. I go out with her.

^What did they do to me?^

^They like to loosen their new guests up a bit. If you had ulterior motives they might have revealed themselves.^

^I have no ulterior motives.^

^We know that, but they didn't. You will be fine. Maybe a slight headache in the morning. We will stay in the same room until I leave to go back for they next transport duty.^

^You will be the one who comes and gets me when I return?^

^No one knows. We are chosen by who is ready to go.^

I am asleep before I can ask another question.

I awaken to quiet and near darkness. Fion is gone. How does she get by with less sleep? Instead there are two others with me. They are dressed in Sanctuary robes, but show servant markings. I leave the room without waking them. Slowly I learn the layout. I find an uncovered window and look out. A partial moon and clearly after dark. I check my direction pointer. The moon is in a position as to indicate that morning will be in about two eights.

Why aren't the two up? This is not a good sign. I will not let our reputation be soiled by their laziness. I pour water and start to heat it. Once hot I pour some out into a pail and begin by washing the floor of the bath room and the waste room. Next I move onto the food preparation area. Once done I heat more water for the bath. As that is going I look around for what they might eat for their morning meal.

I pour the hot water into the bath and check the temperature. It should be just the right temperature when the honored ones awaken for their day.

I go back to the food and finish preparing the meal. We don't normally eat a hot meal in the morning, but most food is better cooked, so I set bowls of food out to cool. I have to guess as to the number from the closed sleeping areas. One to a room, as the honored ones might arrange

themselves.

Still the lazy ones are not present. This is not good. I finally go back to our room to check on them. They are slowly waking up. They are a mess. Their robes are not presentable. Mine looks better even after travel and morning preparation. Amazing.

^I smell food.^ One says to the other, who looks confused.

At that moment I hear one of the honored ones awaken to use the waste room.

^Stay!^ I tell them and then rush to attend. When they emerge from the waste room I hand them a cloth to dry themselves when they go to the bath. I bow, but say nothing, just offering the cloth. It is accepted after hesitation. I am not surprised. Who served whom here?

As others emerge I do the same for them. Unless one is not emerging I am one off in my estimate of bowls needed. When the last enters the bath I make the necessary adjustment. I do not waste the food, but hide it in a cabinet in case I am wrong and another emerges. I put the food out around the communal table. When they arrive I adjust each of their perches as they arrange themselves. When they finish I remove their bowls and offer cleaning cloths.

When the others finish a final old female comes in. I retrieve the bowl and offer it to her. She seems very surprised. I bow my respects and wait until she has finished, never saying a word. It is she who notices how clean the floor and everything else is.

She turns to me, ^You did this?^ I remain quiet. It would bring dishonor to the lazy ones to admit my work. She clacks understanding and finishes her meal. I clean up the bowls and table. She watches every move I do.

When I finish I turn to her.

^You will be wanting to know what meal will be served later in the day?^ I affirm.

^First I want to know your name. I have not seen you before.^

^I am your servant. I am nobody.^

^Well Fem Nobody, you did more work in two eighths than the other two have done in an eight day. But, I doubt even you can do what needs to be done before the party two days from now.^

^They should be hungry enough by then to lend assistance.^

The old female shows much amusement.

Magenta

We have decided to call our new world Magenta, seeing as how the last place we were on was brown.

We are still near the crash site, figuring that if anyone came looking for us they could not miss the wreckage and they might find us even with the TK out. We also set up warning buoys in orbit to warn of the TK going out on the surface. Surprisingly it does not seem to happen while in orbit, only on the surface.

There was discussion of remaining in orbit, but everyone gets tired of recycling their own shit eventually. Not much entertainment in a small escape capsule. Working together we could have added to it of course, but we would learn nothing of this world then. At least as long as we are here we should do as much as we can.

Nothing here is edible. It all tastes like bleach and does wonders for our digestive tracts. Between the two of us we can make almost anything we want or can remember. We are not suffering on that account.

The Magenta day is up to six eighths and night down to twenty. That makes the year something like six of ours. Hotter than when we arrived, but still tolerable. We both realize that we will have to move eventually. We are still hoping for a rescue.

In mapping the world we find that it has a larger diameter than brown but a similar gravity, so it must be less dense. Less oceans than any of the Edens but much more than brown of course. Vegetation is mostly all of the magenta and purple variety, with an occasional red or blue mixed in. Nothing like flowers though. Di Eden did not really have flowers either, so this is not so strange. Of course I do not remember much about pre impact. So much was lost.

“You realize that TK time is much different than normal time.”

!So you are saying that they might not get here for hundreds of years?!

“Or a thousand. Remember we were not much use to them. Seeing the crash from a distance they would assume no one had survived. Why bother looking more closely. Besides they are not stupid. Anything that could take out our ship would be dangerous to them as well. Would you stick, around to find out?”

!No. Then that means we need to assume no one is coming and make what we can of our situation. Like more extensive living space. If it is going to get hotter or even just a longer day, then we need to go down.!

“Good idea. Will provide relief from the heat and radiation.”

!Radiation? What radiation?!

“We have no idea what . . .”

Great, we have TK again. Can you hear me? This is annoying. We have no idea what we are in for. We have not even been here a Magenta year yet.

True. I move outside. Nice day, for Magenta anyway. A slight breeze. The smell is nearly the same every day. A musty smell with a decay and hint of chlorine to it. I smell the wood like plants the most. Our species is tuned to smells of plants. Poor Randy can't smell past the mustiness. Just wish I could taste it. Last time I tried I threw up for two eighths and our species does not throw up. TK emergency rations, TK chow, is so boring even if it is complete nutrition. Too much vitamin C for my kind, but the Hu need it. Gives me the splats. Took me an eight day to learn how to remove it from my chow.

Sigh, The beacon has gone out again!

We'll fix it then. You know where the others I made are.

I kick a stump that disintegrates nicely and go inside to retrieve a new lamp assembly. I then climb up on top of the shuttle and lock twist the old one off and put the new one on.

Doesn't work.

Try another.

Sigh, I go get another one and repeat the process.

Same thing. Not working.

Do I have to do everything?

You are just as bored as I am. You fix the beacon and I will start digging the first layer of our new underground chamber.

Scan for natural occlusions while we still have TK. Make sure the caps are charged. You know the drill. Save the fun stuff until we are down TK.

Fine, ruin my fun. He grabs the beacon from me to examine and try it himself. It does not work and I show amusement as he passes me and goes into the shuttle. I hear him banging around in there looking for something. Scan stupid Hu, saves time. Use TK while we have it Hu.

I go around the back and remove the safety cover to start watching the gauges as I charge the caps. I can't transform matter but I can move electrons around just fine. Only takes a fraction of an eighth.

I go to the clearing and lie down in my lounge chair with a cool drink. Randy joins me a half eighth later.

What was it?

Whoever designed that stupid shuttle put the fuses in the worst possible location. I searched all over for them. Had to trace circuits nearly this whole time just to find them. Fixed, but I am going to complain when we get picked up.

You mean if.

We will. They will just let us sweat it out a bit first. Ah, sorry, you don't sweat.

I know the term. Your species has such a low heat tolerance.

Dealing with difficulties is what made us smart. I show amusement.

Must have been a Ceph. Only a Ceph would have put the stupid fuses there.

The only cave is two kilometers away. Out from the crash zone. Deep in the forest. Nearly full of water and small, too small.

We make our own then. Nothing else to do anyway.

I love digging, so I end up doing most of the physical work. Randy likes telling me where to dig. During TK time periods he works out elaborate plans on plastic paper. We tried making paper from the various woods, but they went moldy quickly. Nothing local lasts and everything we brought with us is untouched, including us fortunately. Not even the insect like creatures bother us. We do filter the water that we gather to replenish our supplies. Probably not needed. Still, wise to be careful. We are a long way from any help.

Of course it does not take long before we can't go any deeper because we strike water. This world does not have much in the way of seas, but not much in terms of hills or mountains either. Shallow seas and low lands. A marsh world really. Lucky we landed where we did I guess.

We complement each other. Randy can't TP, being dependent on other TK's abilities to communicate when oral language can't be used. He can DS, but there is no need here. No where to go.

“You are growing big guy. Soon our chambers will not be large enough and we can't go deeper and we can't risk being closer to the surface or it will collapse on us. I can only make so much 'thn metal with what little TK time we have to us. Damn I wish I was a seven or eight.”

!So do I Randy.! I go to the shuttle, but barely fit in now. I really have grown. I check the chronometer. We have been here half a brown year now. The below ground rooms are comfortable and we spend a lot of time down there. Oh and I have a running path. I have to run. In my blood I guess. Randy tried to keep up, but is pathetic without TK assist. I check the panels. Everything normal. Oh, except that one light on the upper right. I whack the cabinet and it flickers out.

!You have some work to do on the 'tronics up there. One light keeps coming on and then goes out again when I hit the panel. Loose connection maybe?!

“What light? Where exactly? If it is out I won't be able to find it.”

I sigh, Hu trait I have picked up. Too much time around one.

!Come with me, I will show you. Most fun we have had in an eight day.!

“You are no bowl of laughs either.” How do laughs fit into a bowl? Hu are strange. We can't laugh, so maybe that is why I don't understand. We shake our top feathers when amused instead. Much more dignified. Does not look or sound like we are dying.

I show him the light. Or where it was. Not lit now.

“Shit Droop, why didn't you tell me?”

!I just did.!

“How long has this been going on?”

!A few days.!

“Brown days or Magenta days?”

!What's the difference. Probably just a malfunction.!

“I rerouted the sat data to that light. When it lights it means it has picked up a psionic signature. Someone else is here!”

The light comes back on after Randy resets it with the circuit blocks. He then consults the screens.

“Last location before black out is in the south sea three hundred and thirteen clicks from here.” I do the map in my head.

!Near shore then. Best to wait until daylight. Get some rest now. I am tired. I can be so alive when the sun it up, but once it goes down I am out until halfway through the night. These thirty hour days are annoying. Messing with our abilities is worse of course.

“What if they are in trouble?”

!If we die getting there it won't help them any. Besides we can't both fit in the pod any longer. And don't think for an arn you are going to go without me. You are not stranding me in this place all alone.!

“Ah Droopy needs someone to talk to. How sweet.”

!You are going to end up as a nice dino cushion in a moment. I rise up as if to sit on him and he backs away into a corner I can't reach any longer. So I block the exit and let go a nice big fart.

“Oh God, I am being poisoned! Help, someone help!” I back away and he comes out gasping melodramatically.

“That was a good one. Where did you get the onions from?”

!Database mentioned the compounds that give them their punch.!

“It worked. Wake up at half night to get everything ready?”

!Sure. You want to TK the entire way?!

“Unless you lose a hundred kilos in the next few eighths I don't see a choice.”

!You could take the shuttle while I TK next to you. Worst case I could be strapped to the outside for the return trip at low altitude.!

“That is assuming whomever we find fits in the shuttle and does not weigh too much. We are near our max with the two of us.”

!Okay, I will watch my eating. No need to rasp my scales.!

“Sound painful.” It is.

Randy wakes first. Hu advantage. Dinos, though we are warm bodied, are still slower, especially when it is still dark. I smell coffee. Poisonous for Dinos. I just need something to eat. Then I remember. Guess I could do without a few meals. I do a few exercises to help me become alert.

“God I wish you could drink coffee. Your thunder thumps give me a headache.”

!You want me to go outside?!

“Let's just get to work.”

Not knowing if we will make it back, we leave nothing essential behind. Of course escape pods were never meant to be flown up or even full. We have to supply TK assist to keep it up. I will do more than just lift myself.

“Well, we are ready. Just have to wait until morning. Since we are going south we will have to make good time if we are to get back before sundown.”

!Or we spend the night there. You packed the tent?!

“Yeah, though we don't know what the weather will be like on the coast. Coastlines tend to be cooler and windier.” That's why Dinos don't do coastlines. One night. Only one night.

I am nearly asleep again when the sun starts to show and I start to feel my abilities swell in me. Wakes me up at least.

“Give it another few arn and we leave. Assume whatever position you think will be comfortable.” He goes inside the shuttle and starts up the systems. I stand on the rear supports and lay my body over the top of the pod, hanging onto rings I had added last daylight. Far enough away from the exhaust ports for low level flying. I hope.

Lifting off. Are you okay?

I start to help with my own TK. Even with two level sixes it is a struggle. It will be easier once we reach altitude.

Proceed. I TP back to him. We slowly get above the trees. We have

both been up here before, in the shuttle and without. We put the sun to our left and head towards the distant sea. From here we can't see it through the morning haze. Swamps breath air and water and this world is nearly all swamp.

Above the haze it looks like a sea of white down. If it weren't for the sats we placed above we really would have no idea where we were.

Moving forward. Hang on.

I grab the rings tighter. The shuttle is not the most delicate craft ever conceived. With a huge lurch that nearly takes my arms off I compensate and use TK to protect myself and help push. Still with this much weight we can only make about a hundred and twenty kilometers per eighth. With our daylight time at seven eights now we will make it there before sundown, but won't have much time there if we are make it back in time.

The flight itself was very boring. We do eventually see the sea, but not the coastline. Just a gradual diminishing of the haze.

Match coordinates in an eighth of an eighth.

I don't sense anything do you?

Nothing here or on sensors. Still it would be wise to go down and investigate. We need to get below the haze to see. Use TK to help guide me in. I would rather hit the water than jagged rocks.

There are jagged rocks on Magenta? I tease.

Even a sharp tree would hurt. Stay awake.

Yes Boss.

We set down without incident on the shoreline then promptly sink into the soft sediment. Getting back out requires TKing a ton of mud as we slowly rise.

We need to get further from shore. Too soft here.

Really? I hadn't noticed. I sling some mud to the window in front. It vanishes quickly. We end up going back nearly twenty kilometers and losing an eighth.

I lower myself to land firm enough to support my weight. Feels good. What does not feel good is the number of bugs. These are not the nice polite ones where we came from. They don't seem to mind landing on us. They apparently can't get through my scales at least. Some appear to be trying. They smell me, but aren't quite sure what I am. Never hurts to taste I guess. I shake them off before they decide I might be a meal. I use a TK shield to prevent them from getting near me again.

"It would appear we were in a desert compared to here."

!You noticed the bugs too huh?!

"Bugs are minor. Look at all of the crab like things and everything"

else that moves here. The plants went inland to get away is my guess. Whoa! Did you see that. Something big just ate something a hundred meters away.”

I scan, this place is loaded with hidden shallow caves and critters inside most of them. Probably waiting for prey. Oh, yeah, there goes one. Ah, the herbivores are trying to get inland to where all the plants have gone and the carnivores are waiting for them. If too many are eaten then the carnivores will starve. Those little guys are fast through. Most seem to be making it.

Whump!

Someone just tried to attack my tail. I TK the critter up to get a better look. About thirty centimeters, a lot of teeth, three eyes, and massive claws. For digging those hidie holes is my guess.

“Stop playing with the pets. We need to find the psionic source.”

!Right.! I set it down and it runs like the devil himself had caught him. Bet he tells all the others to avoid us. I wonder if I should do the Hu thing and give him a name.

!Anything from the sensors?!

“Nothing. I confirmed this is the spot.”

!You mean twenty clicks from it. Shouldn't we get closer?!

“You want to be stuck out there when the TK goes off? Besides, we can sense anything psionic from here as long as we have light. Once that goes down I want to be inside the pod.”

!Going to be a tight fit.!

“That is why we brought the tent. Have fun buddy.” He drags it out and deposits it at my feet. Yeah, like that is going to protect me against all the critters with no TK. I leave it for the moment and rise into the air. I still want to get closer. Maybe that is why I am still a six. I like to see things with my eyes if I can.

A lot of hole jumpers duck and cover when I am over them. Randy finally catches up and it becomes a race. He easily wins. My extra mass slows me down even in the TK world. No matter, without the pod traveling is much faster and we are there in a fraction of an eighth. We circle out from the approximate center for a half eighth.

You should have told me about the light.

You should have told me the light was important and not like the dozen others that have blinked off and on that weren't.

He sighs, *True.*

Nothing.

I don't sense much from you either. Let's try announcing our TK

instead of hiding it like we normally do.

Good idea. I open up to full six magnificence.

Am I glad to find you two!

!Okay, don't need to shout. Who are you and ah, where are you?!

Droopy I am hurt. I am directly below you.

I hear clacking and look down.

!Snap!! I shout and Randy dives down to be next to him. I am slower so as not to make a splash. Randy has bubbled and it already part way into the water. Not really deep enough to get totally submerged and not be part way in the mud.

“How did you survive the crash?”

I ejected early. That is how I ended up here. My pod is smashed and sunk. Legshi did not make it. At least I have not been able to find her. She went back into the ship at the last moment. I was launched without my doing by some automated system. Where have you two been? And where is the ship? Crash. Guess it did not make it. Seen any others?

“You will have see it for yourself. Not much left. We stayed near by in case anyone came looking for us. Not a bad place. A lot fewer bugs than here and the land is stable enough to walk on.”

Sounds horrible. Glad I ended up here. Some of the creatures here are really tasty.

!You can eat them? They make us sick. Nothing like our life.!

Hey, you know me. Anything is food if I can catch it.

“We are the only survivors that we have found. Droopy and I were together. We should not have survived, but Droop pulled the release catch down by himself. The crash site shows a few pod remnants, but most is not recognizable, so we don't really know if anyone else made it. Not heard anything. You were the first that a sensor on the pod picked up.”

!We have five sats above us, but they have not found anything either.!

Have you sensed any natives?

“Nothing so far. Nothing sentient even. The hole jumpers are the largest most active creatures we have seen.”

Those silly things? You need to travel the seas. I just got back from a trip. Never gets over about a hundred and fifty meters deep, but most of the life is in the sea. Sentients, not really. Some of the crab like things are close to the ones from my world. She thinks for a moment. Maybe like the raps or chimps on your worlds.

“Never seen a chimp myself. I wouldn't know.”

!I have met a few raps, certainly smart. Give them a million years and they may come after us.!

I look up at the sun. The small moon is nearby.
!It will be dark soon. We need to get back to the shuttle while we still can.!

“Right. Will you be here in the morning Snap?”

I don't understand. Why do you have to leave?

“The TK blackout of course. You being in the water it probably does not matter, but for us eight eighths without TK is a pain and dangerous. Especially without shelter.”

What blackout? I have TK all the time, day or night.

We both stare at her. Huh?

!As soon as the sun goes below the horizon, we lose all TK. Maybe it is different underwater?!

“The real question is do we want to chance it. We could make a simple underwater living space if we hurry. Not that I would want to spend a night in it.”

!If we come back in the morning, meet us here Snap. That will give us an entire sun period to set something up to test what you say. I too do not want to get stuck here.!

Can't be sure I will be here. I follow the food. But, if you have TK in the morning, you should be able to find me. I won't be that far away. She plunges below the water and disappears. I can still scan her of course, but she is leaving the shore quickly.

Move it Droopy! Too much talking. Randy is already far ahead of me. I will not catch him but I give him an incentive to move.

I don't make it all the way, but Randy has the light above the shuttle lit. I run the rest of the way. Maybe work off a few kilos.

“What took you so long lard butt?”

!I like to run. Don't want to end up TK lazy like someone I know. He laughs.

“Could be worse. I really don't like the idea of being stuck up to my neck in muddy water with everything trying to eat me. Speaking of which, could you move your tail a bit. It is certainly tight in here. I thought you were going to use the tent.”

!You use the tent and I will stay inside. Don't like the idea of spending the next eight day pulling critters out of my scales.!

“Snuggle time then. Curl up a bit and I will make a bed leaning against you. I will keep the air exchanger going if you don't mind.”

!That would be nice. Anything to eat?!

“Speaking of which how are we going to handle waste?”

!I'm good until the morning. Running brings out the best of me.!

“What do you think of Snap? I am not sure she wants to leave.”

!I don't understand how she can eat this stuff.!

“I suppose if she has TK she can mute anything she brings in.”

!That would make sense. But still. I eat, but if I don't need to why bother?! Randy starts giggling and does not stop until he seems in distress. I decide it is time to sleep. More of a morning sen anyway.

Actually I find that I really enjoy sleep. I can almost sleep the entire shortened night now. We are further south. I wonder how warm it will get?

I awake to darkness. Randy is at the controls.

“Good, you are awake. We need to get moving. Can't stay here. Getting too warm. I will end up using the entire charge keeping us cool.”

!With me inside you are going to use the entire charge just trying to get off the ground.!

“I was hoping you could run instead.”

!Two hundred kilometers over unknown territory? Are you crazy?!

“I was thinking more of going to the shore and seeing if we still have TK at night. That could be more important than slowly rotting in the north.”

!How soon until daylight?!

“A little longer than an eighth I am estimating.”

!And how much of that is underwater or muddy enough that it might as well be?!

He gives me a funny grin, “Most of it. Okay, we wait until light and TK there. The shuttle can charge while we are gone.”

!Thank you. Now take it easy, we are in for a long day.!

He doesn't though. Still fussing around the cabin. I pretend to be asleep and meditate to no avail. Finally get up and go outside to relieve myself. At least the bugs are not up yet. There is a pre-glow on the horizon. Not long now.

“Help me lock things up. I don't want to lose the shuttle to some curious creature or plant.” Plant? Well, I guess it is possible if we are gone long enough.

Being much stronger I tighten the hatch latches.

!I have not see anything strong enough to get into that.!

“We have not met everything I am sure. Let's run as far as we can and then wait for the sun. Do you mind carrying more in your pack?”

I look at it and see that it is already packed way more than his. I huff and pick it up and start running. Randy catches up.

!Did you put in a few rocks in while I was not watching?!

“Only a few.” He is breathing hard. Maybe we have been doing too much TK and too much sleep.

He is right though. It does not take long before I am slowed down by the gradually increasing frequency of swampy areas that I sink into. Almost fall over a few times. Fewer trees or rather bushes. Too low to be trees here.

Hole jumpers are thinning out too. We got past most of them before they woke up.

“Ow! Shit! That hurt!” I move closer to see what got him. I see a row of teeth marks on his calf, each trickling blood. The creature looks wicked and very dead.

He looks at me looking at it, “Poisoned. My blood apparently killed it. I just hope it's saliva does not hurt me before sunrise.”

!Not much chance of that. Look.! I point to the east. The sun is just poking out from behind the low rolling landscape. The trees are a distant bright magenta line. Beautiful even if it is not an Eden. I slowly feel my abilities returning.

“Not the area anyway. When Snap said she always had TK, I thought maybe it was the life forms or the region we had been in. But it came back right as predicted. I am not sure about this. Might be Snap is immune for some reason and has nothing to do with where she is.”

!Best make our shore shelter good then. And big enough for both of us.!

“Agreed. Dupe enough food and make screens for the bugs.”

!Not as many bugs here. Most of them get eaten it would appear.!

Not hard to see that everything gets eaten by something bigger in succession. The wet ground is constantly in motion. Guess they hide when it gets hotter. I don't remember it being this hot yesterday. I turn up my TK cooling.

We reach the shore pretty quickly. No shuttle to more back and forth this time.

Snap is not in sight.

“Forget scanning. We need to know whether or not we have TK at night before we can stay with her. Without it, it would be best if we moved back to the crash sight.”

I furl my disappointed agreement.

“No TK last night so, it is not the region. Maybe it is being underwater. We need a sub.” Not crazy about being underwater. Silly I know. I swim just fine, and shuttles in space don't bother me, but being trapped underneath that much water, heavy water non breathable water

scares me.

!You make the 'thn metal shell and I will work on the rest.!

“We don't need 'thn, crystal carbon reinforced with 'thn fiber will be enough. We are only talking a hundred and fifty meters. You could hold your breath and go that deep.” No you couldn't, but he is right it is not the depths of Eden.

We are all trained on water and air purification systems. Since I can't transform elements like Randy can, I have to work with what is available and use the high silicon and metal content. The life forms are carbon based, sort of. Their decaying bodies will be enough. I refuse to kill anything more sentient than a plant, even if I have to eat TK chow the rest of my life.

“Overkill don't you think?” I look over what I have done so far.

!You want to suffocate thirty meters underwater?!

“This is enough for the entire ship.”

!Exaggeration. Just concentrate on the shell. You don't want a mad Dino in the same bubble with you, do you?!

“Ah no. I suppose we can finish the connections underwater. If Snap is right.” I speed up and he laughs at me, but starts helping me by DSing units in as I finish them.

!You have to make the power modules. Not enough gold here to make them with.!! Even if it was easy for me to make the 'thn cores we usually use.

“Got it.”

We finish in time, but it is not pretty. A pyramid of four bubbles with passageways between. If one breaks we can live in as little as two of them. At least until morning. Then I am getting back to the shuttle so fast you won't even see it happen. Randy has no problem, being able to DS of course. He can just pop to the surface and swim to shore. He should be able to DS me as well, but I hate D space. Freaks me out, as the Hu say. I can PS, but how does one do that under water? Of course none of that happens without our TK.

Using TK we move the heavy structure into deeper water and Randy DSs in. *Hey, move to the lower bubble so I can get in!*

I climb on top and it nearly tips over. I PS into the top bubble.

!I'm not sure about this.!! Randy is at the control, such as they are and we descend. This thing is not going to break any speed records. By projecting a more water dynamic shape we glide through the water okay, but if we lose TK we will be back to non-dynamic profile and will only be good for bobbing to the surface. Tipped over to one side as the one

bubble is currently sitting on top of the lower three. Who designed this thing anyway. Oh, yeah, me. Guano. What was I thinking.

There is not much in the way of plant material. Most of it is microscopic or hanging from rafts from the surface. Light should penetrate clear to the bottom for the entire sea, so that is not the problem.

!Randy what are those spiny things at the bottom and what happened to all the plants that should be there?!

“Who made me the biologist? Look sort of like sea urchins from Hu Eden, only the spines are fractal instead of single. I am guessing if they serve the same niche they eat any plant that tries to get a hold on the rock down there. Certainly are enough of them.”

!Except for that swath cut through then about three or four meters wide. Look to your right.!

“I see it. I am going to follow it to see where it leads. I am guessing Snap has something to do with this.”

I scan ahead. There is so many small things in the water that is hard even for TK to get through clearly. I keep fixating on some of the more interesting forms and am glad they are not bigger. Law of the sea, everything is eating something and being eaten by something else. A few try to attach themselves to the TK shield, but slide right off.

!Whoa there cowboy, a little closer to the surface would be safer. The sun has nearly set.!

“The caps are charged. We have plenty of reserves to get us to the surface.”

!In case you haven't noticed I ah, made a slight mistake in the design. The ah, access port will be underwater if we lose TK.!

Randy looks around to find the port and thinks about it for a moment.

“We can swim out then. No big deal.” What does that mean? What's a deal? Hu are difficult to understand at times. He continues to descend and we are right on top of the path now.

“This thing drives like a whale even with TK.”

!Another good reason to be a little closer to the surface.!

“And get tangled in the hanging weeds? I don't think so. Getting dark and I don't feel weak yet. Not even tired. We usually fall asleep as soon as it gets dark.”

!A relief to know it is not something special to Snap. So, what is the difference? Does seawater shield whatever is causing the TK loss? Never heard of that in any of our classes.!

“Nor I. Maybe something does not like TK at night on land, but does not care what happens in the sea. I am going closer to the surface to see if

it is depth dependent.”

!I would rather you did not do that. TK is fine. I like TK. I don't want to be without it in the open sea, tangled in weeds, with the port pointing down in the dark.!

“Brave Dino. We have to know what we are dealing with. Better now while the caps are full.”

!They will stay full if we maintain TK. I will make sure of it. We go up anyway. I knew he would. He never takes my fears seriously. But, cover him in slimy worms and watch him shake.

We break the surface with my bubble going up into the air as the lower three keep me afloat. I feel the TK leave me.

!Lost TK. How are you doing?! I start to get sleepy.

“Weak, but still able to at a limited level. So, it appears to be depth dependent. Whatever is causing the problem is blocked by seawater. Snap probably never came to the surface at night. Why bother? Nothing interesting to her.” We descend and I feel TK return.

Once we are fifty meters down I feel normal and wide awake again.

!Let's find Snap.!

“On it.” I would like lights, but with TK we really don't need it. Probably would just upset the critters anyway.

We stop suddenly.

!What happened?! I scan around. I was distracted watching the night creatures instead of the bottom. Watching an empty path is boring.

“The urchins are back. No more path. Weird thing is that it just stops suddenly.”

!Go back to the end of the path. He does so.

!Now wait. Snap will be right there. Probably passed out from eating too much.!

“Crusta sleep?”

!Not exactly. They go into a sort of meditative state. Most of the blood is in the stomach doing the digestion job. The mind will be running on slow time. Not much will try and eat a creature that big covered in armor.!

“She is huge. I can barely scan her outline under the silt and sand.”

!She is TK. She can hide from us if she needs to.!

“Would never see her if we did not have TK. I doubt even light would show anything.”

!Try it. She invited us in. About time she responded to us and told us what she knows.!

The lights come on. A few arn later we see some movement in the

sand. Slowly, very slowly, she works her way out of the sand.

Took you two long enough. Do you believe me now?

!My question is how the rest will find us down here? We are hundreds of kilometers away from the crash site and at the bottom of the sea.!

TP, not sound. Too distorted to understand.

“I can't TP.”

!I will translate then. We work together.!

How will the others find us down here?

You really think they will come for us? We are the excess, the sacrificial spawn that draws attention away from the ones who are worthy of being saved. They are not looking for us. They don't care if we live or die. We are on our own to make the best of it as we can. Accept this and do the best you can with what is available. It is not a bad planet really. Given enough time there will be sentient forms worthy of watching and teaching.

“I will die of boredom long before that happens. A million years is a long time.” I TP what he says.

I admit that there is a lack of curiosities. I think I have seen most of what this world already has. It is actually amazing that it has gotten this far. I would have expected more species than this for the phylum diversity present.

!Are you saying that this world is not OM spawned, but sentient started?!

There is that possibility.

“A farm maybe? If that is the case we may see other sentients when they come to harvest or settle here.”

The world is full of life. If they were going to settle, it looks ready. If they were going to farm, I have seen no evidence of past collecting of food.

“If they have TK, they may not need much, just enough fresh materials to provide a welcome change from TK chow, or their equivalent.”

!Does anyone know where we are? Are we close to one of the systems that has been attacking us? They certainly are powerful enough to fit the description.!

Good claw. What are we going to do about it? We are not high level TKs. We could not put up an effective defense. That leaves hiding.

“How did you hide for so long from the sensors we have in orbit?”

I don't use TK much. Once I changed my enzymes to be able to digest the local life forms I really don't need TK. I am big enough to scare any

thing away that might first want to try.

I do a quick scan. Her DNA has been adapted.

!You might appear as a really nice meal to the TK masters of this world. Can you hide anywhere?!

“You are rather big Snap. Droop is right, how do we hide.”

The only thing that would cause them to look for us is your shuttle.

You need to destroy it so that it looks like part of the rest of the crash site.

“Oh, no. Never happen. It is also the only thing that would cause our own to look for survivors too.”

It has been over one brown year. They are not coming. You put all of us at risk. Adapt as I have or we all die in a boiling pot of water.

“Actually the two of us would poison them in our current form. But I get your point.”

!I don't think an immediate decision has to be made. They have not arrived yet. Let's think about it for a bit. See if we can come up with any alternatives. One Magenta day ago we thought there weren't three of us. We need to absorb that first.!

“We wasted time finding you Snap. You might be right. If they have no reason to look for us, they are likely not going to be able. There is enough life here to hide innocuous psionic signatures. As long as we keep our TK use to a minimum we could succeed.”

The alternative argument is to try and escape this world and return to brown. I would prefer to stay here of course. Brown has very little water, only a few small lakes made by the higher ones. But I would be willing to help the two of you to leave if that is your choice. She turns around and heads further out, snatching urchins and other life forms to continue to expand her girth.

“We can't leave the water until daylight, so we might as well explore.”

!On Di Eden and I suspect Hu Eden, there is not a lot of life in the deep sea, but here there is no deep sea. Normally I would say stick closer to shore, so I don't really know which direction would be most useful.!

“I guess I would like to see these crab things Snap says might become sentient soon. They are the only thing that might argue for this not being a farm world.”

!There are smaller species of raps that some have tamed and kept as pets. I believe you Hu have done similarly with many species. Could be these crab creatures are pets.!

“Or livestock. Hu are good at using both strategies.”

!We prefer the hunt to the ranch.!

“Does not sound like the crab things are much to hunt from Snap's

short assessment of them.”

!Go closer to the surface. If I was a hunter that is where I would hide. I would hide in the weeds and then drop down on the prey as they came up to feed at night.!

“I hope we don't get caught in the weeds.”

!As long as we have TK we shouldn't.!

“Don't worry, but we could still die of boredom.”

!Welcome to Magenta.!

“Stop saying that. You want to try and find brown on our own? I can do D space, but there might be sentients here before we got there. At least here we can stretch and run.” A million years in a 'thn bubble would be impossible. Don't know how Mei did it.

No Where Perch

As soon as we are a few kilometers out the cart stops and they remove the shackles and chains.

+Thank you. What happens next? Execution?+

+Possibly worse.+ One of them says. Torture first, then flight school.

Hya squawks, +We left Foss in charge. She is young enough and strong enough.+

+Good choice,+ I say.

An eighth later we reach a small village. Ku flaps the five and they raise a wing in response. They seem to be well thought of.

+Who are you five?+

+Later. Decisions first.+ Decisions?

We come to a train station. I am surprised there is one for such a small village. We are helped off of the motor cart.

+They are not likely to kill us in front of all the others are they?+ Gren whispers to me.

+I don't think they intend to. They could have anywhere up till now. Why transport us if they intend to kill us?+

+Maybe we are going to be experimented on?+ The five show amusement waiting for us to approach them.

The leader tells us, +Decision time. You can continue with us or you can take the train to anywhere you want, without cost.+ She holds up a special badge. +With this badge they will never ask for payment. You can even eat food from the kitchen cart without cost. Just show the badge. Now once you leave the train station, the badge will no longer be of any use. Further, you can't give it to anyone else. It is only for you. You can go home if you want. You can go somewhere completely different. You can live on the train until you die of old age if you want. See the world, from the train anyway.+

+There is not much life left in us, so staying on the train would not get us very far. And home, well, we are forgotten. Once we were convicted, we ceased to exist for our families. I don't blame them. They have to survive the stigma of having a guilty felon among their flock. Better if we never existed. I guess I will take your badge and see as much as I can before I fall off the perch. Anything is better than Faley.+

+The food will be better at least. Not a bad choice. You will meet lots of people. You would be surprised by what you learn.+ Gren takes a badge and gets on the train.

+You said choice. What are the other alternatives? You said, go with you. What does that mean?+

+School. Not flight school exactly. It will be very hard work and you may still end up on the train like Gren. But if you succeed you will not be sorry.+

Hya comes up, +Badge. No point in trying school. Never was good when I was young. Now it is too late.+ She takes a badge and goes to the loading section to wait for the next train.

The other three prisoners chose the badges as well after some hesitation. +Always wanted to see what was beyond the next hill.+ Said one.

That left me and the Line Master.

He says to me, +I am game if you are. Might as well try it. We can always choose the train later if it does not seem right to stay. I got no family to go back to either. I would be ashamed to tell anyone what I used to do now that I know what it really was all about.+

I speak, +I always have known that I would choose school. I could not do otherwise. If there is more to learn, I want to learn it. Travel for the sake of travel does not interest me. School for me as well.+

+Very well, come with me then.+ The leader turns to the other four of her group. Without a sound they disperse. Strange Ku.

I whisper to the Line Master, +I don't know what to call you any more.+

+Never line master again Flor. My name is Tegga. An old name from before the fall.+

+I had a nest mate called Tegga when he reached the age of reason. A good name. Thank you.+

+Thank you. I would have done most anything to get out of there. I am sorry for all the pain I caused you and the others. I feared for my life and the lives of my family, who don't even know I exist. I just hope they will be okay and the Black Vests do not extract revenge.+

+We did not call in these white robes. How can they blame us?+ He give me an astonished look. +Yeah, they don't need an excuse.+

+They seem to genuinely enjoy being mean. Must be inbreeding or something.+

+Actually all sentients suffer from this phenomenon.+ The white robe has spoken.

+There are other sentients?+ Tegga asks.

I answer, +You remember your schooling certainly? There were once many other sentients that the Ku interacted with. I am guessing the Black

Vests took training with the Ba.+

+I thought all that was just scary stories to keep fledglings quiet.+

+They are very real. You may be right about the Ba. Strange how the Ku have taken on the characteristics of our former oppressors. It is as if we somehow need it in our culture. We are called The Watchers. My name is Polli. I am top perch for the local chapter.+

+Well met Polli. Why were the Black Vests so afraid of the five of you?+

+One of many things you will learn at school. A most unique school.+

+Guano, you are going to make us Watchers!+ Tegga exclaims. Polli shows amusement, but does not affirm.

+How far away is the train station from here now?+ I tease Tegga.

We are walking, so it is not very far. I am wondering how we will get to the school.

+How far to the school?+

+Not far.+

+Will we walk the entire way?+ Tegga asks.

+Watchers only walk unless we are transporting others.+

+Meaning non Watchers.+

+Correct Flor.+

+How many others will there be? I mean other students.+

+Not many. We are very selective.+

+Selective? You just offered schooling to seven. Does not sound selective.+

+Ah, but only two accepted. Never said I was the one selecting.+

Guano, this is going to get hard if all the teaching is like this. Twisted around and pecks you on the rear.

+How many teachers are there?+ Tegga asks.

She shows amusement, +Many, many teachers.+

Another trick I am sure. I am afraid to ask any more questions, but this does not stop Tegga.

+When does instruction begin? I mean, do we get a rest first?+

+No rest. Never rest.+ Polli shows amusement.

I take a wild guess, +Instruction has already begun. Began a long time ago in fact. And it never ends.+

+Very wise Flor.+

+Then Polli is our instructor?+

I look at Polli, +I think not. She is our guide. Life is our instructor.+

Polli stops and looks at me carefully, +Maybe too smart. Throw this one back?+

She waits for a response from me.

I answer, +Maybe. We will see.+ She then shows much amusement and runs ahead of us. We run to catch up.

We run for some time.

Panting Tegga asks, +You said it was only a short way. Why are we running?+

+Running is fun. Reason enough.+

+Tegga, instruction has begun. Running is part of the instruction.+

+I am not very good at running.+

Polli stops and looks at Tegga, +Why not?+

+Bad feet. A lot of pain running.+ Not just his feet judging from his breathing.

+Show me your feet.+

Tegga lifts his feet one at a time. Polli examines them carefully for some time, but does not touch them.

Finally she gets up, +Feet fixed. Run now.+ She takes off running again. I shrug and start running after her.

Tegga catches up.

+No pain. Amazing. No pain.+ He runs ahead of me ecstatic.

We eventually approach another small village. I look around for a train station, but do not see one.

Polli comes up to me, +No train here. Don't give up. You are a good student. Come, we eat.+

We walk into a nearby coop. Inside are others, a family. There are three places available with three bowls full of food. Much better food than I have seen in a very long time.

Polli whispers to us, +Be kind. They are not well off and this is all that they can offer us.+ Huh?

I look up at Polli, +You misunderstand. This is the best meal I have seen in many years. I am truly grateful.+

+As am I. I thank you honored ones.+ Tegga bows. Seeing him bow I bow also. I would have thought he was used to better food. Maybe like the coop master they really were treated the same as we were. Maybe a little cleaner coop is all.

Once outside again Polli comments, +Not normally necessary to bow to others for a meal offered.+

+Why not? They had so little and offered so much. I was deeply honored. How long will they go hungry because of what they fed us?+

I offer, +I did not see them eat anything. Tegga could be right.+

Polli looks at both of us, +Coming to a conclusion without sufficient

information is very dangerous. I need to change this bad habit.+

She pulls something out of her travel pouch, +These are given to any family that feeds us.+ She flips it in the air, but both of us miss it. She walks on. We are left staring at a gold eight seed. A months wages for the family I would guess.

+Leave it. We need to find sleeping locations outside.+

+Leave a gold eight seed? Why?+ Tegga asks.

Polli turns and looks at him carefully, +Does it matter other than I said so?+ Tegga looks stunned. I show amusement.

Polli turns to me, +Why is this funny?+

+While in the camp we were never allowed to question any action or order. Even the thought that we could gain understanding was alien to us in a very short time. To have one of the former oppressors ask awakens me to this fact.+

+Good, both of you keep asking questions.+ She turns and starts to run. On a full stomach. This is going to hurt.

+She did not answer the question though.+

+I noticed.+ It will be dark soon. I suspect we will find out in time.

This is going to be a long apprenticeship.

I don't even remember settling down for sleep. I open my eyes to see Polli staring at me.

+Good, we run. Gotten fat and lazy in camp.+ Fat? We were starving. I can count my ribs without even touching them. Tegga moans. He is very stiff and sore from yesterday. Wonder how his feet are doing.

Very shortly we come to a small lake. No one else appears to be around. Polli removes her pouches and leaves them on the shore as she runs into the water.

+Bath time!+ I run in after her and begin splashing around.

+It will take me a moon to remove all the dirt from camp. I can't remember the last time I had a wet bath.+ I begin cleaning my feathers, when I notice Tegga is only ankle deep.

+Aren't you going to bathe?+

+I just want to soak my feet until the pain goes away.+

+I thought Polli cured you.+

+Temporary.+

+I admit I am sore myself. We did not run at camp.+

+Nor did we. Guess we both were used. Though I admit, you suffered more. I don't want to belittle what you went through. It was clearly wrong.+

+Thank you for acknowledging.+ He bobs. It will take awhile before I

totally trust him. I am surprised that Polli accepted him. It seems only the Black Vests were truly evil in her eyes.

+Wow!+ I exclaim. +There are some white feathers down there. Thought I had lost them all.+ Polli shows amusement but does not say anything. She is already on shore drying off. I really want to stay longer, but know it would be better to be dry when we start running again. I reluctantly get out of the water.

+You did not take much of a bath Tegga.+

+Only going to get dirty again. It is my feet that I am worried about. Maybe I won't be able to continue.+ I am indifferent.

+We gather food.+ Polli announces. Another gold eight seed going to some lucky family coop.

We walk a short way to find bushes covered in berries and others with seed clusters. Polli begins gathering and eating. We don't wait. It is not a prepared cooked meal, but fresh food is still wonderful. My beak is soon bright blue and dusted with parts of seeds. Tegga takes one look at me and shows amusement. He looks the same though. Polli is clean however.

+Polli, you do not eat?+ She shows amusement.

+Next we need to build our coop.+ Huh?

Both Tegga and I look frozen. Neither of us has any idea of how to proceed.

Finally Tegga says, +We have no tools. Wood has not been prepared.+

Polli answers, +Feels like rain coming. We had better hurry.+

+I don't suppose you have any more of the gold eight seeds to pay for shelter?+

+How many do you think I could possibly carry? Ten maybe. One for each meal and one for a nights stay. Would not last very long. Training will take much longer than that.+

+Squawks, we would soon be in this state anyway. How do we begin?+

+How would you do it?+ Oh guano. Tegga looks around.

+Not much to build with. Some of those leaves might help provide shelter if supported by some means.+

+Gather them up.+ Tegga starts his task.

Polli turns to me, +You are the teacher. What would you tell your flock?+

+They were younger ones. It would have been better if I been a teacher for more advanced students.+

+Excuses. None of the other teachers ever had to build a coop out of found materials.+

+True, wait, you said found materials. We passed a recycle yard coming here. Where I grew up anyone could take materials from the recycle yard.+

+True here as well.+

+CHIRP! Tegga, come on, let's go. I will need your help.+

He has already made a nice stack of the large leaves. He looks up confused.

+The recycle yard we passed. Let's see what we can find there to make the framework.+

+We don't have tools. How will we work the material?+

I think for a moment, +Some of it might not need working and there might even be tools present that are not complete, but might still be usable.+

+A lot of maybes.+

+Don't know if you don't look.+

It takes us less than an eighth to reach the site and begin assessment.

Polli reminds us, +We don't need perfect. We are not building a coop that a top bird would live in, just something that can provide shelter from wind and rain.+

+Usable is more important than pretty. Got it.+

+Unless we want to spend days building this coop, we need to keep it simple and what we can carry in one trip.+

Simple, I like simple. We figured out the bombs we should be able to do this. There is a lot of material here. Most of it would be hard to bring back.

+This stuff is all too heavy and too far away.+

+Think. What do we already have there? The flat leaves that you gathered Tegga. What else is already there?+

+Lots of reeds, fuzzy heads look almost good enough to eat.+

Polli tells us, +You can actually eat them if you know how.+

+We have plenty of food for the near future then. Maybe we can put something together with the reeds and leaves. We need something to cut them with and something to tie them together with.+

+Like this wire weed?+

+Once it dries out completely it will be brittle, but moist it can be wrapped around the reeds.+

+Then we just need something sharp. Not likely to leave a sharp knife in the recycle area.+

+Then we need something we can make sharp.+

+Like these flat pieces of iron scrap?+

+That might work. We can scrape the rust off with rocks and sand and sharpen against the granite outcrops.+

+Crude, but it might work. At least we can carry these few pieces back.+

+Maybe a few more, just in case. Better to have some extra.+

+But not so heavy we can't get back. We still have a lot of work to do before sunset.+

+You had to say that didn't you Flor. Polli has started running again!+

+We best catch her.+ I start running after her, carrying a few pieces of likely metal. Tegga sighs and starts after me.

I am exhausted when I arrive. Polli already looks rested. Have to have her carry more metal and less wire weed next time. She has set up some rocks and a cleaning station near the water.

I look at what she has done, then gather some soft reeds to wrap around one end of the piece of metal I brought.

+A handle will make this whole process easier on the hands.+

She shows amusement and does the same for her piece.

By the time Tegga shows, we are both hard at work cleaning and sharpening out knives.

Normal stones work great for cleaning. The rust is soft and flakes off easily. For sharpening though, only the flat granite will work. Not many pieces of that around. On one of the small islands wading distance from shore there is flat spot. I wade out and start sharpening my metal against it. Polli comes out with a sack and starts to pour water over the rock as I sharpen the metal.

+If you hold the metal like this,+ she demonstrates, +you will get a sharper blade. You sharpen and I will water the rock, to wash away the fines.+ I nod agreement.

Tegga becomes impatient.

+Give me your sharpest one and I will start collecting reeds.+ He wades out and I hand him the first one. He immediately goes to work on the nearest bunch.

+Not great, but it does work. I would not want to do this every day.+

We work for about two eighths. It is well into the afternoon before we quit to rest at the shore. There is a substantial pile of reeds, leaves and wire weed.

+How do we put it together. I have never built something this large.+ Tegga says.

+I used to teach history, among other things. Ancestors made domes by making several long pieces that bend over in a half circle. These

pieces are too short, but if we lash them together we might succeed.+

A few failed attempts later we realize that we need a substantial overlap for strength. We finally settle on a double reed pole where the breaks are at different points.

+We are running out of time. Hold a one end of a pole against this rock. Now bend it over. I will place this second stone at the other end. Polli, you are the tallest. Hold up the pole in the center.+

+I see what you are doing.+ He gets the second pole and places it against a third rock while I find a fourth and put it the right distance away. A little adjustment as the second pole is bent into place.

+Three pole should do it for now. Polli once it is in place, tie the three poles together at the center. That will prevent things from falling apart while we add cross pieces.+ I show amusement that Tegga finally sees what we are doing.

Cross pieces go on easier. When we start placing leaves at the top, Polli interrupts.

+Are you sure that is how to do it. Think like rain.+ I stand and look at what we are doing. Tegga actually collects some water from the lake in a fold of a pouch and throws it on top. It falls off of the top leaves as expected, but then goes under the second row and straight onto the ground where our perches would be.

Tegga takes the leaves off and immediately begins placing them on the bottom first.

+Yes. That should work.+ We get to work.

We finish exhausted, but hungry.

+Berry run!+ Polli exclaims. She runs off, we follow more slowly.

By the time we reach the berries and seeds it is starting to rain. We stop eating and gather as much as we can into our pouches, then run back to the shore.

We had not made perches, so pile stones together to get us off the floor itself. Again, I don't remember falling asleep, but the sound of rain on the leaves is wonderful.

I awaken to a horrible sound of rock against metal. I quickly go outside to see Polli pounding on a large flat piece of metal. Thin, it is giving way to the pounding. At first I am confused. It will make a horrible knife. Then I see the bowl forming.

+I will make a stone fire ring. How do we start a fire without a glass?
+

Over the pounding I hear, +I have one. Every Watcher carries one. In spite of what it looks like, I will not expect you to do everything the

ancestors did.+ Thank you. I bow to her and she shows amusement.

+What's all the noise?+ Tegga comes out.

+Good, find some fine firewood if you want a hot meal.+

He pauses to see what we are doing and goes to the edge of the woods and comes back shortly with an assortment of twigs and branches.

+Good enough.+ The pounding stops. +Help me take it to the lake.

We need to fill it with water before we place it on the fire ring.+

Fire started we set the shallow bowl on the fire ring.

+Hot water? That's today's meal?+

+If you don't stop complaining you lazy rooster that is all you will get.

Come with me Tegga. Flor, stay with the fire.+ I start to show amusement, but quickly stop it. Don't need trouble.

They come back with a few minutes later carrying those fuzzy heads. Some of them must have burst because Tegga is covered in them.

+Don't say a thing. I will take a bath today.+

Polli places huge hand fulls of the fuzzy heads into the water. They almost immediately disappear. She adds more and more until we have a thick bubbling goo. Smells horrible.

+Okay, kick the fire out. Use sand, whatever. Just be careful not to disturb the bowl.+

+I think this needs berries.+ Tegga says. I am skeptical. I pull some out at the end of a twig, cool it and taste it.

+Mmm, slightly better than the food we got in the camp. I could eat this.+ Tegga looks at me in horror.

Polli asks him, +You mean you did not now what the inmates were fed?+

+I was a line master, not responsible for food or coop.+

I am full by the time Tegga gets back with berries. The bowl has turned cold and gotten much more solid. The berries sit on top and don't sink in. He makes several attempts to get some out, but the twigs just break or dig a hole without removing any. He finally retrieves a knife and cuts some out that way.

+The berries don't help. I think it is even worse.+

+However, it is nutritious and better than starving. Unfortunately, the heads are very seasonal. Another eight day and they will be gone. An eight day before and they would be too tough and sour to eat.+

Tegga asks, +So, we have shelter, water and food. What's next?+

+It was important for you to realize that you could survive in the 'wild' if you had to. Of course with more experience more choices become available.+

+Watchers don't live this way then?+

+Not unless we have to, but it could happen, rather, does happen from time to time. You need to be ready and not panic when it does.+

I ask, +I need to know. What is it that you have over the Black Vests? Why do they fear you?+

+What weapon do you have? I have been watching you and can see nothing that you carry that could cause such fear. Eggs, we have even had to make our own knives. No Black Vest would fear us.+

+I carry no weapons. It is nothing physical that they fear. There are secrets that I will keep until you become Watchers yourself. Time to run. Leave everything, we are not coming back.+

+Oh great, we have to make a new shelter every night.+

Ah hell, who am I kidding?

Two months since I have written a word and I have no idea where I am in the story. No idea where the story is going. I could re-read a section, but I was not sure even when I started. I just knew the title, Nobody. The overlooked ones, the forgotten ones, the invisible ones. Of whom I am a card carrying club member. An introvert.

The boss at work is very extroverted. He jumps up on top of picnic tables to get attention to address the troops. Marine station, as in ocean, but sometimes it feels more like the military. Very chain of command, don't ask questions, just do. Oh, never ask questions.

Been having all kinds of problems with a bill from my first night in a hospital since I was born. Seven months latter and I still can't get the 100% coverage my insurance is supposed to cover, but apparently doesn't. I hate confrontation, you probably guessed that by how I handle it in these books. I am confronting the insurance, the insurance confronts the hospital and the hospital comes after me. Around and round we go, where it stops, nobody knows.

My avocation is clearly photography. But, not just any photography. I am in love with the late 19th century for some reason. It is not the time period itself. It was racist, sexist, classist, with no safety net, and plagues of yellow fever, typhoid, cholera, etc. Not exactly paradise. I would not have survived my birth back then. A one month premie, umbilical cord around my neck three times and on from there. Dead meat a hundred years ago.

Given all that there was something special about the time period. It was the last time that a single person could understand if not build all the tools that they used in their lives. Well, maybe not a locomotive or a factory, but certainly the normal everyday devices. Cameras were largely build by hand. A few lenses, some wood and lots of patience and you had a camera. The emulsions were mixtures of commonly available materials.

Photography was new and novel. Very few people did it. Not taken for granted as it is now. Even when I was growing up in the 50s and 60s, not everyone owned a camera. Most families had one, but it was usually only a happy snap camera the parents used to record the family events. Not so with me. Seven years old and my father said, you took the images, you develop 'em. I have never sent away a roll of black and white away to be developed.

A photography friend of mine does not even call digital work

photography. She calls it digography instead. I wonder if painters and sketch artists felt the same a hundred and eighty years ago about the then new photography? But painting and drawing are still here. Photography and certainly not even digography has not erased them yet.

I have lenses from 1880 and 1891. No shutters. Film was too slow to need them. Instead you remove the lens cap, count off the seconds and replace it. Film had an ASA, er, ISO of between 0.5 to 2. Diaphragms closed down to F128. Not uncommon for an exposure to be several minutes even on a high overcast day. Wonderful results. Almost everything is in focus, but much sharper than a pinhole image of similar aperture ranges. Moving waves, water, people, cars, all mist out or disappear. The tonal scale itself, because of the glass plates emulsions used, was different. A different look and feel to the final result.

An image taken with one of these cameras looks like it was taken back then. One image I did of a friend's memorial service is an example. There were digographers running around with systems in the \$5K range. Snap, snap, snap, very intrusive and annoying. Long lens penis extenders. I calmly set up my camera, removed the lens cap, waited one minute and then replaced it. No one paid any attention to me. The result was wonderful. Light coming through the trees, some movement from people, but most held still, listening to the speaker. It almost felt like you could walk into the image and be there.

Another image in front of the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Everyone moved even the small child in the stroller, who waved or something. A quieter, slower imaging technology. I even made my own glass plates a couple of times. It was neat to be able to say that I used Monterey Bay seawater as the halide source. Very slow. Problem was it took weeks to make the emulsion, pour the plates and let them dry. Lots of dust problems too. Of course back then everything was contact printed, so maybe they didn't care as much. Enlarging paper was another thirty years away.

Ever notice how so many fantasy novels are set in some sort of Medieval setting? I wonder if that is our natural level of tech. We have pushed beyond what is really comfortable for us and we will eventually collapse back to it. One good plague could do it. See book one and four? No matter.

Ah, TK abilities. Wishful thinking. Death, destruction, pain all around us. So frustrating that so little can be done. Most people, most of the time, running on autopilot. Going about our lives, hoping that the next catastrophe will not hit us as we watch it hit all around us. This week it is

the horrible floods in Australia. I have a friend there, but she lives up in the hills some. Safe from the floods, but I wonder about where she works. Are we next? Rainy season just beginning. So far not too much. A lot of small earthquakes the last few days. Government cuts backs to research. How much longer will we have jobs. Never ends.

There is a simple sci-fi TV program on called, "No Ordinary Family." The plots are simple and it is fairly easy to guess what is going to happen next, but I like the fact that they are trying to show how it is not exactly simple to have super abilities. There are all sorts of hidden hazards and worries. So many think that being different would make life easier. Not true, makes it much harder.

I have been different my whole life. Helen, my partner, asks if I am normal on a regular basis. I always answer that I hope not. To be normal in this messed up world is to be part of the problem. Being introverted is not my only abnormality of course. I tease people who ask what religion I am by answering that I am a Depressionist. It has been part of me for so long that it is reduced to the level of background noise most of the time. Well, except for most days I wish I was dead. But, it is a living.

Where did nine books come from? About twenty years ago I was day dreaming, a very normal activity for me, when I thought up a plot and wrote it down. About eight years ago I had two weeks off for Christmas and New Year and Helen was up taking care of her over ninety year old father (since deceased at 96). I found the paper with the plot spelled out and thought, what the hell, and started writing. By the end of the vacation I had a rough draft. Friends read it and there were so many changes that I just rewrote it in a few months. Ended up so large that it was split into the first two books.

It was strange during the writing. Automatic writing. I really did not have to think about it or even worry about plot or characters. It just flowed. Different from the initial outline, but it felt good. The later books were harder, but still flowed pretty easily. The last book dragged. This one I am stuck on. Out of gas I guess.

Worked today on a web page programming problem. This will sound simple to most of you nerds reading this, but I am generalist, not a specialist. It was fun for me. Anyway, we have a weather station. Another tech wrote code to capture the serial data and write it to a text file. I then wrote code to put it on a web page using a perl script. Added graphics for wind speed, direction, solar activity and air temperature. All graphically presented without using HTML 5 Canvas. Could have been done in HTML 3.

Well today I used PHP to capture the same data and put it up on a normal web page. I started with wind speed and temperature. Added a small GIF graphic to indicate direction. But how do I present solar? A clock tells you time of day, so I really did not need just intensity. I thought it should be possible to indicate amount of cloud cover, at least during the day. That meant I needed to know the maximum solar intensity for day of year and time of day. Then using a case statement to separate out cloud cover. One hundred to ninety percent I figured could represent sunny to high thin cloud. I used a 'sun' icon. Next was partly cloudy, 90-60%, followed by 60-5% for cloudy. Below 5% I figured was effectively night and used a moon icon. Actually the sensor is not very good at low light and at 5% you can see just fine.

The point of doing this is we are redoing the main station web page with an emphasis on what would main campus people want to know when they visit the page. I just thought current weather in a minimal way could be useful. The have to come down for a field trip or day long class, a quick look at the page and one can see what to take clothing wise. Sweet and simple. Might make it a link to more extensive weather information (and a webcam in the directors office).

The point of telling you this is that this was a lot of fun for me. Cost me a hundred dollars in books to futz past the problems. But it was fun! Just like the kind of thrill I get out of the old time photography. (Only I get 'cat' credit for anything work related. Certainly not for the old time photography. Everyone wants everything to be new and exciting. No appreciation for history, for simpler times.)

Were there ever simpler times? We have not suddenly evolved in the last hundred years or so. They say we take more data into our minds in one month that most people did in the Middle Ages in a life time. Think about that. One month v.s. forty years. Amazing. No wonder we are all so overwhelmed and blown apart.

TK again. Superman was one of the first super heroes. When was that, 1930? Eighty years ago. There were great personalities before then, but Superman was not just great, he was beyond what any human could achieve no matter how smart or strong. And there is a point to his being super. He is here to save us. A glimmer of hope, if only in our dreams. People in desperation cling to some hope, even if only a fantasy. Ask any one in prison, or a survivor of a disaster. There is some jewel, some hope, some promise, that they cling to like a life preserver.

Actually the need for a Messiah has been around since the beginning of time. Jesus certainly fits that role. The first living Superman (before

then it was just hope with no name to pin it on). One of the reasons I included him in the books. No offense to Christians. Remember, these books are fantasy, not fact. A sort of What If kind of thing.

Is that why I wrote these books? Am I just expressing a grasping at hope during trying times? I used to fantasize that this was not random day dreaming, but actually real. People have asked me which character is me in the books. I answer them that I am all the characters. They are all part of me, either my real reality, or my fantasy reality, my wishing that I was more like the character. Yeah, I most identify with Silver Ghost. He is most what I want to be. Hey, maybe after twenty five million years I will be?

So, is this lifetime just a reflection of a previous trip though one of those multiverse spheres? Will I wake up at some point and 'remember' enough to finally manifest abilities? Or is this life one of those 'smiggle' runs where I remain powerless to affect change around me? The purpose of a smiggle run is to reset my memories so I forget that I was ever Silver Ghost? What is the purpose of the spheres? Right, first rule of a TK, we serve the purpose. The purpose is to figure out the PURPOSE.

Is Br'thn real? Should I be on a plane to South Dakota? Is Sauron real? Should I be watching my back? No evidence other than my imagination.

More and more science is showing us how little our choices are truly free choice. Genetics, physiology, effects of what we eat, what environment we grew up in and now live in, all affect us more than our conscious thought does. The last nine books. Where did they come from? I am certainly not alone in imagining super heroes, believable or fantasy. Where is this coming from? Is this a natural progression of our thinking as a species? Or a sign of a pathology of a dying one?

If it is possible for individuals to reach the TK levels, then why has no one come forward and shown the world? Are the dangers to such a person so great that anyone who would dare manifest in public would be hunted down and killed or removed by society or worse, the armies of the world? Even a lowly TK2 would be a formidable weapon. Able to see ten meters through any material except a 'thn solid (which may not even exist). Able to lift their own weight to any height or move a lessor weight at near supersonic speed. Nothing short of a sniper could take them out in safety, and they would only have one chance.

An eight would be near impossible to take out. They could hide anywhere, manipulate things behind the scenes, just what I accused Sauron of doing. Certainly such a person would have no need for fame or

recognition. Would they even see us mere humans as worthy of notice? Or would we be ants for some child to play with as they saw fit? The level eights in my books were for the most part benevolent. No reason why they should be. Maybe they do self destruct? But a TK4 or 5 self destructing would certainly leave some evidence. An eight could destroy the world easily. Unless they leave and destruct elsewhere. Off world. Plunging into the sun might do it. Would we even notice that? A solar flare?

What would be the moral obligations of a TK of increasing levels? Cure the sick? World peace? Destroy all nuclear weapons? Feed the hungry? Remove all the excess carbon dioxide? Making humans totally dependent and addicted to their bad behavior? Never any consequences to our actions, super mom is always there to save us? Not a pretty sight. Jesus is thought to have said, "To whom much as been given, much will be required." Okay, what does that mean? He also said, "Never worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." In other words, you don't have to go looking for trouble. It will find you. Great.

If, and I say if, this should happen to you. What is your response? If it can happen to you 'out of thin air' then what is to stop from it being taken from you? How can you know the change is permanent or that you even understand the extent of the change? Is your first response to pad your own existence while you can in fear it will go away? Stock up on precious metals, diamonds, etc. in secret stashes, that even as a non-TK you could cash in to live on.

Some time as a TK and one might be tempted to give up your job. Spending sixty hours at an activity that detracts from what you could do as a TK might not be the best use of your time. Or, do you help your place of employment even more? Set up a few endowments for instance? Create materials, or put up a few buildings overnight. Never mind that would certainly draw attention and get people into trouble for not getting the proper permissions, not to mention inspections, etc. Endowments might be safer. Most people would not question a source of money used for good where an equally difficult trick of putting up a building would be trouble.

When you make gold or diamonds, do you remember to vary the isotopes in just the right ratio? Make it all carbon 12 and someone, sooner or later is going to notice. Make all of the gold one isotope and it's weight will be slightly off. You can be sure they will check the weight and density of that gold bar. Then it is to a mass spectrophotometer and it will be

obvious that it could not have come from any mine on the planet.

Then how do you explain where you got it from? The IRS would surely want to know. Operating a mining business without a license or known location will attract notice.

Of course, there will be people who will try and take it from you, by whatever means necessary. They break in, hold you at gun point and then find nothing? You haven't gotten around to converting that pile of garbage to gold have you. People get dangerously pissed over less. Did you remember to dissolve the insides of the weapon, or at least fuse the parts together. Trust your TK ability now? Likely they will not wait for you to react, they will shoot first. Only in the movies is the hero given enough time to plan and execute an effective escape.

Another strategy is to head for the hills. Hide out far from other people and trust your TK to take care of you. Dupe food or go into town once a month and essentially become a hermit. Don't need TK to do this. Does not cost much to live this way, can probably do it right now. Why wait? Is that really how you want to live your life, even as an introvert? I like living alone as much as the next introvert, but I still want some contact, at times of my choosing of course.

So either no one else has become TK, or those that have, have chosen to hide the fact from the general public at least. Or there are no TKs and it is all fantasy.

Military. If I was of that temperament it would be an easy choice. I am sure the Cheney's of the world would love a small dark ops squad that could go anywhere and do anything without getting caught. If they know where to strike. These TK ops could help there as well, but six and a half billion are an awful lot of people to keep track of. Could drive someone crazy very quickly. Never understood how control freaks can stay sane. Maybe they aren't . . .

It has been said that the only people who do not complain about their bosses are the unemployed and the dead. If you became TK, how would that affect your relationship to your boss? Would you tell them to shove it and leave? Or worse, make their life a living hell? Or not knowing how long the effect will last, keep it quite and continue to take the abuse? Every superhero needs a cover right?

Kind of funny when you think about it. We all want the ability to correct the problems of the world (or be left alone) and supposedly all a superhero wants is the ability to live a normal life. It is as if having abilities puts a sort of compulsion on one to use them for good (or evil depending on your bent).

All life has suffering. Axiom number one in Buddhist thought. Being a TK sounds at first like a way to solve these problems, at least for oneself. But, it might be like a person who has a little money, but wants more. Is there ever enough? Problems seem to pop up for everyone, not just the poor, sick and aged.

At the same time I get the strange feeling that I am not really telling stories that I just happen to be making up. Maybe these events did really happen in some alternative existence?

Yeah, took me six months to write this chapter, but I feel like I am coming on line again. We will see.

Three Leaf Lake

“Looks very nice here Cat. Bet there are lots of juicy rabbits about.” She is already sniffing the air. It won't be long before we eat. At least the kits are all taken care of. The Fire Stone people were adopted by the two kits, both female. That should be interesting the first time they both become pregnant. This litter felt what was good enough for mom was good enough for them. Spoiled rotten is what they are. Waited on constantly. Still they have discouraged people who would be tempted to exploit them.

This lake is a ways up into the mountains, well away from Fire Lodge. We are on our own again until the old lady catches up with us. She is a strange one. We served our purpose though. Time to move on. I wonder how many people she has used in her life time. Smart one certainly. And it was entertaining. Still I prefer the quiet of empty spaces.

Squirrels chatter above us, cursing Sylvy I suspect. She flicks an ear but otherwise ignores them. Until one drops a nut on her flank and she turns suddenly snarling.

“They are laughing at you now you know.”

She gets up, stretches and wanders off. I start collecting the fixings for a fire to cook what she catches. We have not seen any sign of anyone else in nearly an eight day. Maybe we can afford a larger fire and stay warm tonight. Starting to get a bit cool. Higher in the mountains is part of it, but it won't be too long before first snow.

Lodge people would have already been storing up supplies for winter. We have not had the time, nor the safe location until now. Is this the place? Can we finally relax and lead quiet lives?

Sylvy comes back with the fattest rabbit I think I have ever seen.

“Impressive.” I bow to her, she drops the rabbit near the fire and ignores me. By that I know I have honored her. I quickly dress the rabbit and spit it over the fire. No fancy herbs tonight, just succulent wonderful rabbit. Okay, maybe a little salt. Sylvy loves salt. Have to conserve it though unless we want to trade for it or travel a long way to get more.

The next day we begin our hunt for a safe place to hole up for winter. I start drying half the meat we get as well.

“Yeah I know you don't eat nuts and berries, but if I eat them, then I don't eat the meat you want, so quit complaining.” Why do I have to go through this every year? Skins are not going to be enough to store everything. That means winter hunting. Not sure how good that will be

up here. Most things at this height will either be hibernating and will have gone to the lower valleys looking for sparse food. At least the bears are gone and are not stealing what we have stashed.

Sylvy gets my attention and I follow her down hill a few clicks. I wonder where that term came from? I guess each person decides for themselves. The ground has frozen in some places. Early in the day and it might thaw later, but definitely getting colder. First snow could be any day. Ah, I see what she sees, a herd of deer. A single deer could feed us for weeks if necessary, especially that big buck if we are lucky.

We are new to the area, so the game should not know about our methods. Sylvy goes out ahead and scare the deer back towards me. They know what Cats are of course. They just don't know we work together. The wind blows towards me. They are running slowly now, but will speed up as she gets closer to them.

I am ready with my bow starting to site on possible targets. I will likely only get a few arrows off before they will spook away from me. That large buck is in the lead. I would love to get him, but he is large enough to survive the arrow for some time. I hate running down injured game. Still, he would feed us for some time and we are late getting stores in. Life is taking chances. I concentrate on him.

Unfortunately, he stays too far away and a smaller male is closer. I go for him and get two arrows into him and one into a smaller doe. The doe slows down enough for Sylvy to get her the rest of the way. I run after the injured buck.

Two eighths later and nearly exhausted myself, I finally find him dying on the ground and quickly slit his throat. Not waiting I gut and dress him. There may still be other hungry predators about and Sylvy is too far away and unlikely to desert her own kill.

Sylvy can't carry her kill, so I make my way to her carrying mine on my back. Two deer, I will work most of the night stripping the meat and preparing it for smoking. Tomorrow I will sleep while she keeps guard.

I don't remember falling asleep. I do remember the smell of the smoky fire. It will be at least another day before the meat can be moved. At least it will weigh much less having lost most of it's water.

Of course it snows as we make it back to our permanent shelter in the higher elevations. A quick leento probably saved us, but it was cold. I shivered most of the night even with Sylvy next to me.

"Finally we are nearly there!" I want to sleep an eight day. Sylvy runs ahead of me. I don't care. I am too tired.

It is then that I hear her yowl. A mournful terrible sound. She is

normally so quiet. I drop the jerky and run to see what trouble she has gotten into to. When I arrive she is sniffing the ground all around where we had stashed our food and built our shelter. Everything is trashed. The shelter is scattered and half burned. Food is almost gone. The little ones have carried most of it away. All the dried berries and nuts. All the time it took to gather them. Then I notice foot prints. A human did this!

There are a few skins slit open but not scattered. I go up to them and then notice the smell. They have been peed and shit into and then stirred. Someone did this on purpose to send a message.

“Sylvy, the meat!” She turns and we both run back to where I have dropped the skins of jerky. We get there in time to see three men running some distance away. We would never catch them as exhausted as we are. They have taken all that we worked to save.

“Looks like we have no choice now but to go down. Too late to save for winter.” I am pissed, but there is nothing I can do about it. Being pissed will not fill our bellies. I am exhausted though and can't go any further. Dark soon too.

“We need to find some kind of shelter.” I hand her a piece of the remaining jerky I had on me and had not dropped. I finish the remainder. “That's it until we catch more.”

We find a hollowed out tree and make a small fire. I am asleep before I touch the ground.

I awake with a start, stiff and cold. A large raccoon is looking right into my eyes less than a hand away. “Boo!” It does not move. It must think I am near death and wants to be the first to start the feast.

I slowly rise, “Sorry, not dead yet. Follow me around for a bit and you may still get your chance.” She decides I am not worth it. “Good luck to you my sister.” Where is Sylvy? No raccoon would have come near with her around. Normally the scent she left would be enough. Must have gone out hunting. She eats more than I do. Usually sleeps more too. Must have gotten a lead.

Since I cannot compete with her I decide it would be better to make ready to get off the mountain. Not much to carry and only takes me a moment to take inventory. Everything is precious now. I will need time to patch almost everything. I really thought we had it covered and I was planning to spend the cold winter days repairing what had worn out. No time for that now.

I make my way down. She can find me easy enough. Especially since there is no reason to hide any more. Instinctively, without even realizing it I find myself tracking our thieves. If they were just desperate we would

have shared, but to just take everything is a very cruel pack.

They are nearly a half day ahead of me and were running fast. Probably expected me to immediately give chase, but neither of us had the energy and so near dark we would have just gotten hurt or killed by some stupid mistake. I am beginning to hate people. Nothing but trouble. Bullies, the perpetually needy, the sneaks. All too much. Certainly explains why we are out here alone.

I come across Sylvy's prints. She is hunting them too. This might get interesting. Ah, but if she is hunting them, she is not looking for food. I would rather have food than revenge. Revenge only escalates and causes problems. Not that I would not have taught them a lesson if I had caught them immediately. A cold night takes the piss out of me I guess. I then remember what they did to our stored food. There was no reason for that, hungry or not. No reason. Just mean.

Shit, I am off track. Concentrate. Getting mad solves nothing.

Time goes by quickly when I am focused. The landscape goes by, trees, streams with brief stops, hills and valleys. Must be beautiful in the summer. Unknown territory for us. Where is this leading?

I trip and go flying. Shit! Seeing a trap below, I do an unbelievable twist mid air and barely miss the sharpened stakes set out. When did they have time for this? Or was this set up before they stole the food. This is serious. They are not just being mean. We were targeted. They are out to kill us. I get up and examine the stakes. Yeah, out to kill us. Excrement on each one. One serious wound and you die a slow painful death.

I know who we are hunting now. Where is the old lady when you need her? Probably would not do any good. Being in a village full of people who are afraid, but basically on your side is one thing. Being out in the wild with no witnesses is another.

I do a slow careful trot now instead of a full run. May never catch up with them, but I am not going to end up bear bait either. Could still end up vulture dinner if my stomach is correct. I need something to eat. I finish the crumbs of jerky in my pouch. Not enough. There are pine cones on the ground, but it will take too long to get enough out of them.

The tracks are very easy to follow. Like I am being led rather than using any skill to find them. I shift my running a little more up hill. No more trip lines and stakes.

I stop at a small stream. Tracks go right up to the edge. I move upstream a bit and cross there and make my way back to the other side. There is blood on the sand. I carefully look closely and see long sharp thorns embedded in the sand. Any one who steps in this area will be

punctured. Moccasins would not help. Sylvy is hurt. The blood is only slightly clotted. Not too long ago.

I hurry, but still avoid the direct path. Suddenly a tree limb sweeps at me and knocks me off my feet. Stunned for a moment I am careful about getting up and exposing myself. They could be watching. Easy to see what they had done. My chest stings good. My shirt is torn in three places and I am scratched up pretty good too. Some blood. They have gotten both of us. Must be enjoying this tremendously.

I stay still and look carefully around me. They are being very careful about showing themselves. Wise. When I turn to start down the trail again I see a male short run away. I do not immediately start to chase him though. He does not move either.

Finally he moves and soon disappears. I slowly follow, being very careful for more traps and watching the area around me for a second one. I do not keep an even pace. I slow and speed up, I weave and dodge.

An arrow strikes a tree next to my left leg. Just missed by a moment. One is behind me and one in front. There are enough trees that they could double back or get ahead of me. I am at a real disadvantage. I don't need speed any longer. They are well fed and rested as well as outnumbering me. The safest thing would be to leave in a totally unexpected direction.

“Yeeeeeeooooow!” Sylvy!

Shit. This really smells like a trap. I don't have a choice. I have to help, if I can. I won't go straight in though. I go to uphill so that I can have the higher ground to see and come in from.

It does not take long. She is staked out in a large clearing. Right in the center. They must have caught her first. She would never go there on her own. Her neck, hind right and left front legs are tied to the group with stakes. She can barely move. There is a fire near by with one male holding up a brand already lit. He waves it near her to taunt her. Very nasty. Her fur would go up just like ours.

The one that was behind me comes into the clearing. Two more come from other directions. I know them. They are the ones the old lady humiliated.

The asshole himself takes the fire brand from the other. He waves it into the air.

“I know you are out there watching Death Eater. Dinner is almost ready. You must be hungry after loosing your winter food supply.” He waves the brand closer to Sylvy and she still manages to lash out and snag him one with her loose right front claws. He swears and curses her. Nodding to one of the others, who knocks an arrow and shoots her in the

upper shoulder of the offending claw. He says something to her, but I can't hear.

He then comes from her rear and purposely holds the fire brand to her fur until she is on fire. Four against one I can't do a thing. The best I can do is seek revenge for her death.

Though I hate doing it, I honor her by observing her death. She does not scream, but looks straight at the asshole the entire time until she finally collapses to the ground.

Once they are sure she is dead they look around the clearing trying to determine where I am. I am sure I have ruined their fun by not charging in and dying with three or more arrows in my side.

Not finding me they pee on her body. I expected that so I am not surprised. They then hack her corpse to bits scattering it to the surrounding clearing. The asshole removes her heart and starts to eat it.

“You are missing the best part Death Eater.” He throws the rest to the dirt and steps on it, mashing it into the ground. Certainly living up to his new name.

I retreat into the forest. None of their stuff was in the clearing. It must be close by. They would not risk being far from it with me around. I circle around to the far side figuring they would want to be between me and their ill gotten stash.

They did not hide it well at all. Probably figured they had a sure thing taunting me with her death. I fill my bags and pack with what I can carry easily and can't replace easily. That means leaving the nuts and dried fruit, but taking the jerky. I can gather berries on the run. I then arrange things as I found them. Better if they don't know I have been here. I scatter my tracks as well.

I am well armed. They did not take that from me. Sylvy never had a chance with four of them. She was not used to Hu tracking her. Most respect the Cat/Hu laws. Wonder what happened to the fifth? Have to be on the watch for that one. Can't assume he is not around somewhere.

Occupy Wall Street

2011, book one said they would happen in 2011 and 2012. Close. Of course the book said it would be much more violent with whole sections of towns burning to the ground. That has not happened yet. The lottery has not proven to be a fraud yet either. Could all still happen of course.

I also thought it would be the USA that brought down the world economically. Looking more and more like Europe will lead, after buying bad paper from us. But the way the budget 'negotiations' are going we could still win the race. Then the rest of the world will be pissed enough at us to impose sanctions on us for a change.

You can't spend money you don't have, either on the rich and military or the poor and retired. Both have to give. Lines in the sand are nonsense and only bring hatred. Of course both sides hate the sciences. We are all mad. Only doing our best to stretch out nonsense to steal money from the taxpayers for as much as we can get. Never mind we all turned down higher paying jobs to work on what we believe. Is there waste? Of course. There is in every human endeavor. My own life is full of mistakes I made. Bought the wrong tool, started the wrong hobby, tried to do too many things.

Stress induced stomach problems. Work, aging parents, bullies. Tired. I love working hard, but all the side dancing is a pain.

Making a scale model of the first building the Station had when it was at Lover's Point in 1892. I am a perfectionist and I see all the mistakes, but others who have seen it seem to like it. Maybe it will help start conversations about our history and how far we have come. It is fun using skills I started when I was a kid. HO scale. I used to do N scale. That would have been too small. As it is, a sixty foot building is only a little over eight inches long. Cutting up cedar closet liner I have had around for twenty five years or more. Never throw anything out I guess.

I am feeling more and more invisible at work. The younger ones just ignore you. Walk right past as if you aren't there. Strange. I doubt it is shyness, they see each other just fine. Long gray beard does not help I suppose. Not that I would want to mate with any of them. Yuck. I like ripe fruit. Maybe they don't see that. The young ladies dress sometimes in ways that attract attention, then worry that an older person might notice. Well, you can't choose who sees you. I understand that they can't help it either. Hormones. I am so glad I am beyond most of that.

If what I said in the books is true, this is another version of the current

reality. One of the infinities mentioned. Will it happen this time too? Ten or eleven years from now will there be a plague? Will I change? Or is this one of the times when nothing special happens? When there will be no 'supermen or women', when I will get older, get sick and die, just like everyone else. Nothing special. Just another nobody.

What is wrong with a society when people choose to do financial 'services' instead of engineering. China graduates engineers. We graduate parasites. That is why Occupy Wall Street is happening. It won't really be happening though until a majority of the people join in. Most are waiting on the sidelines wondering what will happen. Will change happen without their needing to risk themselves or will change only happen when everyone no longer has anything to lose?

I have another idea. What if all of this is real. In the other books a split occurs before I was born, but in both lines it lead to my being born and end up working at a marine station. In one I become Silver Ghost, in the other, the line of Doc and Mr. Flower, I die in the plague. Without changing, without meeting Qr'thn or Br'thn. Does Jesus exist in my time line? Is he in Costa Rica helping the poor?

It has been over a year since I have written down my thoughts. Obama has been re-elected. Clearly this is not the Bush dominated time line. It must be the one where I have only ten more years. Actually I find it hard to believe I have that long. Doctors are scaring everyone to death to get them to do expensive, humiliating, invasive tests. What if they are right? I could be dying of cancer right now and not know it.

Work gets harder as I slow down and don't have the energy I used to. I sleep most weekends trying to catch up. Very little time for my own ideas and projects.

I dream constantly of what if. What if I was granted the TK abilities? How would I use it? How would others react to it? I know all too painfully that the culture around me does not tolerate difference. I have seen too many movies where differences are not tolerated and the military always moves in to destroy that which is not understood. Differences are evil and must be destroyed. Always.

Or as in my case. Keep them around as long as they are useful, but exclude them from social interaction. As soon as they are no longer useful, then dispose of them. No wonder staff have a lower life expectancy than faculty.

Ba Eden Return to Slavery

The lazy ones are still not up. I am nearly done preparing the mid day and cleaning up the storage area. Strange, even they could not sleep that long. I sigh and decide it is time for more direct action,

When I get to their sleeping space though they are not there. Maybe the toilet? Nope, not there either.

^Looking for the others?^ The matriarch again. Interesting that she seems to be the most curious about me. I affirm.

^Not here. Took off when they saw you working so hard. Probably half way to the next settlement by now?^

^They got past the guards?^

^They only care about Ba coming in, not out. Especially those two. They had quite a rep even outside the house.^ That is depressing. How could two supposedly trained at the center do so much to undo all our efforts?

^I will remain until I am relieved.^ I bow and get back to work. Not what I was expected to be doing, but I will not have the center hurt by their actions any longer. At least this is better than my own family. No one has threatened me, locked me in a cupboard or denied me food. Well, I am only an unwanted female. A nobody. Need to learn to accept it and not get above my place in the world.

Stalemate in Washington

I have a hard time making decisions myself. I have been accused of being a rabid idealist with irrational perfectionist tendencies. I am so afraid of making a mistake, or making the wrong decision, that I will hold off making any decision forever. I am teased that it takes me six months to decide to buy a pair of shoes. I sort of understand the Republican stand. But in the face of overwhelming evidence how can they continue to appear so incredibly stupid? No one is that dense. Is it just money?

The Democrats come across as totally incompetent. They would lose a boxing match to a fly. Totally gutless. Almost the exact opposite.

Nothing gets done. Both sides are dug in and refuse to budge. In fact, no matter the facts or rational thought behind an argument they both will take the opposite side of the other on principle. Sort of like the cold war with the Soviets. It was stupid then and is now. Washington would rather see the country destroyed for self interest than do the right thing.

I am told this is really nothing new.

What is behind the attacks on the health food movement? Is this big pharma trying to have it all? Today they are saying that omega-3 supplements give men prostate cancer, doesn't help with heart disease and no help for Alzheimer's either. Everything at the vitamin shop is snake oil that is either worthless or worse, dangerous. Have you looked at the side effects on ANY prescription drug? If you read them you will never take any medication.

Another report says that cancer deaths have not dropped in fifty years. The 'advances' we have made just match the increase in deaths from more people getting cancer in the first place. A recent report finally admits that poo card tests are just as effective as colonoscopies at preventing colon cancer deaths. All the rest has been a game to get more people through the mill. Made lots of money for gastroenterologists anyway. A lot of unnecessary pain and humiliation for the patients. Not to mention it takes six months of probiotics to get your gut back in to balance.

It has been six months since I have written. Just can't get into it. Too many other projects too. I have started knitting for the first time in fifty years. Very bad at it. Making lots of mistakes. Have started over once already. Nearly eight inches now. I am letting the mistakes be. It is just a black scarf to go with all the other black stuff I wear. I am not sure that five skeins are going to be enough. Almost through the first one and not up to a foot yet. It may be I can stretch it some once done?

Of course a scarf this year is a joke. No rain since November. At ten percent of normal and nothing in the near future. This is normally our wet time of year. Actually a plot by the universe to stop me from doing photography. No water to process the negatives and no overcast skies to do images under. I am using three cameras. Two use lenses from 1891, 4x5 and 5x7. The last uses a modern lens, but a strange camera back that holds twelve pieces of film or paper at a time. I am using paper to get down to ISO 2. At F64 a typical exposure is 8-15 seconds. I love watching the water mist out, people disappear or ghost out. A very different sense of time. Black and white of course.

Almost daily I think about TK. Not easy. I have tried so many scenarios in my head. They nearly all end up causing confrontation. The ones that don't involve waiting until after a collapse and then doing cleanup afterwards. As long as the world is well armed and the powerful are afraid of change that might take away their power, they would resist or try to co-opt. Use it or destroy it. Such a waste.

I guess part of the problem is my refusal to play nice. I would not help the powerful. I would have to help the weak at the expense of the powerful. Our world is so corrupt. The powerful are truly parasites that live off of the poor. Slavery is alive and well. The powerful contribute nothing of value and overwhelmingly exploit everyone else. They will even eat each other if they can. "You cannot serve money and God", Jesus said. Probably could be said of any addiction, though I doubt there is any addiction that has hurt so many people than the addiction to money. Like being a food addict. You still need food to live, so how to you deal with food being everywhere? In our current world, money is a necessary evil. It would be nice to have a world where the right thing was done without thought of profit or personal gain.

Ah, but that would go against what every other creature on the planet does. Really? Does every species really try to hoard resources, mate as much as possible, to have as many offspring as possible? A new concept has arisen that goes against this Dikensonion social Darwinist concept. It says it is not survival of the fittest, where winner takes all, but survival of the good enough. Puts a totally different spin on the results. Gone is the justification to destroy or consume others so one can amass as much as possible.

Another six months have passed. This is by far the hardest of the ten books to write. Countless movies and TV programs featuring super heroes of one kind or another. People see the need for change but feel

helpless to do anything. Increasingly obvious the one percent are controlling everything, from politicians, to media, to medical sciences and maybe even our thoughts. Since everyone knows there are no super heroes, all these movies really do it add to the sense of helplessness. When they first appeared, during WWII, they inspired people to become heroes, now it is a drug to keep them in line.

I think I have already expressed this. I am nobody. When I die, all of this writing will be destroyed without anyone reading it. I am writing this for myself, no one else. Being the “reason for all the world's problems”, in other words, a white male from America, is a pain. I am not homeless, a one percenter, top of any field, no Ph.D. much less an M.D., don't own a home, no kids, last vacation was three years ago, no flat screen TV, car is 23 years old, I use old computers and cameras (no gallery shows or books from my work), not married but living in sin with very little of that, no church, don't socialize with anyone from work. I do minor volunteer work for small groups. I work at a small marine station that is even forgotten most of the time by main campus. Yes, this was the model for the place TK started in book one. Nowhere.

People are fed up all over the world. Everywhere people are rebelling against the status quo. The artificial countries set up by the rich are falling apart. What were they thinking when the put enemies together who have hated each other for a thousand years? With all the control of media, they still failed. Of course this sells a lot of military hardware and fear sells a lot of people on the idea of buying against disaster, taking a lower wage, putting up with horrible working conditions, etc. Maybe they got their money's worth after all. Once the countries are scourged they can clean them up and start again, moving onto some other country for the fear factor. No Russia available, how about a crazy North Korea? Right wing nut cases not acting up, how about a crazy Arab? Anyone can be made into a boogie man. Of course they do the reverse in these countries. The white male coward hiding behind a drone is the enemy.

The 800 pound gorilla in the room is over population of course. We need wars, diseases, famine, pestilence to keep us in check. We certainly will not control ourselves voluntarily. But even the four horseman have not been working too great lately. The obsession with growth being the only way of keeping it all going like some giant Ponzie scheme is insane to say the least. How do the TKs work without a drop in population? I have spent months and months thinking about it. No answer has appeared.

This time around is very different, but similar enough to be

frustrating. We had the occupy movement this time. A watered down version of the class riots of the last two times. The hope I had for it chapters back never materialized. The “Great Recession” is nothing like the near total economic collapse either and it hit Europe worse than the USA. One wonders if the great plague will happen either. Or TK? Maybe this time I stay totally human. A smiggle. No super heroes. No super villains either. Do Sauron and Br'thn exist in this version? I have a few years yet and of course there is nothing to suggest the timing of the plague will be the same either. Ebola is breaking out again in Africa. But that only has a sixty percent fatality rate. Morbid to say, but not enough. Even if it went airborne instead of contact, it would not be enough. Forty percent of seven billion plus is still a lot of people. Especially with weapon systems dumbed down so far almost anyone can figure out how to fire it. Not maintain it, but firing something is not that hard. That will take out more, as will the resulting food and water shortages. It might set off a chain reaction, with each side blaming another, releasing additional plagues stockpiled for Armageddon. Might work.

It takes me six months to buy a pair of shoes and ten years to buy a car, so of course it will take some time for me to work this out. The fate of eternity is in the balance. Stupid Monkey.

Speaking of which, yesterday while sitting in a restaurant, a cat carrier came by the window from the vet next door. Once inside the car, the cat was taken out to sit with his servant in the front seat of the car. A beautiful gray color. He looked right at me. Owa Moosa? Or is this too soon? Everything is different this time.

What am I thinking? Am I becoming schizo? No longer seeing any separation between this existence and another? Is my last existence in the past, or running parallel? I am trying to remember the 'chamber' for lack of a better term, where all the copies of the universes were. From the perspective of being in the chamber they were all happening at the same time. Well, some were starting and some were ending, to be remade and started again. Time was not exactly the same as we normally experience it. Probably running millions of times faster. Maybe even in a loop of some sort. Impossible to remember or tell from the brief 'time' there.

Where are the others? Daniel, Rachael, James, Doc, Rooi, Jesan (or Susan and Jesus), Barbara, anyone? Q?

Metro has been sold to someone else at work. Staying in the family so to speak. I have a new car, small and blue of course. Not what happened last time. Last time the Metro was my last car. Last time the Occupy Movement was much larger and resulted in the collapse. This time the

collapse of sorts happened first, then the movement. Even the collapse was not as bad. We have not been reduced to a third world country. The rest of the world has not banded against us, cutting off oil products to punish us for abusing the people of the world and the world itself. We still deserve it. The longer it takes to flip, the more dangerous, the more violent, the more people will suffer and die.

Ebola is taking on Africa. Only a sixty percent kill rate, less in developed countries. Not the big one. Could still be messy if it spreads. Not the one that will lead to the TKs.

I have so many dreams, day and night, about becoming TK again. Eight years away by the old schedule. Everything is so different though. Might not happen at all.

It is always the same. How do I express the talents in a safe way? In the latest dream I walk from here to Oregon. I am wearing an off white robe. I walk day and night, never stopping. I wear the brown leather hat that I wear now. I have a TK staff. Dark in color, eight fold, black carbon and gold so fine as to be nearly invisible. Late at night I am stopped by police. They want identification. I have none. I say why do I need papers just to walk. I am not driving. They persist, accusing me of being a vagrant. Do I smell? Am I drunk? I am just walking. Not breaking any laws, not even annoying anyone. There is no one else on the road. I could pop out, but that would only start the dogs searching for us. I wait. They wait. Finally decide to proceed. This gets the two of them to pull their guns out and aim them at me. Really? This is how you want to play?

I am put into the car and taken to the station. At this point I say nothing more. Let them charge me with something. They will come out the fools. I am put into a cell. Bars on three sides, wall with barred window opposite the door. One other person in the cell next to me. No one in the corner cell on the other side. They ask me questions, but I ignore them. I sit down on the lotus on the floor facing away from them and meditate. When the officers leave the room, the older cell occupant tries to engage me. I ignore him as well and he eventually settles down to sleep. Snoring of course. Alcohol 0.2 percent. No question of why he is here. Slowly, while he is sleeping I remove the alcohol and change the receptors so he does not go through withdrawal symptoms. He has refused a blood test and the officers think they have plenty of time to get the court order. Subtle trick on them. Doing good for my fellow rat.

They come back in three hours, force the alcoholic to have blood drawn and leave. In the morning, they ask me more questions. I am quiet. Finally they give up, let me out and hand me back my staff. As I leave the

front I hear swearing. I smile. The blood test came back negative. They will have to let him go too. Hope this time he can stay off the stuff. I head for the back road highway and continue my journey.

Sometimes I make very tiny Buddhas in the walls, bars and window. Cover the place with them. I change my mind and erase them before they are seen. Play it low key.

My father is giving me a lot of trouble. Sister, who did the sex, drugs and rock and roll lifestyle wants to get him to move out. He has a fear of being abandoned, so now he is going after me. No way! He is like a boa constrictor, once he gets around you he will be keep coiling until you are dead and then he moves onto the next one. Crocodile tears and all. He of course threatens to kill all of us and himself. Don't do us any favors. Strange thing is that friends at work say their fathers have done the same thing.

There is something that we do to our males. We teach them that they are worthless unless they are in control and/or useful. It is even better to be evil and hated than to not be useful to anyone. At least someone is paying attention. Important. What happens then when a male reaches eighty, no one listens and he is clearly no longer useful? He falls apart like the above. Until he realizes he can let go of the delusion he is stuck in the psychosis. Of course this forces others to put them into the 'nursing homes' that they fear above all else (a bullet is better). If he lets go and let others be in charge then he can have a less confrontational ending.

I keep coming back to two scenarios. First one is raising an obscene amount of money and blowing away the nasty people at work. Sort of revenge by kindness. There would be strings attached. I would like to see the next three professors cover invertebrates, seaweeds and microbiology. Almost immediately I can see them playing games. They would claim we already have a professor of inverts, but they were hired as a professor of development. It just so happens he uses inverts in his work. Of course the other problem is convincing the Feds that the money, via carbon crystals, is legal. How do you explain a process you wish to keep secret? Someone would most certainly get the idea that they could steal the process. The harassment would be intense. Threats would likely happen, if not to the TKs, then to relatives, friends or others.

The second is the Hopi. Trashed by the Europeans and nearby tribes. Having visited the reservation fifteen years ago I know how desperate their situation is. The third world looks opulent by comparison. Just wrong. They have a belief that their messenger from the Great Spirit (not God), Moogli, will come and lead them to the fifth world through a hole

in a kiva (ceremonial underground chamber). Using DS to an alternate world, maybe one of the Di worlds, they could be led to a world free from their enemies. I see them living in cliff dwellings, going down to get water and up to pastures. A Di world, even with the current sentient's blessings, is not a world free of danger. There would be danger from totally different life forms, both plant and animal. The locals would likely not want sheep, corn, squash and beans introduced, yet these are essential to the Hopi understanding of life. At least an equivalent local version would need to be found for each. What about the Hopi themselves? Is this fair to a Di world?

Neither scenario is great. Not a good way to start. Last time TK did not even happen until the population reduction was already in motion and assured. Not much to lose. When interaction with the other sentient cultures does happen it is much more controlled, with the other sentients invited to join the TK experience. In the case of the Ceph, Rooi and friends already had some TK abilities. Reminds me of the Star Trek principle of non interference until a culture had developed a warp drive.

Waiting until after 99.9% of the people are gone is hard. One in a thousand to live? How can that be right?

Visiting Oregon and having lots of discussions about family members I am struck with how little people can change, even when faced with overwhelming reasons to do so. My sister, even after having her right foot cut off, still smokes, possibly drinks, poor diet, no exercise, etc. Father, who has alienated everyone around him, can't let go of trying to control everyone through bribes, bullying, lying, etc. Having been beaten up for thirty six years at work by the same person I still react to her barbs (which she admits she is powerless to stop throwing). I eat way too much chocolate, knowing I should not. Etc., etc., etc.

Do any of us have free will? Moralists believe we do, not that it is necessarily easy, but ultimately our behavior is totally our responsibility. What I have seen argues the opposite. We really have very little control. Almost like we are watching a movie at a theater instead of 'driving the car' of life.

What then is the point of imprisonment or punishment? Or are these reactions themselves a given that society cannot choose? If individuals do not have free will how can a society? We really are no different, except in scale, than any other life form. Mindless cockroaches reacting as we have been genetically programmed and environmentally trained to do (yes, even cockroaches can learn).

In the first set of TKs, before Doc and Rooi, we see James, Rachael

and Q attempt to find or create a utopia multiple times, to bring Hu to a higher level, to reach our 'true' potential, but even after twenty five million years they fail each time. Cultures either devolve to a simpler, 'good enough', live style or self destruct. Barbara with the whales does better, though we do not know the end of the story there. There is a 'life time' to everything whether it be an individual, culture, ecology or star (or the universe). What is right for one place in time does not work in another. Even the lowly horseshoe crab has changed. It is not a trilobite in spite of the resemblance. No one would want to trade places with one either. Not a creature to envy or strive to attain a parallel path to.

Why care about Hu then? Why have TKs at all? What is the purpose of the TKs? To answer The Question? If that is the reason, it might not lie in helping the Hu in anyway. Hmmm.... that would certainly remove a big distraction. Barbara ignored Hu and chose a charismatic species to work with instead. She came in with an outsider perspective and had to give up her Hu biases and prejudices before she could help them. Want to get smarter? Learn other language. Want more? Learn yet another. Better that this is to learn another organism. Stretch!

Trying to come up with a way to 'save' the Hu may be a dead end literally. Hu are mature enough to see their mistakes. All they lack is the will to change. TKs are not going to change that. Maybe having a little competition would be good for Hu. Being too into themselves may have stifled their growth. Helicopter moms do not lead to children capable of taking care of themselves (any more than micro manager bosses do, hmmm...). Some thought needs to be given to alternative paths to helping the Hu.

Another path is to give up on the Hu and try to save as many of the other species as possible, short of actually exterminating the Hu. Set up CO2 capture stations, release the oxygen and crystallize the carbon. Maybe the poles would be a good location so the reduced CO2 does not affect plant growth near by. AND as important is to reduce or eliminate the CO2 sources. Start with coal fired plants then work down to eliminate all non-renewables, including nuclear. Even renewables can cause environmental harm. The best solution is conservation.

Then there is that gorilla in the room. Sterilize all Hu on the planet. That is not killing. Maybe make an exception for anyone once they leave the planet. Only a small number could do this of course and their method is not likely to be green. Offer transport and help set up on Mars or Europa? Gather asteroids and create a new earth opposite first Earth? Probably not enough time for that to work, at least not at earth normal

gravity. It would take awhile for everything to cool after the collisions melted the asteroids together. Both? Set up on Mars and work towards a new earth in the mean time.

Once the Hu are gone from the first Earth, clean up could take awhile. The first TK thought of this as a necessity. Has it happened before? An earlier TK set removing the evidence from their own species as they too failed to live up to expectations.

How is this done? Turn up at the UN and make an announcement? Unlikely anyone would believe it. Many would try to find a loophole or hope to be overlooked. Hu are good at avoiding responsibility. People are so afraid of being deceived almost nothing presented at the meeting would be accepted. Even turning into a 'thn on the stage would only be seen as some kind of a trick. Sterilization would not be seen immediately. Eliminating or shutting down all coal operations would likely be seen as a terrorist attack even without explosions. And of course, it would be the poor who are hurt the most.

Flooding the market with gold and diamonds? Psiotic power supplies that sub-plant all carbon energy sources? Easy to imagine the backlash. Psiotics are an unproven technology. We don't know what the risks are. Best to wait until we know more (until we learn how to do this ourselves and take away the profit). Set up an independent panel of scientists (that we own) to assess. And so forth.

Ignore the Hu screaming and just do the right thing? Isolate any leaders who work against what needs to be done? DS them to some isolated world to "cool" off? Make prisoners of the Hu? Doubt that would work any more than it does in any current prison.

It has been a year and a half since I have written last. Adolf Trumpetter is likely to be president. The dark ages I predicted fifteen years ago are approaching. Not that Wall Street Hillary would have been better, just different.

I am an introverted, high functioning autistic, slightly dyslexic, paranoid, cynic. I have never convinced anyone to 'follow' me. I am bullied by everyone eventually (probably out of frustration of having to deal with me). I am useful, but never perfect. There is ALWAYS something that someone can point out that needs correcting, thereby affirming their superiority and right to bully me. My mouth is my greatest enemy. When I open it, filth comes out and I am hit for it.

So, to continue the above thought of what should be done if the change would occur. I have come to the conclusion that my purpose is to

clean up the mess left behind by the Hu. I am not their savior. I am not the re-starter after the population bottleneck. Nope, just clean up the mess. If the change occurs before the end, then I can amuse myself as I re-learn my abilities, I can start cleaning up some of the more obvious messes. It really does not matter as long as I don't prevent the end.

I have thought to set up a little two room shop (the store front and a windowless room I can retreat into to 'retrieve' the product without attention. My company name would be AuC, as in gold and carbon. Most people would never see the Au portion. I would make things out of pure carbon, from diamond windows, to graphene arrays, whatever was requested. Nothing that would be over the top hard to explain, just hard to procure from others. The Au would come in as I learn again how to make TK power supplies, pushers, non TK made Rooi portals, etc.

I really get the feeling that this time I will be alone. After the end, of course, I will have all the time in the world to futz through things, but no help making things work, no companions who would understand. All alone once the Hu were gone. Maybe this is because I was perceived as being too arrogant last time or the trick I played on them by 'dying' and then coming back in the insectoid form. Doesn't matter, even being an immortal is not forever.

A nobody in life and a nobody by default afterwards. You can't be a somebody if there is no one around to acknowledge the fact. Interesting. Somebodies are only somebodies because we make them so. Except for the instance of only one person, we make the nobodies too.

There is a homeless person on the rec trail. His name is Dave. Dave is the happiest person I have ever met. He has a run down bicycle with a two wheel trailer on the back. Yesterday he had giant American flags on the back. One time I helped him when his trailer hitch twisted. His trailer was full of cases of beer. He has very few teeth left. No idea if he has a warm place to sleep. He has a PO box in Seaside, but can't get in if he forgets his key, as he has no ID. Yet, he is always happy. All the pain I make for myself, the worry, the health problems, anxiety attacks, heart flutters, digestive problems, and he is happy with almost nothing. I have enough money, barring massive health problems, to provide until I am a hundred, and he is happy with almost nothing.

Maybe I took the wrong path. . . .

I keep buying art supplies. I can't seem to stop. I am particularly obsessed with pens, inks and colored pencils.. I have a constant stream of thoughts of images I want to create. At work I am told constantly to shut up and do what I am told. Staff are NOT to be creative, only do what we

are told. When I do get a few minutes (rare as can be seen by the lack of writing in this book), I am exhausted and nap instead.

Three more years until I retire. IF, I survive. That is really doubtful. Death seems eminent. Someone else will benefit. Not that I needed to spend all of it. I do not feel deprived. Just exhausted.

Change

Home at last. Winter break. AT LAST. All I want to do is sleep. And eat of course. Crap, the house is dark. Now what? I struggle to find my keys while holding homework I am supposed to do during break. Hey, it is called break for a reason! Dump the books on the counter and hit the light. No food. A note on the table. Crap, on my own. Parents at some holiday party, back late. Nothing new there.

Check the fridge. Leftovers it is. I grab stuff at random, throw it in a semi clean bowl and nuc it. Pickle looks good, I pull one out and inhale that sweet sour smell. Down in one.

I don't remember what was in the bowl or even what it tasted like. Next stop bed. Missed the bus saying goodbye. Walking home sucks. 6pm. Crap, that means I will be awake at 3am. Too exhausted to care.

Pounding. Pounding. I wake in a panic. Where am I? Dark. One am! What the fuck? More pounding. Someone at the door. I throw on a robe and make my way to the front door. I check the peep. Neighborhood sucks. Who pounds on a door in the middle of the night? Cops! Crap. I wake up fast looking around. What am I thinking? Never any drugs here, unless you count booze.

I open the door. Two of them, male cop with a lady behind him. Not a cop. Just likes wearing black I guess.

“Miss Hoonaw? Susan Hoonaw?” He pronounces it wrong of course. Everyone does. I decide this is not the time to push it.

“That's me. What's up?” Cops are regulars in the neighborhood. Probably looking for someone. “Someone lost?”

“I regret to inform you that both of your parents were killed a few hours ago in a drunk driving incident. As a minor, you can't be allowed to be here alone. Ms Baker is here to take you into child services. Collect what you want. It may be some time before you are allowed back.”

I faint.

“Not so subtle Officer. What did you expect?” I am on the couch in the main room. Barely caught what she said.

“I am sixteen. I can take care of myself. Do most days in fact.”

I open my eyes. She smiles one of those fake smiles like she has said this a hundred times, “Dear, are you ready to pay the bills? The rent? Got a job during break? You will need a good one.” Non stop, she continues,

“We have contacted your relatives. They will be here in a few days to collect you. Now pack your things. I don't like being here in the middle of the night any more than you do.” Not a nice lady. Wait, I have relatives?

The squad car has one of those wire mesh things behind me. Smells like dog. I hate dogs. Why can't they clean themselves like a cat does? I am so awake now it is like I am seeing everything in hyper reality. I get that way some times. Too dark to draw. I really want to be sketching right now. It helps calm me. They only let me take one backpack with a couple changes of clothes and some drawing supplies I squeezed in. I really want at them, but dragon lady does not look like the type to put up with anything. I remain still and quite. I left my homework behind. I am guessing a new school, so it really does not matter.

“Ah, so where do these relatives I have never heard of live?” Nothing.

Inside some sterile pale green waiting room. Looks like the hallways at school. Same designer I guess. At least I was able to remove a small sketch book from a side pocket and get to work.

“Give that to me now!” Ms Baker looks at me angrily.

“What?” I look around to try and figure out what she is talking about.

“You know what. No drawing me. Get it?” I tear out the portrait I was drawing and hand it to her. Too bad I did not add horns to it. Would have been more realistic. She crumples it and throws it at the waste basket without looking and sinks it. I decide not to push it and put the sketch book away before she takes that away too.

Took an hour at least to get here. I have waited at least another hour, if I can believe the clock on the wall making a god awful click, click, click sound like it barely has enough juice left to make it to the next second. Three thirty in the morning. I am ready for bed again. Not the best day of my life.

“Ms. Hoonaw” the PA system squawks not sure of itself. Dragon lady pushes me to get up.

We walk up to the counter where the clerk ignores us futzing with other stuff. What could she possibly be doing that is so important this time of night? She gets up finally, comes through one of those half height swinging doors with fake wood texture.

“I have her now Ms. Baker.” She turns to me, “Follow me please.” I turn around to say good bye to dragon lady but she is out the door I see closing. Loved you too bitch.

I pick up my pack, sigh and follow. I am led to a small room.

“Leave your pack and your clothes here. Put on the jumpsuit. Come out when you are ready.” She leaves without looking at me. What do you

mean leave my stuff here.

I go out the door, pack in hand. No one there.

“Hey, no way I am putting on the suit and no way I am leaving my pack. It is all I have left of my life. I am not a prisoner. I am.” It just hits me, “I am an orphan.”

I don't see her, but I hear her talking to someone else, “Put on the suit and leave your things or wait in the waiting room for the next three days. Makes no difference to me.”

This is bogus. I make my way back to the waiting room. I am good at directions and never get lost. She is back at her desk and totally ignores me. I need to pee. There is a restroom here. I use it and return to the waiting room. At least dragon is gone. I pull out my sketch book and starting drawing the cat whom I befriended. Was never allowed to have any pets myself, so I made friends with whomever I could find to interact with me. Wish I had a cell phone, but they took that first thing. Said it did not belong to me as legally my dead parents owned it and it would be sold to pay any debts. Right, they might get \$10 for it. Cracked screen, old OS.

Poof is what I called her. Very curious and affectionate. Must have belonged to someone at some point. I would sneak treats out to her. She was starting to get big with kittens when I was abducted and brought here. Hope she does alright. Not good odds in the wild I know.

I must have fallen asleep as I wake when someone new walks in the door.

“Who's the fresh meat?” he asks the receptionist.

“Parents died last night. Orphan waiting for pickup.”

“Why's she not inside?” She shrugs. She hands him the file folder.

“Your problem now. See you tomorrow.” She picks up her bag and leaves. He sits in her place and looks at what I am guessing is my file. He then types away at some terminal I can't see for a time. I proceed to draw him. Interesting face.

“I will want to see it when you are done.” I quickly close the pad and put it back into my pack.

“I see you have experience with the Black Lady. I just want to see it, not take it from you. She hates seeing any rep of herself. Me, I don't care. Tough break kid. I'm an orph myself, but it happened when I was so young I really don't remember. You are lucky. At least you have family. I suffered for twelve years as a foster. Sucks.”

I slowly pull my pad back out and continue my sketch. Now I can concentrate without feeling like I have to hide what I am doing. When I

am done I slowly brink it up to him, holding onto my pack at the same time. No one's taking it away from me.

“Not bad kid. You got talent. Lotech though. No one will hire a manual artist. Have any pad experience?” I shake my head. I hate pads. I need to feel the paper and the pencil on the paper.

“Want something to eat?” He rummages around and pulls out what must be his lunch and offers it to me.

“I don't want to take your lunch. Not right. What will you eat?”

“I get a free lunch in the caf. I need to lose weight anyway.” Like I don't? I am starving though so I reluctantly take it.

“Thanks.”

“Says here you are headed back to the rez. What you doing so far off base?”

“What rez? What is a rez? I was born in San Jose. Never been anywhere else.”

“Your name, Hoonaw,” he pronounces it properly, I am surprised, “means bear in Hopi. If you did not come off the rez, then your parents sure as hell did. Most change their names first gen off.” I did not even know that. Bear. I kind of like that.

“How do you know Hopi and where is the rez. Only heard about them in school, briefly. They are supposed to be the peaceful ones.”

“Not entirely peaceful. Better than most I guess. A lot of Injuns come through here for one reason or another, so I pick stuff up.”

“Is this a prison? I thought I was going to child services.”

“Same thing. Budget cuts. You're a short timer though. Lucky. Not a nice place to end up.” The he adds, “Or end.” Shit.

“Shit. Bastards.” He swears at the terminal. “Well one good thing, you are getting out of here soon. I would have had to process you and I really did not want to have to do that. Down side, you are on your own to the rez. They only sent money for a ticket. Did not come themselves. What a way to treat someone.”

“If they are like my parents were, probably could not afford to come here themselves. Cheaper to send just me to them. Okay, I am used to being on my own.”

“Shit, you are only sixteen. Not allowed. Someone will have to go with you. We don't have the budget.”

“Leave the ticket on the counter and look the other way. I know how things work too.” I put on my best sad face. He turns around and I grab the paper and quietly exit through the door.

Several problems. I have no idea where the bus station is and I see the

paper says my age and that I need an escort. That I can solve. I open my pack and with a little touch up work I make it look like that part is just a smudge.

Next, asking for directions gets me going in the right direction.

Lunch time by the time I make it to the station. I check the outgoing board and look at my paper again. Arizona. I know that is a state, but don't remember where or how long it will take to get there.

I find the gate and go outside to wait. I am not missing this one. Two hours. I am going to be hungry again before I leave. I go back inside and with my few remaining dollars load up on vending machine crap. Better than nothing. Water too. Hate water in plastic bottles, tastes like gasoline, but better than dying of thirst. A map. Can't believe they still make these things out of paper.

Fifteen before the bus loads I use the restroom. I pray I don't get my period when in route. I am out of cash and they want two dollars for a lousy pad. I will rip up my pack before I pay that much. At least at school they were free. Guess they didn't want us poor folk bleeding all over the classroom seats.

"Wow" that has to be the worst bus I have seen in my life. It must date to the nineties. Rust, dents, dirt all over it. When they change the sign on the front to LA I move to the door. An old fat guy opens the door for me. The rest of the people waiting in line up behind me.

"Well lookie here. Aren't you a little young to be going all by yourself?"

"I am eighteen, just small. You got a problem with that?" I give him my meanest look. He grabs my paper and looks it over then waves me on. I know better than to sit at the back and choose a seat a few back from the front. Handicapped get bumping rights for the front, but the back is where the gangs do their business. At least in San Jose.

As it turns out my fears were unfounded. No handicapped or gang members, mostly Latino, tired from working themselves to death. A lady looks me over and decides I am no threat and sits down next to me. A little sixteen-year-old should not be a threat to anyone, but I guess you never know anymore. I wonder if she speaks English?

"Do you know how long it takes to get to Flagstaff?" looking at my paper. On the map it looks like forever from here.

"I am going to Santa Fe. That takes almost two days. Maybe a little over a day to Arizona. You will change buses in LA." She seems to be knitting something and does not even look up.

"Thanks." An entire day! Guess I am sleeping on the bus. I am adding

a bed to the things I am missing already.

I have not even cried yet. Losing both parents at once less than a day ago you would think I would be a total mess. I just don't feel it. I don't know whether I miss them or the routines that I had developed. Then there is the fear of the unknown. Who are these relatives? I don't even know their names. The paper does not say, only that I have passage to Flagstaff. Does not say who will pick me up there. Hope I don't end up in child services in another state, though I can't imagine it could be worse than San Jose.

When in doubt, draw. I get out a pencil and a small drawing pad. I don't want any more trouble with anyone. The good thing about being first on was I got a window seat. I have never been further than San Francisco. This is an adventure I am not going to waste. People I see every day, so I concentrate on scenery. Winter break means we have had some rain at least and the hills are green. I see birds up in the air and a lot of traffic. Guess people are getting ready for Christmas. Not for me this year. This may be the last pad of paper I get. Okay, don't go wacko yet. Paper is still cheap, even if I have to settle for copy paper from recycle bins (yuck). I will be strong. I will survive. I will succeed. I hope.

I am a loner. No surprise there. Short, overweight, not pretty, poor. Not exactly wearing rags, but everything except underwear is from second hand store. You can get some good stuff, but never the latest styles. Being a loner helps, I just don't care. My favorite classes are art, pottery, music to some extent, though I do not have an instrument. I tried playing one of those cheap plastic recorders they give you in elementary school, but was too embarrassed to bring it out in high school. I left it behind. I was okay in math and science, never top of the class. Don't want attention. English or foreign languages, not good. I tried turning in art for writing assignments when we were supposed to do a book report. The work was good, but not what the teachers wanted of course.

My imagination is fine. I don't do drugs of any kind. Seen my parents drunk enough times to avoid that trap. Again, drugs are for people who are rich or willing to steal to get the money. Not me. So, I draw mostly. Describe any critter or plant, real or imaginary and I can draw it. I do people to the extent you can recognize who it is. I am especially fascinated by clothing. The colors, the textures, the folds. I love light and shadow.

Landscapes not so much. Soon I am asleep. Maybe all this is finally catching up with me. I was up most of the night and my life is turned upside down.

“Where are we?” I ask my seat mate.

“Santa Barbara,” she tells me. Nearly done with a cute little sweater.

“For your kid?” I ask.

“Grandkid. It is who I am visiting. Need to finish their Christmas presents. Fortunately they are happy with this so far. Once they grow up I will have to work more to afford the toys and electronics they all want now.” I nod.

“Teach them how to draw and they will never be bored,” I show her what I have done so far today.

“You visiting family too? You are not Mexican are you?” A common mistake. I am often not seen as NA. She probably guessed I was not because I never spoke Spanish.

“Parents died last night I am being shipped to an aunt and uncle I never even knew about. Though I did not know until today, apparently I am Hopi Indian.” I try to look cool about it, but from the look on her face I can see I failed.

“You stick with me. I will get you there. We can get off soon to use a restroom. Stay with me. The one in the back of the bus is horrible. Always take a chance to use a real one. We will stop again in LA long enough to switch buses. You stay with me. My ancestors were Mayan. We are probably related long time ago.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate it.” I am shaking, “Did not realize how scary all this would be.”

“You have food?” I nod yes and show her my stash. She looks at it briefly, then rattles off a bunch of Spanish too fast for me to get more than a word or two. Soon there is a shuffling of people behind us and a ton of food, more than I have ever seen at once my life appears before me.

“You look too thin. Eat. No one goes hungry on this bus.” I take out my stash and pass it down. Not great stuff, but maybe they know someone who would like it. What I get in exchange is amazing. Some a little too hot, spice wise, but I have had street food before and know what to watch out for.

At Santa Barbara, Tia, I had finally gotten her name, takes me in hand and we get off to use the restrooms. I feel I like I have a new mother, even if only temporarily.

Changing buses in LA was insane. We run off the bus, down a complicated route, through back places and behind stalls, etc. Lots of people yelling hello to Tia as we pass and her raising her hand and yelling back at them by name. Does she know everyone?

We get on the bus panting and find seats. Not as close to the front as the last bus, but I am with Tia now and trust her judgment.

“What was all that about?” I finally ask.

“We save two hours.” she smiles back at me.

“Gracias!” I smile back and recline into my seat for the night. Tia goes back to knitting. Something in pink this time.

I wake up thirsty and needing to pee. I have only one water bottle, but have been refilling it at the rest stops. Does not taste like plastic any more, or at least not as bad. Tia is asleep next to me, knitting in hand. I gently take it from her hands and place it in her bag with the rest. Outside it barren. No buildings as no trees either. I knew Arizona was largely desert, but I have had no experience with this much desolation.

It is nearly noon before we reach Flagstaff and it is snowing! My face is glued to the window watching it get deeper and deeper at the edge of the road.

“You never seen snow?” Tia asks. She smiles like I am a little kid. Maybe I am. I am not so happy when we leave the bus and I realize just how cold it is outside. My new world.

I am in the station. Now what? I don’t know the names of the relatives I am supposed to meet. I don’t know if they know when I was to arrive, especially with Tia’s shortcut through the LA terminal.

“Are you going to be okay Suzie?” Tia asks. I try to put on a brave face and assure her that I will be. She does not look convinced, but she needs to get back on the bus to make it in time to transfer in Albuquerque.

“Go Tia, please. You have helped me so much already. I will send you my address and phone as soon as I know. I am sure I will be fine.” Still she hands me twenty dollars, “In case you get hungry again.” My pack is stuffed with goodies. Food is the least of my worries for the next day at least.

As I sit looking out the window wondering about my new life I see a very large cat casually walk by as if she or he owns the place. No one else seems to pay any attention to it. Are all cats huge here? It is gone in a moment. I miss Poof terribly. I hope she finds someone else to help her.

I hang out at the station. Going outside to watch the snow, investigating the entire small place. Been to the rest room a half dozen times out of boredom. I look over the food machines, but nothing compares to what I already have and I really don’t want to touch the twenty I have as it is all I have.

By late afternoon I am getting worried. I find they actually have a phone booth with part of a phone book still present. I look for my last

name and find three listed and write down their numbers and addresses. I next look on my map, but it is not detailed enough. I go up to the counter and ask the bored clerk but she knows nothing. I ask if she has a better map of the reservation.

“Which one? Hopi or Navajo?”

“Hopi please.”

“Don’t have one that is just Hopi, they are surrounded by the Navajo, so maybe it would work for you.”

“How much?”

“Five dollars with tax.” Shit, I really don’t want to spend that much. Then I remember that a lot of phone books have maps. I run back to the phone booth where someone is using the phone. I can’t easily use the phone book while they are there, so I step back and wait.

While waiting I hear him say my last name, “Yeah, can’t find her. The picture is really old.”

“I am Susan Hoonaw, are you looking for me?” I ask hopefully. He looks way too young to be an uncle.

“Found her. Be there soon.”

He looks me over and shakes his head, “Well come on. Have any money for gas?” I look shocked that he would ask. “No matter, should make it. Luggage?” He looks around. Is he even old enough to drive?

“Just me and my pack.” I reach in and pull out one of the burritos I was given and hand it to him. Now he looks shocked, but accepts it.

“Thanks. Cold, but tastes good. Follow.” We go out and around the back to the worst looking pickup truck I have ever seen. Half of it seems to be missing or about to be missing. There are several bales of hay in the back and a sheep! An actual sheep. It looks at me and baas then goes back to eating at the hay.

“Wait a second.” He goes in the driver side and then kicks the passenger door until it opens. I climb in as he moves all kinds of trash around to make room for me. Once in I try and close the door, but it does not latch. He gets outside and kicks the door closed from the outside. No seat belts. I am scared to death. Little did I know. He takes off like a gang banger being chased by another gang and the cops too.

While wheeling around corners at speed he offers his hand and says, “Mike Tohu. Pleased to meet.”

“I have never met my uncle or aunt. Are they nice people?”

He shrugs, “Same as everyone else. Been on the rez before?”

“No. Never been out of California before. Did not know until yesterday that my last name meant bear even.”

“Oh yeah, sorry about parents having died. Lost father when five, so don’t remember much. Bummer losing both at once though. Have any brothers or sisters? Imagine not if here. Well, life on the rez is very different. Hope you don’t mind a poor lifestyle. Good part is it is much more laid back and less stressful in someways.” He looks me over, “How old?”

Since he would find out anyway I don’t play with him and tell him, “Sixteen.”

“Hmm, will have to go to high school then unless you drop out and work. Stay in is better. No one will hire without completing high school. Used to be it did not matter, but there are enough people looking. Used to separate people. Aunt Lucy works at the visitor center, she may able to get some after school work. Done any waitress work?”

“Done everything in a small restaurant but. I am sure I can pick it up.”

He looks me over, “Watch out for the fry bread. Tastes great, but it really packs on the pounds. Ladies want to watch their weight.” Is he calling me fat? He smiles.

I ask him, “So, how old are you?” He smiles and keeps driving.

Finally he answers, “Eighteen. Graduate in June, hopefully.” I nod.

All the buildings we have passed look like the something rejected by a third world slum. I point to one, “People live in those things?” He nods.

“Welcome to the rez. We are here.” He pulls into a parking lot at speed and parks randomly. He rushes out and yanks on the door on my side to open it. Takes a few attempts.

“You really need to get that fixed.”

“Usually no passengers in the front,” pointing at the sheep. He continues, “Late with the delivery of Mable and the hay here. Walk yourself in?” He nods towards the nicest looking building I have seen all day.

“I’m good. Made it to Flagstaff on my own. I think I can handle it.” He is back in the heap and leaving even before I finish. Okay, guess this is it. Wait, he did not tell me my Aunt’s name! Yes, he did, Lucy. I relax.

Lights are on so I push the door open and go inside. There is a small museum and a place to eat off to the left. I don’t see anybody in either direction. Since Mike said something about my Aunt being able to get me a job in the restaurant I go inside. Still no one. Guess they don’t get many visitors in this weather.

“Hello. Anyone here?” Place looks really clean. I could work here if they have a uniform.

A Hispanic looking male pokes his head out of the kitchen area,

“Susan?” I nod. “Wait here or in the museum. Aunt will be here in a few minutes.”

Well, I have seen restaurants before, so I move towards the museum. Don’t know anything about my own culture, guess I had better get started.

The first thing I notice is the Star Wars hairdo on the some of the women. Hope I don’t have to do that. The images and the things all look old. Not that those shacks looked modern. What have I done?

A few minutes turns into more like half an hour. I have been through the museum several times and read every bit of text I could find, twice. I like the art work, especially the silver work. I would love doing that.

“You work with silver?” A plump older woman behind me asks.

“No, just admiring the designs. Very nice. Are you Aunt Lucy?”

“Come on kid, best get home. Uncle will be hungry.” I really do not want to believe that all Indians are drunk all the time. I don’t want to end up a drunk. Seen enough lying in the gutters at home. Oops. This is home now. Great.

I follow her out the door and look around for her car or pickup, as that seems to be the vehicle of choice around here. We keep walking and walking.

She turns to look at me, “Can’t even keep up with an old lady. No exercise in California.”

“No car?” She smiles, nods no, then turns and picks up her pace. Great.

I see nothing for miles. It is cold. There is still a dusting of snow on the ground in places. It is definitely getting dark. How can she see? I trip several times over stones I do not see. Not that stones are common on sidewalks. Beer cans and trash are, but they are not as hard apparently. I soon lose track of time. I concentrate on her shawl and just keep moving.

In what seems like forever we arrive at a small home that could not be more than a couple of rooms. I am surprised that it does not look like the ones I passed on the drive in. Maybe it won’t be so bad. It is dark inside. I instinctively reach for the wall switch. Nothing there.

Aunt Lucy goes into what must be the kitchen. I trip over something on the floor. I reach down to see what it is and find a bottle. Empty. A flickering light appears in the kitchen and I walk towards it. My Aunt is working at something over what must be a wood stove. Such things still exist? Dorothy we are not in Kansas any more.

“Can I help?”

“Have a seat on the couch. Something to eat soon. Nothing special.”

She comes back in about ten minutes with a tortilla like thing loaded with beans in some kind of chili sauce with that looks like squash in it. She then lights a kerosene lantern and I can see what I am eating.

“Hot. Spicy.” She smiles.

“Love it. This is great.” I inhale the one she has given me and look up for more. She grunts and goes back into the kitchen to make another one.

When she comes back with the second one she comments, “You work if we are to feed another mouth here.”

“Mike Tohu mentioned that I might be able to help out at the Visitor Center. I have worked in restaurants before.”

“Hmmp. Have to learn at least a few Hopi and Navajo words to get by. How about in the kitchen?”

“Anywhere. I can clean toilets or wash dishes, bus tables. I have never been a waitress, but can learn easy enough once I learn how to speak the bit you need. Should be able to pick that up just listening to others while I work at other tasks.”

“Only have one bedroom. Bed down on couch. Bring in a few blankets. This all happened a bit fast.” I nod and smile my being okay with that. Where do they think I was living, in paradise? I lived in a very poor area of San Jose. All Indians are not drunks and all people from California are not rich.

Dark outside. I get up and look out a window. “Holy cow, all the stars!” My Aunt laughs and shakes her head. City girl for sure. She blows out the lamp, makes her way to the bedroom and closes the door almost all the way. I don't hear it latch it anyway. Pitch black. I can't see even my own hand.

“Wait, what about a restroom?”

“At night, go outside and go anywhere not on the path or near the house.” She says from her room. Okay, but what about snakes, scorpions and such? What about spiders!? I have heard about the HUGE spiders in the desert. Not going until light. No way!

New Home

I am nudged awake to bright light. "Where am I?"

"Ah, just inside the rez. Where do you think you are?"

"Who are you?"

"Uncle. Call me Cid. English only, no Hopi?." I nod.

"Okay, Uncle Cid, where is my Aunt Lucy then?"

"Work. Left over breakfast on the stove. Go work too." He stumbles out. Does not seem very steady on his feet. What am I supposed to do now? I find cold leftover oatmeal on the stove, but eat it anyway. I try the sink. Water works, not great pressure. I wash everything up. There are no cabinets. I guess things are just left on the counter.

When I go to the door I find there is no lock. Guess I don't have to worry about a key then. I look around for someplace to pee. Nothing inside. I grab my pack and go outside. We are in the middle of nowhere. I slowly walk about the back. There is some kind of tiny building about fifty feet away. Curious. I go up to it. Strange. I go around it and find a door on the side opposite the house. I open the door. Oh wow! The smell is something else. I recognize the seat and its purpose. There is a roll of toilet paper on the side. Okay, when in Rome. I nearly gag, but I get through it. The door staid open though.

Now what? I can wait it out in the cabin. I really can't call something this small a house. The path leading from the house looks obvious. All of the snow has melted at least. So quite, so cold.

I walk the path and soon see the visitor center. Not that far really. I guess in the dark and tired it seems very far away. No more than a mile really. There are a few cars in the parking lot. Most look pretty nice.

When I get inside I understand why. Tourists. I see Aunt Lucy and wave.

She comes up to me, "Need to get registered for school, but can't leave right now to take. Sixteen means need Aunt. Go help Manuel in the kitchen. Unexpected visitors and likely will appreciate any help." She does not look she believes I can do anything. I see a clock on the wall. Shit, nearly noon! I really overslept. Surprised I did not wet the couch.

I make my way through the service door. Those are universal at least. A quick glance around sees a sink full of pots. There is a Hispanic looking male at the fryer and grill. I hit the sink and get to work. This is something I understand. No Hopi needed. Rinse a pot that does not look that bad. Add soap and fill with hot water. Arrange everything else for

fast throughput and access. More things arrive without comment. Not a problem. I rinse the new arrivals quickly to prevent things sticking on and add them to the stack. Not much wasted food. That is a good sign. Means people like what they have been served. I hate picky eaters. You work in any restaurant for any length of time you shut up. That is not to say there are not bad restaurants. Don't go back, but don't blame the help. If the food is bad, it is likely the owners being cheap. Hurts them in the long run. Just hope the new owners will be better.

I have no idea how long I am at it. I get into a zone where time passes without notice. This is my world now.

“Susan, take a break. The house is empty for the moment. Another rush when the kids get out of school. Then again when people get off work. Oh, name is Manuel.”

“We met yesterday when I arrived.”

“Thanks for the help. No one else was scheduled for the noon shift. Usually do not get many visitors this time of year. Have some food. Made a plate for you.”

I did not realize how hungry I was. I must have literally inhaled the food.

“It’s okay to taste it. It won’t bite,” he laughs as he says it.

“Manuel, that sounds Spanish, yet you look Hopi to me anyway.”

“Half. Maternal grandmother insisted on the name. No matter. Most people are a mix of different tribes and ethnic groups. Remember most Hispanics are at least part Native as well. It all works out. Good part is that most speak English, Hopi and Spanish. Not that uncommon actually.”

“There you are. I thought I said you should help, not just stuff your face like some spoiled brat from the city.” My mouth drops open.

I needn’t have worried. Manuel tears into her good, “Stop being the ugly Aunt Lucy. She worked her butt off for two hours. That sink, over there,” he points to where I was working, “was piled higher than she is tall when she came in. Do you see even a single item not clean and put away?”

She looks at me obviously not totally convinced, but aware she has lost this round, “Sorry. Still not used to being a parent yet.” She stalks away.

“This is not going to be fun. Found an empty bottle on the floor of the cabin last night. How much do they drink?”

“Not my place to say. Most on the rez do. It is not an easy life. Best if we get ready for the afternoon crowd. Show how to prep some of the

universal ingredients that go into a number of plates.”

I quickly find this means more grunt work. That’s okay though. I really mean to show up my Aunt. No one calls me lazy.

“Whoa there little lady, Indian time not crazy gringo. Save some for the rest of the week.” He smiles at me again, clearly impressed. He understands at least. I feel better having something nice said about me.

A head pops in the door, “Hey, any chow around here?”

“Mike! Manuel, Mike brought me in from Flagstaff yesterday.” Yesterday, it already feels like ages ago.

“Also the afternoon crew.”

“Hey, what can be said, do many things. Also a poor student and need the cash.”

“Since Sue Bear did all the work. Get started on the cold room.” He salutes and with a smile at me grabs a mop from the corner and whistling, opens the door to the cold room. Sue Bear? I guess if you translate my last name that makes sense. Hope it does not catch on.

“Susan, need to get to the high school and get registered. Now.” Yes ma’am. I hang up the apron and follow her out.

I don’t see Mike’s truck in the lot. Probably an embarrassment to the center. Turns out the high school is really close. There is Mike’s truck. A lot of other ones in similar condition. In San Jose kids would spend their eye teeth to fix theirs cars up. I know you are thinking, sure Mexicans and low riders. Not the case. In most cases it is a kid’s only pride. This is silicon valley. Look good or leave. None of us can compete with the six figure incomes. A car is cheap compared to a high end condo. Especially if you do all the work yourself.

The school looks nice. Like the center. I am guessing they care about the future. I don’t see any graffiti, trash, cigarette butts. Not San Jose. There is a dancing figure playing a flute on the side of the outside wall. I have seen this somewhere before.

My Aunt sees me looking at it, “Sacred symbol, Kokopelli. Wish stop using it where outsiders can see it. Over done. Never thought to copyright it, so it is everywhere now, even on coffee cups.”

The reception area has a few students milling around and few sitting. They stare at me like I am a Martian. I smile back. They quickly look away.

“Um waynuma?”

“Owi.”

“Lucy Hoonaw presenting niece for registration.”

The receptionist hands my aunt a form, which she does not even look

at, handing it to me. I take it. Expected information. The receptionist points to a chair with a table next to it. Guess they don't like people at the counter. Grade, sophomore (lost a year due to illness, okay a variety of circumstances), age, 16, languages spoken, English and some Spanish. Definitely not Hopi or Navajo. Area of interests? Art, nothing but art. What level of math, science, English (why English?). I did some work while sick, geometry (I liked that, algebra not so much), earth science and biology (also good, relates well to art), one year of English. Oh I read a lot, but not the classic stuff. Agriculture? What do I know about growing things, nothing. Shit, the sheep in the back of Mike's truck. The dried corn stalks outside the cabin. Need to learn Hopi, Hopi culture and farming. Great.

I hand the form to the receptionist, who looks at my Aunt, who just shrugs. She does not know anything about me, just going through the motions. I would not treat a dog this bad and I hate dogs. What is her problem? Why did my parents never mention her or my Uncle? That must be it, something about her relationship with her sister, my mother.

The receptionist types the information into the computer rapidly. New flat screen. I expected to see a CRT or even just paper. How can the homes be so low tech and the high school so high? She goes to a printer, takes the output and hands it to me.

"Here are list of classes, teachers and locations. A map of the campus and the school rules." There is a silly cartoon at the bottom saying "Don't worry, be Hopi!" That's bad. I groan and the receptionist grins. Old joke that still works. I wish my old school was this efficient. Likely would have had to come back for days with people screaming at each other, phone ringing, etc. If everything is this efficient I will never get any more drawing done waiting. I am going through severe withdrawal.

"Be here, at this office, at 8:15am and a fellow student with the same schedule will take you around the first day." Wow! All the stereotypes are going out the window. She motions for me to close my mouth, which I do and turn around.

"Home?" I question Aunt Lucy. She turns and is out the door. Guess so.

This time I know the way and it seems easy. We get home quickly. As soon as we get in the door she lays into me.

"Some ground rules," she points to self, "Cook breakfast." Points at me, "Eat and then clean up. School lunches are free, eat there. After school work in the kitchen for a few hours. Eat a meal there. There will be nothing here when you get back. Sleep on the couch. Responsible for

your own laundry, Sunday mornings. Saturday is mine. There is a tub in the wash room. That is how we do laundry. Wash self at the gym at school. Not enough water here. Figured out how to use the outhouse?" I nod. "Any questions figure them out. Just stay out of our way. Don't look or worry. Know your way around." She then turns, goes into their room and shuts the door.

Out of habit I try my cell phone. Dead. No way to charge it here. Soon, without payment it would be cut off any way. Better get used to it. I really wish I knew my parents history. This is crap. I almost would have been better off in the streets with the gangs. Not that I have fond memories of them. At least you knew where you stood with them.

Going to bed at sundown is not normal for me. I stay awake staring into the blackness for what seems like hours. I must have fallen asleep at some point though because I am startled awake by something coming in the front door. I can see a faint shape against the open door. I am guessing my Uncle. It stumbles in making a lot of noise. It comes closer to me and I hear rustling of clothing. Why? Maybe just taking a coat off.

"Well listen here sweetie. It is time for understanding. Pull your weight around here. No freeloaders on the rez." Most rustling. "Start right by performing a little service. Itch needs scratching." He stumbles into the couch. I am tenser than a piano wire wound too tight. "No woman tight spot. No preppers. Just a little lick should do the trick."

"No way in Hell! Get away from me if you still want to call yourself a man you asshole." I get slapped as my reward. He sort of misses, but it still hurt. I slash out with my shiv. Don't leave the hood without it. Gets past metal detectors too, being made of sharpened bamboo. I feel resistance and hear cursing. I am off the couch, have my pack and am out the door before he can take a second breath. I run several hundred yards before I stop to put on my shoes and then keep running. Glad I slept in my cloths because of the cold.

I get to the visitor center, but it is locked up tight. I make my way to the high school and hope something is open there. I do not have enough clothing to survive in the cold. After what seems like forever I find a ladies room unlocked. Not the best, but out of the wind. I am shaking like a wet rat. Takes me forever to get warm enough to fall asleep.

I am awakened by voices outside coming this way. I try to straighten myself up and look like I belong here. Three girls come in. Big. Not freshman, likely seniors. I am old enough to be a junior but small enough to be a junior high student.

"Well what have we here, the little tiny newbie. Welcome to the rez

city whore.” They surround me. Out comes the shiv.

“I really am not in the mood to play right now. Back off.”

The shiv is out of my hand faster than I can blink. The pack is ripped off me. Boots are kicking me in the side and head once I am down. Guess the rez girls know how to survive too.

When I come too I find all my art work spread over the entire restroom. Most of it torn, pissed on, shat on, water logged. Pencils are broken. The pack is shreds. The shiv is near the wall untouched. Not a threat to them I guess. Now I am homeless, no possessions, nothing left. I go into my dark place. I have nothing left.

Awakening

Why isn't she awake yet?

She does not want to be. You've read her, you know what really happened, even if her Uncle tells a different story.

Also impressive what happened in the Hu litter box.

We call them rest rooms. Huh?

Then stop referring to ours as cat boxes.

Point made.

"What are you two talking about? It does not make sense."

Oh monkeys, she heard us! Did you push her already?

"Quiet, you're scaring her." No I did not.

I must be dreaming. The nightmare continues.

"I am afraid it was not a nightmare dear. It really happened. Not the welcoming I would have planned for you when you came to the reservation."

I open my eyes to a late twenties blond lady. I look around.

Finally.

"Shush!" How come I can hear her thoughts?

I am in a bed and there is a very large cat at the base of the bed.

"I know you. You were at the bus station. We have not been properly introduced." I give the back of my hand to be sniffed.

A civilized one. Better than most Hu I know. I am called Owa Moosa your lady and I already know your smell and Hu name.

"Thank you your highness. Ah, how come I can hear you?"

They look at each other.

"Normally this does not happen. Maybe the trauma you have been through set something off in your head." She shrugs like it is no big deal.

"Will I be able to hear everyone?"

"Not likely. We are ah, special too and we were letting our thoughts be heard by those who can. We thought it was just each other though." She smiles. Not offended at least.

"I need to leave. I can't go back to my relatives. If you can take me to the bus station I will find my way back to San Jose and go from there. If you don't I will escape and go anyway. I have nothing left to lose by staying here."

"You will never have to go back to them. And you don't have to go back to San Jose either. I understand that was not really any better. Gang raped two years ago." She raises an eyebrow. How does she know about

that? I told no one here. Seems forever ago now. “At least this time the outcome was better for you. By the way, your Uncle ended up in the emergency room to be stitched back together. Nearly severed it clean off. Lost a lot of blood too.”

Too bad she did not succeed.

“Like cats behave any better?” She looks down at Owa.

For us it is called a good time and we know and approve of what is going on. She licked herself a few times.

“Could we change the subject? Where am I? I am guessing a hospital, but where? Last I saw Owa was in Flagstaff, so unless Owa hitched a ride or flew. . .”

No, I did not tell her. Tell me what?

“Topic for a later discussion. You are in Flagstaff General Hospital. You were pretty messed up. Not sure you would make it.”

“I was beat up. Been there before. When you are this size it is not uncommon.”

Look at your front paws. I look at my hands. Seem fine.

Under the gown. I raise them and let the gown fall. Both wrists are heavily bandaged.

“How did that happen and who did this to me? I don't remember this.”

“You did it to yourself dear. My guess is some kind of breakdown. There is more.” She pulls something out of her purse. A picture.

“This look familiar?” It is a very nicely drawn raging bear against a white background. Dark red brown ink used. Wow, nearly reaches the ceiling.

“Shit! I did that? With my own blood?” She nods.

“Damn, some of my best work. Too bad it is gone now with the rest of my stuff. I am sure they must have cleaned everything up by now. I would have loved to have seen the original.” How long have I been out?

“Still there. Bear clan claimed it as a spiritual event, over your Aunt's objections of course. They are debating about leaving it or removing the entire wall to preserve it. Restroom is closed for the time being.”

“What about the three who beat me up?”

“They claimed you came at them with a knife.”

“It was made of bamboo and I did not come at them, but just stood my ground to defend myself.”

“Marie is a black belt in Karate. Even with a steel knife you did not have a chance. The three are a constant threat to any single cornered small one. So far they have been careful not to get caught by an adult, but this is far from the first incident reported and we suspect many more that

weren't." I nod my understanding. Who would believe one new kid against three native raised. No one.

"Ah, how come Owa is here. Are cats allowed in hospitals in Arizona? Definitely not in California."

Uncivilized wasteland. She rolls her eyes at Owa. I don't know her name yet.

Well, that is embarrassing. My name is Ms. Lightfoot, that is what you should call me in front of others anyway. My Hopi name is Yongosona, means Turtle.

"You hardly look like a . . ."

Shush! Private only.

"Sorry."

You can think your thoughts and we will hear you.

Okay, got it. Weird though. She shrugs again.

"To answer your question, Owa has been assigned to you as your body guard. In reality, there is provision in the Hopi code for a spirit guide. And no, this is not normal in Flagstaff either, but they make exceptions for us if we raise a big enough stink. Had to convince the council too of course. Your drawing pretty much did the work for us. Unusual to be a Cat. Usually a well behaved dog or bird sometimes."

I like spirit guide better. There are no well behaved dogs. She sits tall on the bed.

"Sorry, but we? You definitely don't look Hopi or did you mean some other group?"

"Ah, sorry, but you don't look Hopi either. To the 'natives' I look more Hopi than you actually. More of the way you hold yourself and interact with people. I am Hopi, both parents. Just means somewhere in their ancestry there were some whites. Most likely some women were raped by settlers. Not that uncommon actually. If you had been born in Europe, you likely would have some French blood in you. Napoleon's troops were not nice either.

You will notice I am using the words 'I' and 'you' which is not common among us. I went to school in Phoenix where I learned to speak white English." She smiles.

"So, Ms. Lightfoot, what happens now? When do I leave, where do I go? Do I go back to school with the evil ones? Do I work at the Visitor Center with the evil Aunt?"

"No one will mess with you with Owa present. Believe me. She can take out the fastest Karate master in a blink."

Faster than a blink actually. She looks proud of herself. I can't help

but smile.

“We will find other work for you to do, and you are coming home with me. Oh, you are not alone. There are already three other orphans there, two boys, aged nine and twelve and another young lady you will share a room with who is thirteen. She will be very envious of you and Owa, so be nice to her.” Not when she hears my past.

“Another couch in a cabin I guess.”

“Yeah, about that. Your Aunt and Uncle have a nice place in the village. No idea why they put you in the cabin. We have running water, electricity and everything. Cabins are only used by people on retreat for spiritual reasons or traditionalists.”

“I’ll even be able to recharge my phone?”

Owa rolls over on her back and yawns.

“You can charge it, but no reception. The council, rightfully decided, that cell phones were not Hopi. We do have mail service six days a week, just like other ‘civilized’ places.”

“No one I need to talk with anyway. Good to have the camera and calculator though.”

“Yeah, well, no people pictures either. And don’t draw anyone without permission.”

Pictures steal your soul.

“Stop that Owa. No one believes that. It is a privacy issue. Not everyone is as gorgeous as you, you know.” Clearly teasing.

Of course not. Impossible for a Hu to reach this level of perfection.

“What is a Hu?” I keep hearing that term.

“Short for Human. Just as Cat is short for catastrophe.” She laughs at Owa’s hurt look.

“We should let you rest.”

I’m not going anywhere. At least as long as they are serving chicken surprise. She licks her face.

“How long was I out? Days? I am wide awake now and tired of being horizontal. I have so many questions.”

“You have been here a week. You lost a lot of blood. They have replaced that, but they were not sure you did not suffer brain damage so they kept you in an induced coma to let your head heal. They will likely want to run tests before they let you go. Owa can tell me when you are ready and I can have Mike bring you back. He knows where I live. Everyone does actually. On the rez that is.”

“What do you do? I assume visiting sick psychos in the hospital is not your normal job.”

She smiles in an evil way, “I am your history, Hopi language and last but not least, your art instructor. Not that you need help there. You can act as the teaching assistant if you prefer. If you had read your schedule you would have realized you had me three periods a day. I will check back later if I have not heard from you.” She gets up and leaves.

She was the one who found you in the Hu box.

“I will need to thank her.”

A woman in hospital clothes comes in, “Well, as you are awake now, how about a little brain scan to be sure you are still all there and we did not leave any pieces out.” A nurse, no a doctor. Wearing a stethoscope.

“Sure doc, whatever is needed to get me out of here.”

“What you don't like your food? Your cat sure does.” She pets Owa nicely and Owa purrs back. Suck up.

“I think all I got was the IV drip.” I smile though.

I have to keep up my strength.

I roll my eyes, “Maybe a little too much Chicken Surprise. Maybe some nice greens to make sure she does not get fat.” She hisses at me and the doctor laughs.

“I could swear she understands you.” You have no idea. How else would I have known about the chicken. I smile.

The doc leaves and a male nurse comes in with a wheel chair.

“I don't need a wheel chair.”

“You have not been on your feet for a week. Also hospital policy in case you trip and decide to sue us.”

“Sorry, but I am nobody. Don't have the resources to sue a bug. But, I'll take the free ride from a hansom fellow.”

“Wow, you really are sick.” He smiles though and helps me out of the bed and into the wheel chair. Hate these gowns.

“Don't worry, I never look at, wow, such a fine ass.” He was not even looking at me. Hospital humor. Owa jumps off the bed and is right behind me. The nurse sees her.

“No cats allowed in the MRI room.”

“She will sit outside the room then.”

“I don't think even that is allowed.”

“Then you can turn right around and take me back.” I apply the brakes I noticed on the side and he nearly falls over me.

“I will have to clear it with the technician.” We move forward again.

The tech did not mind and even winked at Owa who raised her chin and looked cute back, before curling into a ball on the floor of course.

“If you have to pee or anything, do it now. You will be here awhile.”

She points to the appropriate door. Interestingly, does not care that I am standing when I go to the Hu box.

“Your cat is not wearing a collar is he?”

“No she does not wear a collar. No metal allowing in this area.” She looks up at the mention of the collar in horror. I have to laugh. *It is not funny to be strangled.* It would not kill you scardy cat. *Yes it would. I know it would. I’m sure it would.*

Yeah, faster than a Karate champ. Ah huh. She turns away from me. I was in the MRI an awfully long time. Seemed like hours.

When it was over the tech exclaimed, “You did really well. Most would have been climbing the walls long before now.”

“Most who?” He blushes and looks away. I guess I look Hopi to him at least. “I was raised in San Jose California, not on the rez. Never seen an MRI before, but saw pictures in our science books and understand the basic principal. Cat scans too.” He nods, but does not say anything.

I have to settle down and remember that I am nobody. Just a dumb Indian out of place. I am taken back to my room and am soon asleep again. Did not realize how tired I was.

I wake to voices again.

“Ah Miss Hoonaw? Did I say that right?” Not even close.

“English is easier, you can call me Ms. Bear.” He is taken back by that. Must have seen the picture. I smile.

“Well ah, Ms. Bear. We need to run some more tests. There were some anomalies in the scans we cannot figure out.” Owa wakes up and pays attention.

“What kind of anomalies? Cancer?” I am concerned now.

“Oh, no, nothing like that. Did not mean to scare you. Just something we have not seen before. More for our own curiosity really.”

From nobody to guinea pig. Great.

One of their cell phones rings. Owa jumps from the bed to go with me. I am loaded into the wheel chair again. After a long way through a maze of doors and corridors we end up outside? Daylight at least.

“Mike? But I am not dressed. I have no clothes.” He brings out a long cloak and wraps it around me. “Thank you Sir Knight!” He bows to effect.

I whisper to him, “But they wanted me for more tests. What am I doing here. Breakout?”

He whispers back, “No idea, just got the word an hour ago to come get you. Maybe ah, Turtle, will explain.” He looks around to be sure she is not nearby. “She has eyes in the back of her head. Can’t get away with

nothing around her. Whoa, that is the biggest cat have ever seen. Mother must have been a Toho.” He bows to her carefully.

“Right, mountain lion, your last name and clan. I’ll learn. My officially sanctioned spirit guide (and ah, body guard). Her name is Owa Moosa.”

“Stone Cat, now know two more words.” He jumps in the truck and kicks the passenger side open. Owa jumps in and sits on the seat.

“Kitty make this little sick invalid ride in the back?” Does he know about you?

No.

Then you better get in the back unless you want him to know.

She slowly gets out and jumps in the back. *Smells like sheep shit. You expect me to lick this off of my fur?*

Happy dreams. Sit in the hay silly.

“Wow, that was weird. What did you say to her?”

“Spirit guide, special connection.” I shrug. Then laugh looking confused too. Hey I know how to fake it.

“Let’s beat it in case they change their minds.”

“Okay with me. Owa ate all my food. Do you have anything to eat?”
I heard that. You weren’t going to eat it.

Yeah, and I bet you begged for more from the nurses too.

A little. Did not want any to go to waste. I laugh. Mike looks at me.

“What? It is just a burrito. You have those in San Jose. Remember giving me one a week ago.”

“That one was from Arizona from one of the bus stops.”

“Your mind works okay. What’s the story behind the bear drawing?”

“No idea. I was unconscious at the time and don’t remember a thing.”

“Whoa. No wonder everyone has gone bat shit crazy over this.

Coming back with Owa will only make that worse. Watch out.”

“I know about the Karate kids. Why are they still allowed in school?”

“Parents are on the council. There have been new calls for them to step down. Here two days, stir a pot that has been simmering for years. Will be interesting.” I hate interesting.

I pass some of the burrito through the back window to Owa who pretends to be reluctant in accepting it. Though she was trying to sniff it through the glass when I first accepted it. Poor baby.

I am older than you.

And I am still a baby. Besides cat years don’t count. How am I am going to afford to feed her? She looks up sadly.

I can hunt for myself just fine.

Hope you like lizards. Maybe a stray coyote.

I would not piss on a coyote.

I will give you a nice back rub when we get to our new home.

“Now what? Sounds like thunder back there. Can hear her even over the engine.”

“Just gave her a bite of the burrito.” He looks over to me.

“Looks like gave her the whole thing. There is a soda in the pack somewhere if thirsty.”

“No thanks. I have been on a sugar drip for a week. Enough for me.” He laughs and shakes his head.

“Why so happy? Thought you would be a total mess.”

“I have nothing left to lose. I have been gang raped, lost both parents, beaten up by Hopi hoodlums, nearly raped by my uncle, nearly committed suicide apparently, lost all of my belongings. I am nobody, nothing left.”

“Shit. Coyote did a number.” Yep, got that right. Wait, huh?

Native Americans believe coyote was some kind of god or spirit. I smile.

“Smiling about this. That’s crazy.”

“Sorry something Owa said. I speak cat you know.” He laughs.

Good save. Be careful. Owa yawns and curls up on the straw. How can she sleep with all this bumping?

Practice. Am master of the nap.

We seem to get back up the Mesa faster than I remember the first time. Twice does not make one an old hand.

“Is this where you live too?” These look nice.

“Nah, live outside town on a ranch. Sheep, corn, melons and squash. Hopi favorites. Have electricity and water from a solar panel and cisterns. Living off the land for thousands of years.

The reason these are so nice is this is where the teachers live. Loosing too many teachers to the cities. The pay is bad, so make up for it with free housing. All they have to come up with is food. Each apartment has space for a small garden and most of the shops give discounts to the teachers they like.” I see lots of solar panels and a few wind turbines too.

“Impressive.”

“Composting toilets not outhouses and a few other things done differently than in the cities. Most people are a blend of traditional and progressive. Neither extreme really exists any more. The hard core traditionalist got old and died. Progressive does not work out here either, takes too much money to maintain a white man’s lifestyle in the desert.

So, Hopi hippie and try to do everything as sustainable as possible.”

“I suffered with an outhouse. I suppose I can handle one that composts.”

“Big difference. Composters don’t smell.” I sigh relief.

Hey, at least you don’t have to bury it like I do.

I thought you were sleeping.

Too bouncy. Trying not to throw up the burrito, or is it a hairball?

The truck has stopped. Get down before losing it please. We may need a ride again in the future.

Hope not.

“What is wrong with Owa? She is barely able to stand.”

“Car sick. Go figure. Guess they did not evolve to ride in trucks over bumpy curvy roads.”

“Hey, only the last part coming up the Mesa is the least bit curvy. Poor baby.” Owa throws up a big hairball.

Happy now?

Much better thank you.

Ms. Lightfoot comes out one of the doors to the right and waves to us. She sees what Owa has done and shakes her head. *Bury that please.* Owa gives her a dirty look, but she has already run up to us.

“Have a nice ride?”

Mike answers before I can, “Kitty was not too happy about it, Sue Bear seems fine through. Crazy, but fine. Should fit right in.” He smiles a big goofy grin. “Okay? Need to get back to chores.” She nods and he takes off.

“Come in. Lets get you some real clothes.”

“Shoes too if that is okay.”

“Yes, shoes too.”

We go inside. All of the walls are rounded, just like the outside. Pueblo style I guess.

“This is the kitchen. You will have some chores here, being large enough to use a knife. The little ones will do most of the cleanup. Sorry, but your sink days are over with. Hope you don’t mind.” She is teasing me.

“We live a simple life. You won’t see a lot of stuff.”

“Whose dolls are those?” I ask pointing to a shelf.

“Not dolls, Kachina. Used to help us remember spirit helpers. We make less authentic ones to sell to the tourists. Never sell a real one to outsiders.”

“This is your room which you will share with Dory. I will let her tell

you her native name if she is willing. Never insist that someone give you their name. Same goes for you. Officially you are Sue Bear. That is what it will say on all the written records.”

There are clothes neatly folded on one of the two beds. Used, but look great to me. Lots of pockets! I am in heaven.

“I’ll leave you to get dressed. Come out when you are ready. I need to go to the school for a little bit and I would like to show you the room where you will spend half your time anyway.”

Owa is waiting outside smelling something I can’t see when we come out. She falls in behind us and then changes her mind, rushes ahead only to stop and smell something else.

Dogs have been here.

A lot of people have dogs as pets. Be thankful you are a spirit guide instead.

I will never be someone’s pet. Stupid monkeys.

“Stupid monkeys? Where does that come from?”

“All of the Cat lineage believe that Hu are stupid monkeys. You get used to it. Means nothing. Our ways don’t make sense to Cats is all. Not that their ways make sense to us all the time either.” She shrugs.

“Sounds more like a pay back for Hu always thinking that all cats are alike.” *I like her. Can I keep her?* Everyone knows cats own you and not the other way around. Stupid monkeys indeed.

Hey, you two, settle down. We still have to live here.

The school is not that far away. Makes sense. Why give teachers housing only to have to give them cars too.

“Elementary and Junior High are that way. Teacher housing is conveniently in the middle. There is a small grocery store over that way if you find you need anything. We, meaning our household, has credit there, but only get what you really need, not what you want. You understand the difference?”

“You are talking to a broken girl with only one really nice set of clothes on her back given to her by a nice teacher. Yeah, I get it. Not going to be a problem. Nothing to be taken for granted from now on. Period.”

“You will be Hopi soon with that thinking. This is the history, art and Hopi language room.” She does not call it her room. She raises an eyebrow, but does not look at me. Have to remember she hears all.

She opens the door. Not locked. Surprised. Would not want the Karate kids to get in here. Imagine the destruction.

They tried once. Never again. She grins the most evil grin. I smile

very happily back. I would imagine that someone who can read minds could have a lot of fun getting even. *Just a little scare. Myths are a wonderful thing. They are afraid of this room now and will never take a class with me again. No one else knows about our ability. Do not tell anyone please. Who would I tell?*

Inside there is a room full of students, well maybe fifteen. They all stand up, but relaxed when we come in. Oh. You mean them.

“Class, this is Sue Bear. Please be respectful. First day back. Let’s use our quite voices.” Definitely a teacher in case I had any doubt.

The smallest of the group comes up to me at the urging of the others.

“We wanted to welcome you to the rez. We have this small gift for you if you will have it.” She is nearly trembling as she hands me a box covered in brown paper.

“It’s heavy. Do I unwrap it here?” I don’t know the customs.

An older male student says, “We have learned the white ways too. We will not be offended. At least for oh a year maybe?” He is clearly having fun with me.

“Okay, here goes then.” I carefully unwrap the paper. Will make good paper for sketching later. Inside something made from wood. All kinds of neat carvings on the surface. I recognize the flute player.

“These are all Hopi. Did you do this yourselves?”

“We all helped. Ms. Lightfoot helped too.”

“It is beautiful. Thank you. Now I have someplace to store art supplies.”

“Open it,” the little girl exclaims.

Inside. Inside are pencils, pen and inks of several shades. Blank paper. And something else. I reach below the rest. Something old.

“Oh god.” I nearly faint. “This is too much. I can’t accept this. I truly appreciate the thought. But that part of my life is gone.” They had rescued at least some of the my drawings and cleaned them up as best they could I am sure.

“Class, how about we take the previous work out and keep it here for everyone to learn from.” They all agree. I’m sorry, but I can’t see anything at the moment because I am crying so much.

“Toho! Toho!” They all back away from me. The little ones are terrified.

Without turning around, “Owa, you can’t sneak up on people like that. Class, this is Owa Moosa. She is Sue Bear’s spirit guide. You remember what that is. Owa is very special, as is Sue Bear.” I am shaking my head no adamantly.

The little one comes up to me and hides in my arms, being careful to be on the other side from Owa, "Does she bite?" I nod no. I am still crying.

"She does not eat little girls, but for some reason she especially likes chicken surprise." The class looks puzzled. Not a Hopi dish then. Owa purrs at the mere thought and the class laughs. *How do you sneak up on prey if you purr so loud to let them know where you are?*

Chicken surprise does not run stupid monkey. Okay, I deserved that one. I pat her on the head and scratch under her chin. The purring get even louder. I laugh. I stop.

"I need to see it." The class goes silent.

Little one says, "It is locked. No one can see it."

"I think we can make an exception for the artist." Ms. Lightfoot jingles her keys. "The rest of you should stay here. This is deeply personal for Sue Bear."

I shake my head, "No, they should come too. If I am to be part of this class, this clan, this tribe, then they need to see this. This is the point when I ceased being city girl and was reborn."

I look at the little one, "You were the only one brave enough to come forward to meet Owa. What you are about to see is not real. It is only a drawing. Just like the drawings you do all the time in class. It can't hurt you. You need to be brave now. Can you do that for me?"

"Will Owa come with us?" I nod yes.

"Then I can be brave too." She skips back to the others after patting Owa. *You have created a monster. She won't be able to stop touching me.*

We will sort that out later. Dory needs your help to be brave this one time. She is your roommate by the way.

I whisper to Ms. Lightfoot, "Dory does not look thirteen to me."

"What, you thought you were the only little person in the world? Everyone here is in high school."

The rest room is nearly on the other side of campus. There are two locks on the outside. There were no locks the last time I entered.

"No one can go in there." A male about forty says from behind us.

"Mr. Toad, this is Sue Bear. She has invited us to see it just this once."

"Of course. I did not know. I will make sure you are not interrupted."

"Thank you." The class is very quiet.

"Let Sue Bear go in first. You remember where the light switch is?" I nod. "When she is ready she will invite the rest of us in." Okay, now or never. I would imagine not many people get to face their birth this way.

I go in with my eyes closed. I admit I am afraid. It nearly killed me

the first time. I fumble to find the light and turn it on. Okay, now or never.

I open my eyes. I am facing the wrong way. Duh. Turn around. Right.

I turn and my eyes take it in. At least it is no longer blood colored. More iron oxide reddish brown. Makes sense, basically what blood is once the bio is removed. I can't help it. Art just affects me that way. I am sucked into the image. The reality of the image. No separation. Much different than the photo of this.

I come outside to the others, "Incomplete. Not finished."

You do not have enough blood to finish what I see in your mind.

"Does not have to be blood. Any iron oxide based pigment will work. Given the closed space, an acrylic should work on these walls fine."

They do not hear both sides of the conversation. Sounds like you are talking to yourself. Freaking them out at bit.

"Sorry. Go inside and see for yourself. It needs to be finished. There will be discordance until it is."

"Maybe I should not have let you see. We are forbidden to touch anything without approval from the council."

I think for a moment.

Stupid monkeys think that only something done in a trance is valid.

Now that you are conscious, it does not work any more.

"Sush!"

"Paper. I need paper. Do you have butcher paper. I can use iron oxide powder in water. Brushes." I hurry back to the classroom with everyone else scrambling behind me.

Owa rushes ahead of me and pushes open the door. Ms. Lightfoot is right behind me.

"Class, let's push the desks together into one long line. Erik, get the paper from the supply closet, Tim help him carry it. Merle, brushes. Sylvy, you know where the oxide powders are we use for ceramic glazes. Find the iron oxide. Betsy, a one quart jar with water. Oh, and a smaller cup to mix in.

As the desks are pushed together I am seeing the image laid out before me. They lay out the paper across the desks. I am already mixing pigment in water. Perfect. Now it begins.

The image comes through my mind and eyes to be impressed on the surface of the paper. I start with the bear, as that is where it begins. I work with intensity, without separation. There is no paper, brush, pigment, hand, eyes, mind, no Sue Bear. There is only image and becoming.

I have no idea or sense of time.

I pull back and walk away. People are talking, probably in Hopi. I do not understand them.

They do not understand you. This is not part of their experience.

This is how I live. This is me. This is what I am.

You need to say this out loud. This is a class. We learn from each other here.

Dory holds my hand and Owa rubs against my leg.

“I do not know more than a few words in Hopi. I sense that when I work, you are in my place when I hear you speak. Not understanding. You see part of what I am saying but only a very tiny part. This is my language. This is how I speak, this is me. That is why it hurt so much when my work was destroyed. At the same time, the result is not me any longer. It is the process itself that I am part of. That is why I really don’t care what becomes of the old work. I really don’t care what becomes of this work. At the same time I would have died for real if I had been forbidden to let this out. I thank you for allowing me to let go.

I am different after the restroom bear. I am no longer attached to the result. I no longer own my work. I see now that I am the process of work becoming.

What you see before you is as valid as what was done in the restroom a week ago. The same mental state was in play. You can accept this or not. I don’t care. It is done.”

“Question. Claim you do not know our culture, your culture. Yet, every clan is represented here. Started with your clan, the Bear clan, but all are here now. Research on the internet?” *No internet access in this room. They are jealous.*

“I did not even know I was Hopi before I came here. I was told to get to Flagstaff, where someone would meet me to take me to my relatives.” I refuse to think of them as aunt and uncle any longer.

“Then were did this all come from? Not the internet. These symbols are sacred to us. We do not share these with the outside. Not even the Navajo know of this. The carvings on your box do not include these.”

“I don’t know.”

“How does it work? Imagination or does it just happen? Adapt from experience?”

“I see the entire image before I begin. That was how I knew the bear image was not alone and not complete. I have no idea where they come from, but when they happen, and I can’t predict when this will happen, I have to impress the image on some media. I can sit and draw as anyone does. I could draw your portrait for instance. The work before you is not

of that nature. One is of the mind, the portrait, and one is of the spirit, the image done today. Where do ideas of the spirit come from? I cannot say.”

“Okay class. We do not want to wear out Sue Bear on her first day back.” *I hope we have not already done so.*

I am fine. In fact I feel much better. I think I could not really heal until the image was finished.

“It is time Sue Bear sees where these images come from. The mural goes to the back of the room. Put the desks back and get out two images. Sue Bear will see the images in all our hearts. All Hopi. This is home. This is where we belong.”

In hearing people talk I rarely here the word “I” as if the individual is not important. So different from the outside world where “I” is all important, all consuming. *Where ever there is “I” there is also “you” and a separation.*

While everyone is getting ready I go to Ms. Lightfoot, “Why do my relatives hate me so much?”

“It would be better for them to tell you, but seeing as how neither side wants to even see each other any more,” she pauses and I nod, “I will tell you. Both your mother and your aunt were in love with your father. A decision had to be made. Your mother got pregnant with you. Not a good thing even in modern times here, much less seventeen years ago. They got married, but the damage was done. After you were born they left. You know the rest of the story.”

“Wow, to hold a grudge that long and against a child who had no choice in the matter. That is a lot of pain to endure on their part. I am sorry they suffered so much.”

“We all make our own suffering. Imagine what would have happened if you had left Flagstaff and returned to San Jose as an underage street kid. That would have been a lot of suffering too.”

“I have been meaning to thank you and Owa for saving me from that. I am afraid that I am still very much spooked and will get the urge to bolt again at the next catastrophe.” Owa looks up. Not you dear. Relax.

“Owa will go with you if you decide that is your only choice. Teachers are needed here too much for me to go with you.” I nod my understanding.

“Everyone go around and see how many similarities and differences in the mural and these images.” I would have expected exclamations every time someone found a matching images, but everyone is quiet. Different world. I am beginning to like this one very much. Yes, there were a lot of images seen in both places, but their work is more abstract,

more stylized. Everyone fits this style except me.

“I think this will be a good tie in to talk about Hopi history tomorrow. Study up on clans and see which ones can be matched here and on the mural. As this is not a regular school day, feel free to continue your projects or go as needed.”

“What day is it? Wait, school tomorrow, not a normal school day, that makes it Sunday if you work on the same schedule I know.” She nods.

“You come in on Sunday and maybe even Saturday if the need comes up?”

“Not married, this is life. Do what is needed.” Both she and Owa look at me. Shit. Okay, a high ideal to live up to. Good thing I have such good teachers. I put on my cutest smile. Ms. Lightfoot laughs and Owa licks herself.

“Hope you don’t have fleas.” She gives me the dirtiest look imaginable. I just smile in return.

Stop it you two. But she is smiling too.

Stupid monkeys.

“Dory, how about taking Sue and Owa home and help her get settled.” She nods. She patiently waits by me.

“Oh, you want me to start. Okay. Ah, the box. I should take the box.” She nods enthusiastically. I gather the box, leaving the old work. All new now. I have learned a lot looking at the others work. A style I have never seen before. Why did they go so crazy over the bear then? And don’t say stupid monkeys. Owa looks up at me with part of her tongue sticking out. I always thought that looked silly and I can’t help but laugh. Dory looks at me confused. I just shake my head.

We make the short way back to the apartment. Still startles me that the door is not locked. The two boys are already there, chasing each other around. That is not different anyway.

Dory goes into action ordering them about in Hopi. I guess she is the oldest. Different side to her though. She was so cautious in the classroom.

“Come.” She takes me by the hand and leads me into our room.

“Clothes go into the closet here. I made a couple of drawers empty here for you.”

“Dory, I am wearing all my clothes.”

“Nonsense,” she opens the closet and points to the side where my clothes would go, it is full. Must be five different outfits. Oh, that coat looks warm. I pull it out.

“This is for me to wear?” I dare not claim ownership. She nods.

She opens the dresser. Normal things like underwear, socks, bras.

Hope they fit. Hate bras. I am not really big enough to need one from the gravity point of view, just don't like drawing attention to my nipples. Oh, they are nice and thick. Should hide things well. Nothing fancy, very serviceable. Perfect.

"Ms. Lightfoot says you will help in the kitchen." I nod. She leads me to the kitchen.

I am not sure what to expect, corn, squash, beans and melons I guess. There are gourds hanging up, but I think they are decoration. I see where the knives are. Everything is very orderly. No surprise there.

"Maybe something simple to start. How about stew?" I nod. She pulls out carrots, celery, corn, okay that is different, but not bad, some meat, not a lot.

"For flavor mostly. With five to feed we can't afford too much. We will add squash at the end so it does not get too mushy. Beans are already cooked. They are already in the pot, having been cooking most of the day. Water is hot, so this will not take long." She looks me expectantly.

"Got it. No onions?"

"Tod gets an upset stomach from them. Hopefully he will grow out of it. I miss garlic too."

I break the dried corn off the cob and add it first. Likely to take an hour or more for it to re-hydrate. I get to work chopping everything else. This is stew after all. All stews are better with time.

"She was not kidding. You are quick. I will set the table."

"What will the boys do?"

"Cleanup, garbage, that sort of thing."

"Do we do all the cooking?"

"Depends on what needs to be done. Be flexible. Everyone takes turns with laundry."

"Be Hopi." She smiles, rolls her eyes up and shakes her head.

While the stew is simmering I ask about the boys.

"I assume Tod is the youngest. They tend to be the most picky about food." She nods.

"And Ramond or Ramone as he currently wants to be called is the last. Oldest male he feels the need to try and dominate. Don't let him push you around. Hopi culture the women runs things."

"So, that is why the men get drunk." I try and keep a straight face, but can't.

"They don't seem to need an excuse. You know why we natives can't deal with alcohol don't you?"

"I know it is a problem. Just thought it was the humiliation, poverty

and accessibility.”

“Well, that does not help for sure, but the real reason is we never had alcohol in our past. Showed up with the whites. Our genes have a horrible alcohol dehydrogenase, so alcohol spends too much time in the acetaldehyde state. This is similar to formaldehyde or embalmers fluid. Has the same effect. Pickles the liver and brain. Life expectancy for a drunk Indian is about forty tops.”

My mouth falls open, “Where, when did you learn all that?”

“Oh, Ms. Lightfoot really drills that into us. You can’t beat alcohol, for us it will always win. Best not to start.”

“If I am not being too nosy, how did your parents die?”

“Yours died in a car crash. My mother died in childbirth, could not get to a midwife fast enough. She thought she should be able to do it herself. Father died in a hunting accident. Amazing how poor a shot everyone is when they are drunk.” True.

“And the others?”

“No my place to say. Even I don’t know what happened to Tod’s parents. Best not to ask. Being the youngest, he really was not old enough to understand.” Got it.

The two boys come running in, nearly falling over Owa who has been sleeping right in the doorway.

Stupid monkeys.

“You chose the spot knowing full well what it’s purpose was.”

She gets up and moves over just enough, just as Ms. Lightfoot comes in. Smart move kitty. She gives me a dirty look. Not used to being read so easily. Granted most cats probably know your emotions.

More.

“Smells good. Thank you ladies.” She looks over at the boys, who suddenly notice we are all staring at them and waiting.

“Thank you ladies.” Then Ramone notices me, he bows to me, “Welcome to our humble abode.” His voice breaks halfway through and he blushes bright red.

“Don’t worry, does not last long. Thank you for your welcome.” I curtsy and he smiles.

I am ready to dig into some stew when it is taken away from me and a bowl of cornmeal mush with milk and raisins.

“You have had no solid food for a week. This will go easier on your insides. If that works okay, we will work our way up to ‘real’ food.”

Disappointed to be sure, the stew smelled wonderful.

“No chilies?” An adamant nod of no. Oh well. I tentatively try it.

Sweet. Not crazy about sweet things, but then I have been on liquid glucose for a week. I can't even pass any to Owa under the table. I finish before the others though.

"You even eat fast." Todd comments. Ms. Lightfoot smiles.

Dory sighs and comments, "This one will take some work I am afraid."

Sweet cornmeal, yuck. Kitten chow. Yeah.

The boys take away the bowls and do clean up. Dory and I go into the living room study. The walls are lined with books.

"We are allowed to read anything in this room. You can take a book back to your room if you want, but nothing leaves the house."

Makes sense. Owa has already chosen the best padded chair to curl up in. Definitely a cat, sleeping all the time.

I am on patrol tonight.

"No one is shocked to see Owa. You have met her before?"

"She has been here for years off and on. Can be a pain once in a while, but probably saved each of us at one time or another. You are just the latest one. Probably someone else in a few years."

"Always as a spirit guide?"

"No, that has never happened before. They must be worried to have allowed it."

The boys come walking in as calm as can be and announce, "We will be referred to as Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones from now on."

"Oh God." Dory shakes her head. Ms. Lightfoot smiles, but sits down and starts reading a book.

Dory continues, "I suppose it was bound to happen after they started reading the books."

"Is that their names?"

"Well I guess technically. At what must have been just several months old, they came in as two abandoned ones from Flagstaff, so the nurses just randomly named them. Smith and Jones being the most generic names. It was only later than a DNA test confirmed that they were Hopi and at five and seven respectively, they ended up here. But the reason they want to be called, Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones is on account of the books we have all read." She goes to the shelf where they are and pulls out one.

"This is the first one. There are eight others. Sooner or later everyone here reads them. Weird thing was I even saw Owa looking at them late one night. Never made sense of that."

Cats don't read. Stupid monkeys. Right. You must be sound asleep.

Ever vigilant.

I take the book and find a spot on a blanket covered couch and start.

I am still reading when Ms. Lightfoot announces lights out. She stays, but everyone else gets up and goes to their room. I follow Dory of course, carrying the book with me.

“This is one strange book. Dinosaurs to some kind of history that is not ours.”

“Yeah, no idea why she makes all of us read it. The little ones got less out of it of course. They like the battles the most. Don’t know what it is about boys always wanting to be warriors.”

“Not just little boys judging from my experience with the Karate kid and her gang.”

“You mean Marie. Snake clan. Never liked that clan. Something wrong there. Too much inbreeding is my guess. They pick on all the small ones sooner or later. Even me.”

“Were you hurt.”

“No so far. Just a matter of time. Owa can’t watch us all, all the time and they are infinitely patient.”

“Why is this allowed?”

“Bullies exist everywhere. You must have had them in San Jose.” I nod repeatedly. “The council allows it because it is supposed to teach us to be stronger and not be cry babies. Real reason is because their parents are on the council. How do you remove three members out of twelve without upsetting the entire government. Besides, if these three are gone, three more will arise. The council has a point there. Ms. Lightfoot says they may have to this time. I would not be surprised if they keep a low profile, especially around us, for awhile. Be careful though. They are patient. They always corner you when you are alone. Always. No witnesses.”

“And no one thinks it a coincidence that so many are hurt with similar stories?”

“Most say nothing. Those that do, get it worse. Word gets around.”

“They are really terrorists.” She nods.

Not for long. This time they will be taken out. What are you going to do? Eat them? What do you think they do to cats who eat monkeys? They hunt them down and kill them. She humphs and rolls over.

“Before we go to sleep. You are way behind everyone else, not just in knowing our language, there are several dialects, so in spite of that fact that, not knowing any will be held against you. There are more important things. Understanding the way of life, what’s important and what’s not,

and finally the clan structure. VERY different than the white culture. VERY.

Being this way puts us at a huge disadvantage when dealing with the white culture. We get the short stick nearly every time. But being of the white culture puts you at a real disadvantage here. You are better than most from what I have seen, but you still have a long way to go, quickly.

You were attacked by the three from the Snake clan as much because you were different as the fact you were alone.”

“Sorry if I am about to say something wrong, but right now you are using the word you a lot. When I hear others speak they rarely use you and I in a sentence. What’s that all about?”

“Good ear. Most whites do not hear that and just think everyone is speaking pidgin English. Not true. The white culture is all about ‘I’ and ‘You’ as a means of separating. If someone is not ‘I’ then you can do bad things to them. Nature is not ‘I’ so it is okay to do bad things to Nature. We do not even have a concept that can be translated as Nature in the way whites do. These words are used until understanding is reached.”

“No separation. When understanding is reached ‘I’ and ‘You’ no longer needed.”

“Yes. Better, I and you not even a possibility.”

“Are all thirteen year old's this perceptive?”

“Here, yes, at least on this subject. It is part of the core of being Hopi. Other things we are just as silly and stupid as any young person. Time for sleep.”

Not sure all Hopi are so enlightened. At some point during the night, Owa has left. Not there when we wake. *That’s because I know what’s for breakfast.* Great, something even Owa won’t eat. Can’t be too many possibilities there. *Hiss!*

“With water at a premium it is best to take a shower at school. Even there, best to conserve. Never leave water running.”

“Figured that much out.” Hey, I am trying not to use ‘I’ so much. Oops, except in my own thinking. Need to be beyond thought. Dory smiles at me. Can she read my thoughts too? Can everyone?

No, come and eat.

“As young have trouble being awake in the morning. Breakfast is Ms. Lightfoot’s chore.” Dory tells me as we leave the room.

“Coffee?” I am given a dirty look. Guess not.

I look in the pot. Cornmeal mush with dried fruit of some kind.

The boys run in, putting on articles of clothing at the same time, rush to sit themselves and then patiently wait. Well, poking at each other under

the table and squirming. Dory rolls her eyes. Guess some things are universal.

Ms. Lightfoot puts food into bowls and serves us. I wait to see what others do. Everyone waits until she herself sits.

“Mindfully begin.” I hear a collective sigh and everyone slowly reaches for a spoon and slowly collects a spoonful and slowly raises to their mouths.

This is Hopi?

No, Zen, close enough. Good practice not to take anything for granted. Not likely for me now.

Owa chose that moment to come in the door. How does she do the latch. Ah, the doors all have levers, not knobs. Must be for her benefit. She even closes the door with a nudge and then sits upright next to me.

I nudge her and whisper, “Owa, there is a tail hanging out of your mouth. Dignity matters.” The others ignore me concentrating on eating slowly. Only one rat?

Ten. Evidence of one is not evidence of total. True. Glad you liked your meal. *I did, thank you.*

I finally taste mine. Hand shook a bit trying to go so slow. Guess I am not totally back. Oh, this tastes good. No sugar added. Maybe even a hint of salt. Apricots. This is going to be so hard for me to go slow.

Afterwards, “Weird, that was actually enough. Normally would eat twice that amount.” I am confused.

“Eating fast does not give stomach time to tell brain it is full.” Back to no you again. Wait, is that directed at me because I eat too fast. Hmm, maybe I will lose weight. Though I noticed there are not too many thin people here. Maybe I am okay.

You are fine. Please don't obsess on this. White culture has many problems. This is a big one.

So does this mean I will have no privacy of thoughts from now on.

Are my responses helpful or hurtful?

Helpful of course.

Is there a problem then?

No. I suspect that Owa would listen even if told not to anyway.

Correct.

Stupid monkeys. Chatter, chatter, chatter. I have to laugh at this and no one else understands why I am laughing. Owa of course licks herself.

School 2.0

Dory tries to teach me the Hopi greeting, but I just can't get the accent right and I sound silly.

Silly monkey, cat would me more useful.

Really, I am seeing a lot more monkeys than cats around here. I don't think I have seen more than a couple since arriving here. Dogs are more popular. Stupid monkeys for sure.

But cats are more important.

We reach school quickly. In fact we are so close it does not even make sense to pack a lunch. I will just go home where an assortment of materials are at hand to make my own in minutes. I dare not go to the Cultural Center.

Okay, reached the front office.

"Welcome back Ms. Bear. Do you have your paper work we gave you earlier?"

"No maam, that was destroyed in the attack."

"Um, yes, I thought that might be the case, here is another copy. We did not know when you would return, so your guide is not here."

"My guide has the same classes as you said, so if I turn up at the first class they should recognize me and we can take it from there?"

"Sounds good. Glad to see you are feeling comfortable here."

"Ms. Lightfoot helps a lot." And you too Owa, but how would I explain that.

"Of course. Have a good day then."

I follow the map. Not exactly laid out in a grid. The paths seem to go every which way. The map is good and I make it to the first class, chemistry. Not my favorite topic, but I have already had biology so I guess it had to be something different. Worst part is I am coming into the middle.

"Ah, Ms. Bear? Good. Glad you made it early. Hopi time is a bit different. I am Mr. Stevenson.

This class is probably not what you are expecting either.

Our method is a bit sideways. Instead of formulas and memorizing we learn practical chemistry by solving day to day needs.

The current project involves Mother Corn. What chemicals are in corn, what can be made from it (besides bread and booze), how to use corn sustainably so we don't paint ourselves into a corner. Does this sound okay to you?"

"Thank you yes," the relief on my face must show.

"Your class is your clan for this purpose. Team work is critical. My understanding is that you are quite an artist. Could be useful for illustrating what is learned and you will have to understand it to illustrate it. No assigned seating, so sit anywhere you like and feel free to sit in a different place whenever you want."

"Owa won't be a problem will she? Last thing I want to do spend the day in the principal's office."

"That would be difficult as there is no principal. Teachers all participate in a sort of school council. The Hopi nation has no president either. Not what you are used to, but it works. Most of the time anyway. Owa is welcome as long as she does not eat anyone." He grins. Owa licks her lips of course and looks at him expectantly. Any mention of food. Sigh . . .

Did you eat rat for breakfast? No I did not and please do not offer me any. Was not planning too. All mine. All mine!

"She prefers rats." I stick out my tongue to her and grin. *Don't know what you are missing. Raw rat is out of this world.*

Sylvy comes in and sees me, "Here you are. I checked in at the office and they said you have been and left. I am your guide till you get settled. Remember from yesterday?" I nod. "Hi Owa. Nice to meet you again." She does not pet her though.

"You know each other then? Great. Sylvy why don't you show Sue where we are on this project."

The project was fascinating. I think I can really help here. The rest of the classes are also good. Even PE, which I normally would hate with a passion. Very strange. We are all helping to build a pueblo. Very physical, I guess that is where the PE comes in, but also challenging, as we have to solve all the engineering using scale models at first. Mixing the mud for the adobe is fun at first, till your arms nearly fall off. Serious bicep action expected here.

The best class was art of course. The worst was Hopi. I am so far behind everyone else I am surprised that they don't make me attend classes at the elementary school. Owa finally comes to my rescue by translating Hopi into English in my mind so I can follow along. Cheating, but I was worried I would freak out without her help.

The class on Hopi history is fascinating too. Dory is of the Blue-Bird clan and Ms. Lightfoot is part of the Spider clan and all of us are part of the bigger Bear clan. There are twelve major clans with someone from each clan sitting on the council. If the people of a clan do not like the

decisions being made they can elect a new representative at any time. Everyone is invited to attend meetings and offer ideas, even children, but only adults do any actual voting. Even if one side of an idea ‘wins’ it is not automatic that the clans will follow. If there are enough people who are adamantly against an idea, then the decision is postponed until some kind of accord is found. Turns out that the minority is often right, even when they can’t articulate why at first.

This may sound ideal, but it does not scale up well to larger communities where almost no one knows anyone else. Too bad, it would certainly be nice to see the white nations behaving as well. I have to laugh that I am thinking of my old life in that way. Does not help either. So much of what goes on outside the rez affects us here.

In making dinner we make corn bread. I was so worried that I would have to use a stone mortar to grind the cornmeal. My arms are still sore from helping with the adobe. We use an electric blender and it goes quick. I heard in the chemistry class how different corns have different starches and quantities of starch and how Hopi corn is very special. Not your yellow corn, but all colors. Makes for a greyish mess when ground, but it is heaven. Owa seems to like the crusts the best.

Tastes like cat crunchies, especially when fried in animal fat.

“Meow, meow, meow!” teasing her.

“I swear you two understand each other. She really is your spirit guide. I wonder what mine will be.”

“Everyone gets one?” I thought I was an exception.

“Maybe not in the sense you mean, but when we formally join the tribe in the adult ceremony we are assigned a guide animal to help us navigate life. What this usually means is that there are characteristics of a particular animal, that thinking about or emulating, will help round out our personality.”

“Do you intellectualize everything Dory?”

She sighs, “I have been told this. Dory, be more open. Don’t try to figure everything out.” She shrugs, “I really can’t help it.”

“Embrace it Dory, I am already dependent on your explaining things to me in a way I can understand. No offense, but I never thought I would be saying this about a thirteen year old.”

“I am old for my age, what can I say. I actually prefer the company of older people. Not as many silly games and such.”

“Speaking of which, why are we in the same art class. I would have thought there would be a separation by grade level.”

“That would be silly. Why would anyone do that? We don’t have

grade levels here. We don't have grades either. You stay in high school as long as you need to and/or get a job you need to spend more time on. Oh, there is a test you can take if you want to go to a white college or something, but if you are staying on the rez, no worries, be Hopi."

I groan, "Got me again. I can see where this would be a real advantage. I can learn for the pure pleasure of learning. Anyone who does not like learning can leave and work. Thereby not staying around disrupting classes."

"Exactly. But also not all knowledge is school taught. Most of the crafts are done by apprenticeship. This is usually done within a family."

"You mean like a silversmith teaching their children." She nods.

Only takes us a year to learn everything we need to know. Monkeys fuss and chatter too much.

"Owa says we fuss too much. She learned everything within a year."

She hesitates then comes back with, "Eating and sleeping are not hard to learn." She has you there kitty. *I also hunt. You catch rats and then come back.*

"How about hunting. That take training."

"You mean all the play kittens do. They are ambush hunters. Sit around waiting most of the time. Not much needed there either."

"I think you should be careful you do not make an enemy of Owa."

"You think she understands me?" Oh yeah. Owa licks a spot on her tail. *Let's see you lick your tail.* You mean the naughty places. No thank you. I have had enough activity down there to last a lifetime.

Days turn to weeks. The food is almost always the same. I am told that once the garden comes in we will get more fresh food and less dried beans and ground corn. Not that I don't like fry bread, but Ms. Lighfoot seems to ration it. I am getting muscles where I did not even know it was possible. I am finding working on the pueblo is now one of my favorite activities. Okay, I am molding designs in the clay. I try to do it in secret, but some of the others have caught me and now they hide my secret from the teachers.

Snake 2.0

I have a feeling that I will always be an outsider. Not that things were great in San Jose. Aside from the gangs, I am small, overweight by California standards, art nut, hate sports, etc. No friends, did not fit in. Most people thought I was Mexican. I really did not know any different. My parents were gone most of my life. They both worked two minimum wage jobs as soon as I could get around on my own, just to make it work. I should appreciate their sacrifice, but I really don't remember them. When they were home they were exhausted.

Hell, Ms. Lightfoot has spent more time with me outside of school than I ever remember my parents did. Having a little sister, Dory, is great too. We can talk about anything. Amazing that she accepted me so easily, being an apple, red on the outside and white on the inside. Fewer and fewer of the others call me that.

Both Dory and I keep a low profile, but I am the only one with such an obvious spirit guide. Most other people have wild animals as guides and they specifically have to leave the developed area to meet with them. They can't even be sure it is the same turtle, fox, rabbit as the last time. I am sure there is a certain amount of jealousy.

Took me awhile to get used to the diet. Tastes good, but highly repetitive and ah, at least until my gut got used to it, a lot of gas. Beans, ah wonderful beans. Like I needed another thing to be embarrassed about. Even Owa stayed a bit away during the worst of it. Dory just giggled and sometimes let out a toot herself. That made Owa leave the room and sleep in the hallway. Of course the boys relished in making as much noise as possible.

I got to learn how to card wool and deseed cotton, making yarn out of both and making small projects on a Hopi loom. I am better at drawing, painting and clay than yarn, but it was a lot of fun. Speaking of clay I really liked the black clay work with the carved icons. Just gorgeous. However, that was the sole right of a different clan, so off limits. They were really serious about these artistic separations. I resented it, but I also understood. I could not claim all art as my own. It was important for others to be able to express themselves as well. Still, I loved the work and traded as much as I could to obtain a few pieces I kept on my desk in the bedroom. Dory like pottery also, but liked the red form better, oh and leather for some reason. Hopi used deer skin, but not much else.

Silver was also off limits. That really hurt, not that I would ever be

able to afford the materials. I finally was able to obtain a small bear that I wore around my neck. That would have to be enough.

Drawing was my real talent. I liked the iconography, but I was still better at the more realistic works. I still occasionally go back to the iron oxide paints and my iron oxide colored clay animals are well received.

The strange thing is that my ability to read people did get better. Ms. Lightfoot and Owa could not explain it. Usually it is either one way or the other. Did not follow the sequence in the strange books either. Neither would admit if the books were real or not. Just said it was different each time, whatever that meant. I did notice the books mentioned another Owa Moosa, also a large gray colored cat from near here. Owa claims no connection. She was a kitten when named by Ms. Lightfoot. Maybe she did it as a joke. The books are hers. I am sure she read them long before Owa showed up. Yeah, I also found Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones figured into the tales.

Being able to read people was not used to spy on anyone, but to avoid conflict. I could tell even before a person entered a room that they were upset and why. Strong emotions were the easiest to read. Some of the older students were sex crazy, but that just bored me. Dory found out quick enough and I could read her the easiest outside of Ms. Lightfoot and Owa of course. We used it to pull pranks on the boys from time to time. Not often enough to make them suspicious though. That would destroy the advantage. Dory could mask her thoughts with effort that got easier with time. I used the same technique to hide thoughts from Owa when I needed to. Not that I believed it. I suspected that she was just pretending not to read me when I did not want her to, but still did to keep me safe.

I did not have any more trouble the Karate kid and her gang other than being totally ignored and shunned. That was fine with me and I returned the favor. I could read that she hated that. The whole point of being a bully was to be noticed if not envied, at least feared.

Or so I thought. With time we monkeys get careless. Dory warned me not to, but it was months and it was the beginning of summer. We had heat in San Jose, it frequently got to 105 and spent most of the summer in the 90s, but here it got to 120 at times and regularly spent the heat of the day over a hundred. What was really impressive was the buildings. All were eighteen inch thick adobe. Mr. Stevenson explained it to me, as the others already knew this, was that being this thick the adobe was closer to the ground temperature. That meant cool in the summer and warm in the winter. For free! Well, if you discount the cost of arm muscle labor to

make the bricks. Worth every bit in my opinion. Home seemed far way during the hottest days even though in the winter it seemed really close.

With spring and then summer come fresh vegetables, corn, melons dripping in sweetness, baby sheep and lots of wildlife. After the last rain all the wildflowers bloomed at once. I had never seen anything like it. My classmates teases me about being under the influence of flowers for a week afterwards. I filled a notebook with wildflower drawings. A welcome distraction from the growing heat. There is so much to see outside, but I want to be inside to avoid the heat. I can't imagine what July and August will be like.

"Dory, I am getting nervous. It has been months and nothing from the evil ones."

"Maybe they have given up on you. There are still rumblings of other little ones being harassed. Not as many and nothing proved of course."

"Could be the council came down hard on them and they don't want to risk it. It was only fun for them while they could get away with it. The problem is, where do they go from here. From bullying to what?"

"Drugs or booze are the usual options here."

"Do we really need the Karate Kids hyped on meth?"

"No we don't. That would likely result in someone dying. Maybe one of us even. I am sure they are mad as hell and just looking for a time and place."

"That's what worries me. Common sense goes out the window with meth. But how does Owa protect both of us. They would not stop with just getting me if they thought getting you would mess with me too."

"Thanks sis. I really needed to hear that. How do you make a shiv again? No bamboo here, but I am sure mesquite wood would do."

"The council stomped on that too. And both of us are being watched. Someone would likely see it eventually and turn us in."

You can hear Dory and she can you. If one gets into trouble all of us will know. You are not alone.

"You heard that? And the evil ones don't know this."

She nods and adds, "You think. I am sure we have done stuff accidentally that tip us off. Be careful." I nod and sigh.

Did I ever tell you are about the great cat fight on 1st Mesa?

"With your size advantage I am sure it was a fair fight."

There were ten of them.

"All wanting to mate with you? So they were really fighting each other, not you."

They have to fight me too if they want to mate.

Dory chimes in, "I don't really want to hear this. I am still at the Hopi Princess stage of life." She covers her ears like that would help.

Ms. Lightfoot comes in, "Have you seen the boys?"

"Baseball practice?" Dory offers.

More likely trouble. The male monkeys are the worst.

Can't argue with that, only the evil ones give me pause.

"While we have a chance, let us girls have a talk." Owa yawns and starts to curl up.

"Oh no you don't, this involves you too. You play an essential part."

"Ah oh." Dory, you are picking up some of the San Jose lingo.

"I too am concerned about Marie and company."

"Can't you read her thoughts or something?"

"Everyone is entitled to their privacy."

"Lightfoot speak for we need to come up with another plan."

"Lightfoot speak for we need to do the work ourselves." Hmmm.

"A hint maybe?"

"Lay out as much as you can first. What is important to you. What do you believe in for self, others and the clan/tribe. What do you want for Marie and friends."

"If you mean revenge, sorry not interested. I saw so much tit for tat in the San Jose gangs to last twenty lifetimes. Really, really stupid."

"Hmm, think Marie understands that?" Dory shakes her head no.

"I have been 'back' for months and have not done a thing to the evil, I mean Marie. If I think the way she does, then she must be going crazy waiting for me to strike. She knows that with Owa I am certainly strong enough."

"You mean all this time we have been getting more and more nervous all the time she has been too."

"Maybe. I did not read her mind."

"We could just sit down with her and explain we have no interest in revenge. Problem solved."

"Dory, I am afraid in gang speak that means you really intend to get them and you purposely are trying to make them sweat."

"Why do you think Marie is a gang member? We don't have gangs here."

Ms. Lightfoot raises an eyebrow. Dory look sheepish.

"Well in awhile anyway."

"We need to think. What is best for the community? I think the community wants to avoid conflict. Hopi are known for their peacefulness, for working things out."

“Good. What does Marie want?”

Dory, “Huh, what do you mean? She is a bully. She must like doing it to have done this to so many of us.”

“Really? That’s all she wants? That is the only reason?”

“People cause pain because they are in pain.”

“Good Dory. That’s a start. What could be causing Marie pain?”

This is taking too long. *Hush, she needs to learn too.*

“Someone else did her wrong. Probably family or a close friend. Maybe she was bullied as a child. Her mother or older sibling.”

“Good.”

Aaaah, “What would make Marie happy?”

“Well, we can’t take away the pain that already happened.”

Then it hits me big time. Really big time. I know the answer.

“Shit, it is really obvious isn’t it. How could I be so stupid?”

“We are all blinded by our own pain.”

Dory is confused, “What is it? What are you talking about?”

Funny how all of us are now comfortable with the I and you words.

Side issue. Right.

“Marie needs to be our teacher. Our Sensei.”

Ms. Lightfoot nods, “Go on. Fill Dory in.” Dory is in the state of shock.

“Marie was raped. She needs to be able to teach us how to stop it from happening again, to anyone. To us. This is why she is showing us our vulnerability. It was supposed to be a wake up call.” Ms. Lightfoot smiles.

“How do we do that.”

“I have a plan. It will involve everyone, or hopefully everyone.”

I go on to describe what I think we should do. Details are worked out. We work to set it in motion.

Sensei

“They are coming! Shush!”

From inside the school assembly hall we hear, “There is no one here. What’s going on?”

“Just sit on the three chairs provided please.”

“Are we being punished for something?”

“No, be patient please. All will become clear.” The sound of the male teacher leaving the room.

“Wait just a bit,” I whisper to Dory, “Slowly. Dignified.”

She is already nervous dear.

She looks to us and Ms. Lightfoot nods it is time.

Dory quietly open the door and with bare feet walks slowly up the front of the room about ten feet in front of the three. Marie is showing no emotion. Surely she knows Dory, but no idea what is going on. Is this a trap. Dory all alone in a room with them?

Dory lowers herself to the floor and plants her face on the floor.

Another student comes in another door. Another from another door. All take their place in the hall and face down on the floor.

Slowly the room fills. I still can’t believe so many went along with this crazy idea.

There are two empty spots to the right of Dory’s left. I take a deep breath and enter the room. I put myself face down next to Dory. Owa comes next. I hear a slight intake of breath. Owa does the same as us to the right of me. We are a solid block of female students now.

Wait for it.

I know what to do.

Ms. Crow Feather comes in and takes a place in the back of us. She does the same. More teachers come in. Finally Ms. Lightfoot takes her place. All of the female students and teachers are now assembled. No males.

I start, “Who has been raped?” I raise my hand along with nineteen other students. Ten percent of us. There are tears in my eyes. I know Ms. Lightfoot has raised her hand too, along with three other teachers.

Dory, “Who has been threatened with rape?” She raises her hand. Now a third of the room and all of the teachers have hands in the air.

Sylvy, “Who has been threatened with violence unless the will of a male is followed.” Everyone else raises their hand. So much for the peaceful Hopi. To their credit, the main threat of rape is not from a Hopi

male, though it has happened, but from white tourists hoping for some native experience. Owa's paw is also up. I am shocked.

I thought you were always in control.

I am now, but I was little once.

Pre-chicken surprise no doubt. Sorry, I should not tease about this.

No.

"Why are you here? What do you want?" I sense confusion. Not fear.

I slap my hand to the floor and as one we chant, "We are not prey. Never again. Teach us Sensei."

"What I know is useless against a gun." Only whites would threaten with a gun and they are hard to smuggle onto the rez. We have something equivalent to air port security since 911. There are guns, only a few, but only to protect herds and family against the few predators of the non-human kind. Any Hopi using a gun on another would be worse than dead.

Sylvy slaps her hand. "We are not prey. Never again. Teach us Sensei."

"If I teach you, it will require a great deal of work, both physical and mental. Few of you will succeed."

Ms. Lightfoot slaps her hand. "We are not prey. Never again. Teach us Sensei."

"You have asked three times. I know your interest is true. It will be challenged. Rise."

We rise, tears flowing freely from my eyes and I sense from others. There were so many other ways this could have gone.

We bow as one, "Thank you Sensei."

"Logistics, how will this work? We all have school, jobs, chores, duties."

"Sensei, may I speak?"

She nods to me.

I answer, "School is nearly done for the year. We have one month free from all other duties. This will be our dojo, our existence."

"Not possible to teach Kung Fu in one month. Impossible." All this time I assumed it was karate.

"We seek not perfection. We know that will take time. We seek a start. We are not prey. We seek the ability to defend ourselves. Never again be victims. We know now that is what you have been trying to teach us. We know now you teach from love. We know now you teach the Hopi way."

There is shock and tears in her eyes now too, but she holds it together.

"Where are the males?"

Ms. Lightfoot asks, "Sensei may I answer?"

Shock that a teacher would ask permission to speak from her, she nods slowly.

“You have seen the hands. Everyone of us has been at least threatened. This is not Hopi. The males, all of them. The entire tribe in fact. They are doing all of our chores as well as their own. They will make all the meals we eat as well as the meals for those women not here. They will wash our robes.” She points to the boxes of what contain our robes and white belts. “They will undergo training themselves on what it means to be a Hopi man. To abstain from alcohol, from violence except in the defense of self or others, to be caring, serving, to take nothing for granted. That you must ask AND receive permission.”

“What about the cat? I will work Sue Bear hard. No interference.”

“Owa is here to learn, same as all of us. She was raped as a youngster. You got our attention, finally, with your method, but we are not prey, never again, applies here too. You earned your black belt. That means you are qualified to teach us. You have something to prove too. So teach us. Trust works both ways.” She bows.

“Fair enough. Let us begin. These two will act as my assistants as they are further along in their training. You will obey them as you would me unless overruled by me. First lesson, how to show respect and care for your robe. When you don the robe, you show your respect for your learning and for your teacher. Disrespect the robe and you will leave. No questions asked.

Respect is easy. Don't talk back. Ask permission. When in doubt, bow. Bow to your teachers, each other, the robe, to the toilet even. You are shocked. Do you not appreciate a clean toilet? Disrespect the toilet and you will be digging a hole outside in full view of everyone. If you value someone's or something's existence, bow to it. We will eat and sleep here. The floor is our training pad and your bed. The three of us were be right here with you.”

“Don your robes and practice your bowing. Frog and Rat will assist. I need to talk with the cooks. Training diet is, ah, different.” She smiles. What have we done?

We bow to the boxes of robes. To the robes, the white belts, to each other, the floor, the doors, to Frog and Rat (Trying to keep straight faces). Punishment is push-ups. We need to increase our upper body strength.

There is no dinner. We will eat only at breakfast after a five mile run, barefoot in our robes. Fortunately it is not winter and we run along pretty clean paths. All the same, enough sharp little rocks that all of us are sore and bleeding. I never knew five miles was so far either. Bow to the blood.

Last meal of the day is lunch, also the largest meal. We are allowed a short nap afterwards, then dojo practice, followed by cleaning the dojo. Mostly from the blood stains today anyway. Not easy.

I don't even remember falling asleep. No robe for Owa, but she wears a smaller white belt around her left front leg. She has to put it on herself, which as you can imagine is not easy for a Cat. We are forbidden to talk to each other and Ms. Lightfoot enforces our not using mind speak. Not fair to the others. I can't help but pick up some things, but I try my best to use blocking effect of white noise think to keep it down. I am really too tired anyway.

A few days in Marie takes me aside.

"I know it was you who did this. Why?"

"I was gang raped at fourteen. I can't even tell you how many there were. Took me nearly a year to get over the physical effects. I get here and within two days I am nearly raped by my own uncle, probably with the urging of my aunt. I learn this is because of why my mother and her sister, my aunt, did to each other before I was even born. My parents are dead. I thought the bamboo shiv was enough, but it was a bluff and you saw right through it. That means others would too. Now I have Owa, but I can't depend on Owa always being there as much as I love her. I don't want to be dependent on anyone.

I had no problem getting the others on board. I thought that except for your bullying, this was paradise. When Dory and I went around we found out that every female had experiences. Rape was usually by tourists, but threats, whether from drunk or sober males, was universal. This is the 21st century. We, the Hopi, are the best group I have ever experienced, but we are far from perfect as I now know.

It was me who guessed that you too have had these experiences and you were not trying to hurt anyone permanently, you obviously could have, had you wanted to, but to get our attention. I needed that wake up call. I really did. Given my past you would have thought it obvious. Owa helped me hide from it for a time, not intentionally, but it finally got in.

I used to fear you, but now I thank you from the core of my being. I sincerely hope that this class will change you too. You have our attention and deep respect. By your helping in this way you will change the entire Hopi nation. Who knows, maybe even the Navajo will learn something too."

"Tell no one. This is a test I will hold you to. I was molested by my father for five years. When the council finally did something they banned him from the rez and he died from liver problems a few years ago. My

mother, whom he beat, is barely able to take care of herself because of the guilt she suffers from what happened. I have no brothers, but he was just starting to go after my sister when he was banned. She is Frog. Rat is a close friend who knows also and grew up with us. We three are the only ones you can talk to about this.

I was sent to China to learn Kung Fu from a master there who was originally Hopi and decided to stay. The council would have preferred something less violent, like Akido, but this is the connection they had, tribal finances being what they are. I resisted of course, but later found I liked it. My guess is the reason the council approved was because it was their intent that all this happen from the beginning, though I did not know it of course. I was a test case. Any idiot can see we have a problem here. As with most forms of all male government, they also needed a wake up call. I have been back for nearly two years and until you woke them up, nothing. All I could get for students were the two you met. It was a start, but this needed to go a lot farther. Guess we need each other then.

Don't think this will get you out of any work."

"I know why I am here. I want it never to happen again. That is all the incentive I need."

"And the cat, sorry, I mean Owa?"

"We both know that this training is not foolproof. An unexpected knife, blow to the head, or even a gun can still be effective. We have to sleep. I really hope that the training the men get also works. As to Owa, she cannot depend on just claw and tooth either. A few good moves would aid her when she is out hunting and runs into a pack of coyotes. She can't exactly carry and use a gun."

"She is not just a cat. Too big to be a house cat or even a barn cat. Not a puma. Head shape is wrong, though not by much. What breed is she?"

"Best guess is a short haired Maine Coon who ate too much chicken surprise growing up. Our secret, you can get her to do anything for chicken surprise."

She laughs, "Not exactly a Hopi dish, but good to know. How are we going to teach her to spar. I only know people moves. Though most of those are based on knowledge of how certain animals do things."

"You know a lot. All those push-ups. That and after pushing around adobe mud for months, my arms are really getting strong. Pound for pound she is stronger than any of us, but she has gotten out of shape too, hanging around Hu, I mean humans too long. Spoiled. Actually when you think about it, she is more likely to get in trouble from a human protecting their ranch than a coyote. In the dark, all large cats look the

same.”

“I am thinking it might be best not to make you orange belt Kung Fu, but concentrate more on self defense. Form can come later for those who are interested.”

“That makes sense.”

“We had better get back to the rest. They may get the idea we have killed each other.”

“Not a chance Sensei. Owa would be here feasting on our remains.”

She laughs, then gets serious again.

“Just to make this look good, give me twenty.” I drop and she goes back into the hall.

Twenty is no big deal now. Would have killed me in San Jose.

There are no men in our household of course, just the two boys. They do their best to take on three nearly grown women, but it really is too much. Fortunately, while we are in the dojo, others come in and help out. The boys mainly act as our servants. Serving us meals and cleaning up afterwards. Both sides are under strict orders not to speak to each other and only to our own gender when in private. I am guessing that part of their training is to learn how to anticipate our needs. Not to take us for granted.

Back in our own room again and now free to talk, I make the observation, “This was too easy.”

“Too easy! Are you insane. I hurt in places I did not know I had. I imagine I would have hurt less being beaten up in the restroom than to suffer this.”

“There have been a few sprains from falling wrong. That is normal under this intensity of training I would imagine. There have been no new attacks of the bullying or sexual kind at least.

It would seem to be too fast. Every female in the room raised their hand at one point. How do you turn around a group of people in the thousands that fast? This is too fast. There will be a reckoning. Something is going to happen.”

“Then we need to be vigilant. Warn the others to be the same.”

“Yes. Yes we do.”

“We could use our trick?”

“Ms. Lightfoot told us not to.”

“She meant we could not use the talent to be ahead of the rest of the class. To read each others moves before they acted. That would be cheating. This is more about saving the tribe. If someone is attacked, this whole thing could fall apart. People would lose belief that this is working

or has any value.”

“Are you sure you are only thirteen?” I smile.

“Fourteen in a few weeks.”

“God, I will be seventeen before next school term starts too.”

“Where is Owa? I thought she was your shadow.”

“Maybe she thinks I can take care of myself now that Marie is not an actual threat.”

“Now we know she is not the one we have to worry about, it is actually scarier. Look at us. We are midgets. A fly could take us out. All it would take is a good size stick. Those are all over around here. Would not even have to bring it with you. Just a lucky break for the predator. Thunk and rape. Easy peasy.”

“Aren’t we a ball of fun tonight. We best get some rest at least to let the bruises heal some. Remember, we are not prey.” She laughs at this in a mocking way. And not all men are predators. Hmm, maybe I should be a praying mantis or black widow in my next life.

I have been supplementing my diet. Need more protein.

Of the rat kind you mean. Surprised there are any left in five mile radius around the house.

There aren’t any. Going for abandoned children now. She licks her lips.

I hope she is kidding. Even I could not argue for her under those conditions.

Okay to kill Cats, but not Hu? Hypocrites.

You are not eating people are you?

Just young white males. No one will miss them.

“Owa, you can’t eat people!”

“What did you say? Go back to sleep. You must be having a nightmare.” Dory rolls over.

Not eating people, but made you think. Just like this self defense effort. Males think they have the right to treat females this way. Hu think they have the right to kill any Cat they do not like.

You do have a point. We will try and see that others hear it too. Now, can I go to sleep please? I have another five mile run in the morning. And calluses on calluses on my feet (and hands).

I was just learning to get good at cooking the Hopi way when the males took this treat away from me. They are trying so hard though. So tired. Must stop thinking.

We wake to pots being hit and bells going off.

“What the hell is all this about?”

“You have not been through one before. A fire drill. I hope. Could be a real fire I suppose. They like to spring these once in awhile to keep us prepared.”

“Well, we best get dressed and outside then.”

“Girls, we need to leave now,” we hear Ms. Lightfoot tell us outside the door.

“Merow!!!!” Oh, not you too.

I'm just a humble old kitty, not worthy of attention by a human.

“Stop it Owa. Not now. Let's get out of here.”

We are all dressed in our training robes. I doubt we are getting out of our run over this.

People are gathered outside in the central meeting place for emergencies. Sort of part way to the school. If school was in session we would be able to see the students from here. That makes sense. Everyone would want to know they were alright.

There are team leaders who go around and count heads and check us off some list they have.

“Grace Stone? Has anyone seen Grace Stone?” Everyone looks around, but no one says they have.

Mr. Feather Black motions for the three of us to follow him, motioning the boys to stay behind. We make our way to her house and he knocks on the door. No answer.

“The three of you go in. Being a male it would be better for women to go in to preserve her privacy in case something has happened.”

Ms. Lightfoot reaches for the door. It is unlocked. Most of us leave our doors unlocked. Sounds kind of crazy now, given what we know and needing the defense training and all, but a lot of places don't have locks or have lost the keys. Just not Hopi to need locks.

She goes in and we follow. The place is a mess. Everyone seems to have been knocked over.

“Grace, are you here?”

“Over here. Come quick. I need help.”

We go into her bedroom. That is scary. I am not sure I want to see this.

We see Ms. Stone and she looks fine.

Confused I ask, “Where are you hurt?”

“Oh not me,” she says smiling, “him.” She points to the floor. There is a man face down, at least unconscious, hopefully not dead. He is breathing at least. I sigh.

He moans and tried to move. Ms. Stone puts a foot on his back, “Not so fast. There are others here now to collect you. Behave yourself unless

you want some more pain. These three are even better than me in Kung Fu.” She is smiling when she says this.

Dory runs outside to collect Mr. Black. He comes in slowly. Dory must have filled him in.

“How did the mess happen?”

“What mess?” He point to the main room.

She laughs, “That’s not a mess. That’s just the way I live. Not everyone is a neat nick.”

“What happened?”

“I came out of the toilet room and he was waiting for me. I asked who he was and he said nothing, but came at me. Tore my dress before I reacted. Did not know what hit him. Told my little one to ring the alarm bell. Too young to understand what all this is about. Figured someone would eventually get here.”

Mr. Black rolls him over, “Navajo from the clothing and look. We best take him to the authorities.” He reaches down and grabs him by the hand, “Up you go. Ms. Stone, best come with us to make a statement. Good work I will say. He has weight and strength on you.” He looks at the three of us, “And you all can do this?” We nod seriously.

They leave with the attacker in hand. Mr. Black nods to the leader and the all clear is given.

“All right maggots, let’s get to our run.” Sigh, I really hoped. Oh well.

It is one thing to take on a stray hungover drunk in the early morning, who may have only have been looking for a warm place to rest, and entirely another thing if someone is ready for you and you specifically. I am under no illusion that all this has gone without any resentment from anyone. Power is addicting to some. If you have ever tried to take away from someone that which they are addicted to you will unveil the monster. It is a total shock the first time you see the monster, largely because it is so unexpected. Someone who can be the nicest person you ever met becomes a hell beast in a second.

In the dojo Marie gets mad at us, “Maggots, you are still thinking about what you are doing. If you take time to think, you are dead or worse. Stop thinking, do! Again! Don’t stress the mistakes, just keep going. This has to go from head knowledge to bone knowledge. So deep it is beyond understanding, beyond knowing. It is! No separation.”

No separation. That concept has a ton of meaning to me. This is something I know deep. Kung Fu is not movement, it is art! Owa looks at me strangely. She has been having a hard time sparing with Hu. We move wrong to her. At the same time, sparing with her I am learning cat moves.

Excuse me, Cat moves.

I get in the flow, 'me' disappears, I become one with movement. An art, just like drawing or painting, a dance, 4D as they used to say among the nerds of San Jose glued to video games.

I stop. There is no one facing me any longer. I quickly turn around in one fluid motion. No one. Everyone is at least ten feet away. Marie is staring at me. When she noticed me looking at her, she bows. I bow in return and the dance begins again.

"Amazing!" I hear someone whisper, "No one has gone this long against her before." This distracts me enough that I am floored.

I rise and bow to Sensei. Takes me a moment to come back to reality.

"This is what I mean. This is where you need to be. All of you should be able to do this."

"Sensei, what is this?" Sensei looks to me to answer.

"Most of you know me. I am the Bear Girl. I realized this was exactly the same thing. When I draw or paint 'I' am no longer present. It is as Sensei said, stop thinking. In the restroom, it was Bear appearing. Not before me, not in my head. Simply being. Same here."

"Before you get any ideas, she lasted as long as she did because I was testing her, slowly applying more moves to see how she would respond. If I was a real attacker with my current abilities, she would not have lasted three seconds. However, I guarantee you she could take on anyone else here. Anyone." She looks at Frog and Rat.

"Ms. Stone was really lucky. The next one won't be. Be awake! This is not over. No one can get complacent." Ever again actually. If males kill each other over nonsensical wars, greed and stupidity, they are not going to get over beating us any time soon.

"Men are not stupid. They will start learning martial arts now too. Or Kendo, stick work, or knives or worse. If someone really wants to get you, they will. All we are doing here is stop the casual abuser. The one who can easily be dissuaded. The ninety percent who are only reacting to an opportunity where they think they can get away with it. Ten percent will get through. Someone in the room is going to be raped, likely within the next year or sooner. It will happen."

"Sensei, what else can we do then? Even if we had guns, as you said earlier, we have to sleep."

"This is life. You can never reduce the odds to zero, you can only reduce the odds. A lock on your house means the thief goes to the unlocked one. Once everyone has a lock, then they go to the one with the weakest lock, or the one that offer a greater reward to be worth the extra

effort.” Shit. It really never ends.

“Or we change people so ALL people are respected. All are valued. Those that do stray are dealt with by the entire community, not just the victim alone. Or course this is for us and not the people outside the tribe who never got the training and are not part of our community and do not suffer the consequences of such.”

She continues, “Shit happens. People are attacked. People get sick. We get old. We all die. We strive to make the journey as pleasant as possible, but everyone suffers pain. Everyone will suffer tragedy in their life.

Now back to work. Vacation over. Pair off and again.”

No one comes near me. Marie pushes Frog and Rat towards me. They are very hesitant. They decide to face me as a pair.

Owa comes up to be with me and they back off again. To be fair, she does not use claws here. In a real fight the razors come out. This is more counting coo than doing damage.

I finally shrug and face Owa. We bow and begin. She is so fast, but I know Cat. She is easy to distract and attack from another angle. This is no dance like with Hu opponents. More play. We are soon rolling around on the ground together. Not exactly proper Kung Fu.

One month goes by incredibly fast. I have more one on ones with Marie. None of the others except Owa want to spar with me. Kung Fu has some real advantages over Karate. Karate is more pure, you use only your hands and feet, but Kung Fu is more adaptive. Anything around you can be used to assist you in your effort. Think Jackie Chan movies. Never knew that was a modern adaptation of Kung Fu. The movies always seemed silly to me. Lots of kids in the hood would practice the moves they saw in the latest movies with lots of broken bones as a consequence. If you ever get a chance to see the outtakes you realize even Mr. Chan himself cannot do these moves unless they are precisely set up and practiced many times, with lots of redos.

Our last day arrives. We are all gathered in the dojo hall.

“I have been in contact with Kung Fu masters in China so you know what I am about to do comes with their approval. Frog and Rat come forward.” They present themselves in front of Sensei.

“You have worked hard and have achieved the next rank of orange belt. Come forward and exchange your belts.” They do so. That was really not a surprise. Guess we go now. We have only been here a month after all. I am expecting our lessons to continue for at least a year before we too are awarded a yellow belt, the next one after white, like Frog and

Rat were wearing when we started.

Boxes are brought in and left next to Sensei. Guess we give up our robes now.

Sensei steps forward and bows to us. We bow in return. Instinct now. I think nothing of it.

“All of you are hereby awarded the yellow belt for your effort and proof of skill. Well done.” She bows again, as do we. Frog and Rat and Sensei go around and hand out yellow belts. Those who receive their belt then help hand out yellow ones to the rest of us. A silly thing really, but it feels good to have some recognition. We did work very hard. I am happy to be wearing my yellow belt.

“The international league did not understand we had a special participant and were not sure what to do to show respect for her effort. We came to a compromise. Owa Moosa, please come forward. You are hereby awarded the first ever silver belt for the Cat lineage. May you start many others in this new effort of understanding.” She bows to Owa, who startled remembers to bow in return.

Not dignified for a Cat to bow to a Hu.

Be a good kitty and accept your honor. How many other honors have you got from a room of Hu? You have been bowing for a month. Get over it.

Everyone has started to talk among themselves. We all have new yellow belts now. Sensei stomps her foot on the wood floor. No one misses it and shuts up and comes to attention and bows.

“We have one more honor to bestow. Though this honor does not have much precedent, it has happened before. Please welcome Sensei Hang Miao from the Shanghi dojo.” A wizened old man comes in slowly. I am under no illusion though. I can see from his markings he is a tenth degree black belt. How did we get his attention? He speaks in Chinese to Sensei, which I am surprised that she answers in after bowing to him. He bows back. Sensei then motions to Frog and Rat to clear a space on the floor.

“Owa and Bear come forward please and prepare to spar.”

This is weird. Why would the Master want to see us spar. It is more play than anything serious anyway. This will be embarrassing. We come forward and face each other and bow. We wait.

“Begin.” Sensei says and we bow again and begin. As this is serious I go into my fugue mode and the room disappears. As expected we spar to a draw after what must have been just a few minutes. I am not sure. The match is called and we stop and bow to each other. Sensei whispers something to Owa and she backs away. Master nods approvingly to Owa.

Don't get cocky. He does not know you can read him.

I am not a kitten and value my own survival. Worry more about what comes next for you little one.

Huh?

As Owa leaves, Sensei comes and takes her place and bows to me. Shit. I bow back and the Master calls the start. We bow again and begin. I fugue instantly this time. I am getting much faster at doing this thanks to all this practice.

The dance we do is beautiful. A work of art. Everything goes very smoothly as we go through all the forms Sensei has been working with me on. We near the end of the forms taught, but we do not stop. She throws new forms at me and I instinctively react in the proper way to continue the dance. There is a logic, such as all art has, that brings beauty to the whole. The dance stops and I am actually disappointed. With a barely audible sigh, I stop and bow to Sensei.

She backs away and the Master comes to take her place and bows.

I take a step back, "Master, I am not worthy. I have no desire to be humiliated in front of the others. I am sorry, but I cannot spar you."

I barely recognizable English he answers, "I old man. No threat. We dance for beauty, not winner/loser. Understand?"

"For beauty then." I bow to him. We begin. Shit, he is very fast. Who would have known this was possible. I stumble over a simple move and he waits for us to begin again. This time I do not assume anything.

By the time we stop I am covered in sweat and have never been happier in my life. It was so beautiful. All my life I thought of paper and clay as the only possible art forms. Even music was second place to the visual. But what just happened. There are tears of joy in my eyes.

The Master looks at me confused, "Did hurt you?"

"No Master. I am very, very happy. It was beautiful."

He turns and bows to Sensei who bows back and nods.

"Ms. Bear, please come forward." I am confused, but do as asked.

"What master did you study under before coming here. I understand in San Jose you start?"

"I have never done Kung Fu before a month ago. Or any physical art form. Sensei is my only teacher Master. I don't understand. Did I do something wrong?" He shakes his head no. That is universal at least.

"Have question. Can teach what you do?" He looks hopeful.

I shake my head, "I am sixteen, almost seventeen. I have never taught anyone anything that I am aware of. I would not know where to begin."

"You do art on wall?"

“You mean the Bear. Yes. The strangest thing is that this is the same. It feels the same.” He nods he understands.

“Sensei Marie, come forward please.”

She comes forward and bows.

“Most unusual. You are hereby awarded a fourth degree black belt for your effort in teaching so many so quickly. Remarkable. You shame your classmates back in Shanghi Dojo.” She came in as a first degree. Quite a jump.

She bows, but says, “I am not worthy of the honor Master. It was very much a group effort. Everyone here, all two hundred women and girls, are highly motivated to learn as quickly as possible. They ate, drank, breathed Kung Fu. A total immersion learning.”

“As you also did in China. I know. Was there.” He smiles and hands her the belt. She accepts and bows in return.

He then turns to me.

“What are we to do with this one then?”

He continues without taking his eyes off of me, “Minimum three years reach first black belt. Your sensei did in two. One addition year for each of next two belts. Your sensei has done three steps less than one. No one in my lifetime has done.”

He bows to me, “Deeply honored to meet little one with such big heart before death.” He bows again. I am mirroring his bows to me each time.

“Technique is of level ten black belt. Normally take fifty years. Alas, no teaching experience. Therefore I hope you accept this token of respect that no way reflects perfection achieved.” He bows and hands me a black belt. First degree.

“I don’t understand.” I am crying now as much from confusion as anything else.

“Once in thousand years, one such as you is born. No one knows why. It happens. Kung Fu not about destroying enemy. Best fighter not highest. Beauty more important. You beauty. You Kung Fu.”

“I did not try for this. I did nothing special for me.”

“No one understands. Be happy, be Hopi!” I nearly break out in a laugh. He finally smiles at me too and then we both laugh.

He whispers to me, “You understand, can still be killed?”

“I understand. If anything I am more a target than before.”

“Yes.” He nods he is happy that I understand.

“I am hungry. Time to eat. Sorry, know last meal was at midday, but this one is jet lagged. Something ancients never had worry for. Oh well.”

He claps and as must have been previously arranged, males come in with celebration cakes. This time they do not leave and everyone is allowed to talk to everyone.

Dory comes up to me, "Hope not get fat head from belt." She mocks the Master's accent.

"Not with you around to remind me."

Owa remind daily.

Both Dory and I laugh. Owa licks herself in the naughty bits.

They itch. What do you do? She looks up at us with her tongue sticking out. We just laugh and shove cake in each other's mouths.

Marie comes up to me and bows. But as teacher to student. She is still my superior.

"Practice will resume Monday, Wednesday and Fridays at 3pm. Do not be late. Pass it on."

I bow respectively, "Yes Sensei."

Servitude

We gather around the outdoor open area. Impromptu meetings are often held here, so I do not think anything of it. The speaker, who we used to call Thunder Eggs, on account of his way with ladies, is in front. Wearing normal farm clothing, so again, laid back. Not a ceremony then.

He gets up to speak, “We have made great progress in the last ten years. Though not traditionalists in the old ways, we have become more sustainable. I really thought we were finally getting back to our roots. They way Hopi should be. We should be proud of what we have accomplished in so short a period of time.

Recently though, we had an incident. A small awakening.

A young lady, a full blood Hopi, and how many of us can claim that privilege. She came to our reservation from deep tragedy and hardship. Her parents died in a horrible car crash, not their fault. Suddenly with no one else to claim her, she made her way to us on her own, at sixteen. She figured out bus routes, food, people she did not know and is learning our ways, ways she never knew existed. Total culture shock as they used to say.

Two days, only two days after getting here, already working in the Cultural center at an energy level that would put any of us to shame, enrolled in school, living in one of the old shacks, she was nearly raped by her own uncle.

A city girl we all thought. Did not understand what her uncle intended. Maybe she was even asking for it to get a better living situation. I mean, how many city girls have to use or even know what an outhouse is, much less ever used one. We know, we know, how city girls are.

Only she did tell the truth, her uncle and aunt were working together to get her to leave. A long standing family anger. An anger our new member knew nothing about, was forced on her against her will.

A second misunderstanding, being abused by another high school student when she was at her weakest, caused a mental breakdown we all know resulted in the truly remarkable spiritual work of art. I could go on, but that would be off topic.

This same young woman, came to us recently, thankful of what had happened with the women who beat her up. Can you believe that? She was thankful. How many of us would feel the same? We followed her suggestion. This is what we found, all at her urging.

We asked the women and young ladies of our nation, who of you have

been raped? Fifteen percent said they had. Fifteen percent admitted this. This is not easy to admit. I suspect the number is much higher. When asked who had been almost raped, over thirty percent said they had experienced this fearful, humiliating act. When asked who has been threatened with violence by a male. All said that they had. Including girls as young as twelve.

Is this the progress we are so proud of? Does anyone present think these are good numbers? Does anyone here think that this reflects well on the Hopi Nation? Does anyone think the press will ignore these data?" No one raises their hand. We all thought we were gathering for some kind of special men's meeting. If hell is special, I think we are in it.

"Over the next two months we are going to change our thinking, our way of interacting with others, our way of interacting with woman, with all life. This will not be easy.

For the next month we are forbidden to say anything to any woman, young or old. Nothing. They will not speak to us either. You may talk to another man in private when no woman can hear you. Only then. This will be extended to two months if needed.

There is more. Much more. We will do all the woman's chores. Two hundred women are doing their own retreat. If you see anyone about in a white robe you are to pretend they do not exist. To you they do not. All other women know of our task. We will do all the cooking, cleaning, changing diapers, collect groceries, for both men and women. If something needs doing and it is not done, it is our fault."

He smiles, "We will still do all of our normal chores as well."

Many are mumbling that, "This is not possible. The harvest is happening. We are already exhausted as it is."

"Really? Our life here is not that hard. We get up well past sunrise. When was the last time any of use greeted the sunrise as our ancestors did? Breakfast is waiting for us. We mosey out to the garden patch and shoot the bull with our neighbors talking about the lack of rain, the dog's latest batch of puppies, etc. All the while sipping on a long neck. Eventually we get around to gather a bushel or two of food for our families. We drop it in the kitchen and then drive over to the local hangout for a few more hours of goofing off. That's what I do when I examine closely my day.

In the same time I am enjoying life, my wife has gotten up early enough to fix a hot breakfast for all of us, bathed the grand kids and gotten them ready for school. By the time I get up, she has already left to tend the sheep and chickens, then goes to market to get the supplies we

can't grow ourselves. She comes back and washes clothes, hangs them to dry, takes them down, folds them and puts them away. I could go on, but we will all learn what all this means.

Brothers, we are taking our better halves for granted. We are good for nothing lazy injuns. And on top of this we leer at the youngest girls and talk dirty about all of them. We put down the ones who have lost their outer beauty and plot how we can get into the pants of the ones who are young and fertile. We tell ourselves this is normal for men. Really? It is normal to be this way about fellow humans?

Well, I tell you it is not Hopi. Maybe it is normal for others, but not us. Would Maasaw approve? Is this what the sacred ceremonies teach us? I think not. I know not. I am as guilty as anyone here. I know my nick name. I earned it. I admit it. We all need to admit to ourselves what we have become.

This changes right here, right now. We have two months max to become Hopi men again, real men. Not painted corn husks. The mistreatment of others stops here, right now. Never again. We are not predators and women are not prey. They are at least our equals, and from what I have seen the last two weeks preparing for this, they are our superiors, our teachers, our guides. Every lady you meet is now your mother or your sister. Treat them with respect.

We will be so exhausted we won't even remember sleeping. No one says a word. No one complains. No one runs away that still wants to be counted among us, as Hopi. This is the life of every woman who has lived here for thousands of year. About time we joined in.

We begin now!"

I cannot look anyone in the eye. I have reviewed my life in my mind as he spoke and I am not innocent. I may have not actually raped anyone, but I thought about it. I have lusted after nearly every attractive woman anywhere near my age and some that weren't. Hell, I even thought of Sue Bear this way. She went through so much. She is nearly a relative. It is like I lusted after my sister. I know now my male friends likely did lust after my sister. After most of the women I know. I want to throw up I am so ashamed, so disgusted.

We are broken up into smaller groups with a group leader who will give us further instructions, specifics about things we have likely never done before. For three days before we go home to our new lives we learn how to do them.

I can do anything on a farm or around a car or truck, but I know

nothing about the inside of a home or kitchen. Well except for the Cultural center, where I know dish washing. There is no way we can learn in three days how to do what takes women a lifetime to learn. We are not trying to be as good as them. We can't. Best we can hope for is to not poison or kill anyone. I found, even though I have been around almost everything disgusting you can imagine coming out of a sheep, I was not prepared for cleaning a composting toilet or diapers. Good diapers are gross. There is no smell to speak of from the toilets, but diapers, oh my god. I know it is in my mind. Hell, I can't even look at my own results most of the time. The thought of dealing with everyone else's shit is too much. Oh, and the women stuff. How do they deal with this every month? Men have their own concerns of course, nocturnal emissions my ass, more likely the hand, and fear of getting a boner at the worst possible time. But blood. Sorry, too much.

How can I not make a simple fry bread? I was raised on the stuff. I have eaten it nearly every day of my life. I have scraped it off countless tourist plates. Mine are never round. They lack the fluffiness they should have. The worst is we have to eat our own creations and then watch the expressions of the ladies as they try. They must secretly make their own when we are away.

I have forgotten what it means to fall asleep. I never remember now when it happens. Suddenly the alarm bell rings outside and the day begins again. I am so tired I don't remember what it means to be full of energy. To have hobbies, things I enjoy doing.

The other males feel the same. All of us are totally exhausted. We are offered a choice daily. We can stick it out or leave the rez. They are very serious about this. Some have left. Some were asked to leave. This scares the ones remaining enough to stick it out. The rez is my life. I cannot imagine having to live in the city. Could you see me in construction or in a greasy spoon diner? Yes, I could obviously do the work, but I am Hopi. This is my life, my very being. I NEED to be on the rez. I need to be on the mesa, in the corn fields, the desert, hell, even the sheep. Not in them. Need to get my mind off that. Eeeuu!

Shit, the alarm bell rings. Time to get up. Not even light yet. I get the kettle going and start the oatmeal cooking. Mine tastes more like paste. I serve my mother and older sister and her baby. Not good with babies. I am trying, but the kid is used to being fed by my sister, not me. It is amazing how much noise such a little package can produce. Not even a lamb in distress is that loud. Granted, we are indoors. Sherman, the household rat catcher, wants something to eat too. I put down some

scraps from last night and he digs in. I pet him a few times and he purrs in response. Somebody appreciates what I am trying to do. The ladies give no acknowledgment that I even exist. Was I this way with them? I suspect that I was.

I do the dishes after starting the laundry. There are four of us living here at the moment. My mother never remarried after my father died. Said she did not want to take care of another man. Now I know what that means and I can't blame her.

You are never alone on the rez unless you choose to be. I never really felt I suffered for lack of a father. Manuel was a second father to me as were many other men around me. Is this because the men really do not do very much? I don't know, but am pessimistic at the moment.

To the barn to turn the hay. The sheep will need it in the winter and I have to be sure it does not rot or get infested. This is hard work and my arms are sore when I realize I am late getting lunch ready. I smell like hay when I enter the kitchen. The beans have been soaking since last night. I remembered that at least. I get the water with the beans to a boil and add carrots, squash, onions, spices. Next I kneed the corn meal ball and divide it into smaller ones to be pressed into tortillas. I still can't get fry bread right, but at least my tortillas are edible.

The beans are not as soft as I would like, but they can be eaten. I serve them at the same time thinking about what I can do for dinner. There is chicken in the fridge. I will need to go shopping this afternoon if I want anything to go with its. Can't have tortillas at every meal. Corn bread maybe. Corn meal mush. Fried mush. Thank the Hopi gods we still have Hopi corn. The commercial yellow stuff tastes like glue.

Leaning Tree comes up to me and reminds me of the men's meeting tonight. I would rather sleep. The beans will be even better tomorrow reheated, but I need something different for dinner. Shit, I forgot the baby food. I need to make second trip. I rush to the truck. Nearly out of gas. I hoof it to the local grocery. The prices are higher and I am in charge of the monthly budget too now. I am not going to make it. In reality I am doing the work of both my mother and sister. Some of the men have it worse. My mother is over fifty. Starting to get slower. Even when this is over I really need to help out more.

I need a real job and a career too. I am out of high school. Do I go to college or find something on the rez. I really like working with native materials, stone, wood, weaving natural materials. Ceramics. Sue Bear is really good with clay. Maybe she can teach me more. I do not have the finger or patience to work with silver. Nor the money to get started. I

laugh to myself that I might end up doing construction on the new Hopi village planned. That would be honorable anyway.

The meeting is more of a check in. Most of us are nearly asleep in our chairs. The ones not nodding off are suspect and are questioned. I don't care.

The alarm rings. Shit, morning already?

Summer

The Master stayed for an entire week and worked extensively with Marie and I during this time. My ability to loose self was a real advantage, but I also need to get the reflexes down to what he and Marie called 'bone knowledge' independent of my mind altogether. There are only about twenty of us left, including Ms. Lightfoot, Dory and Owa of course. The rest were too curious about the men. No one had ever seen a man do women's chores before and it became not only a spectator sport, but the chief subject of the morning gossip.

Of course, there were competitions once the men realized they were being watched. Whenever a female was around they appeared extra energetic. I was too occupied with my own progress to pay any attention. I did notice a few times Mike giving me weird looks, sort of like he was trying to figure something out.

After the incident of what may have been an attempted rape, everyone was on edge. Both genders. The men all looked at each other sideways. Who would be the next to fall. How did a middle age lady take down a full grown man. We know, part training and a lot of luck that the male in question was more or less out of it. Even a child could probably have succeeded. Still it helped prove our point and reinforces our resolve to keep our training up. I wonder what happens when the men start to train also. The master said that strength and size were no advantage. I am small, but I could defend myself against any of the other women. Not sure I really want a real experience to test myself on.

We have been learning how to work with what we have, in our own bodies, in our surroundings. Anything can be a weapon under the right conditions. Those Jackie Chan movies had some truth to them after all. The difference as I think I have already said, was we do not get to do fifty takes to get it right. We have to do it in one. The most important thing is to remember, we are not trying to hurt anyone, just to stop ourselves and others from being hurt. We do not know what our opponent has been through or the real reasons they are here. They do not deserve harm any more than we do. People only cause pain who are in pain. I learned that from my insights into Marie. Look how that turned out.

I need to get back to my art. I miss it terribly. I don't deserve the black belt I wear in practice. I know that in the core of my being. I can't figure out how it happened really. The Master must be going easy on me. Look at him. He must be eighty at least. I am almost seventeen. Not big, but

after a month of very intensive workouts I am not weak either. One thing I learned was many ways to use a knife if one is handy. No more faking it. I doubt we will be issued one in high school all the same.

I still get up early and run. It sort of de-stresses me for some reason. Dory usually comes with me. Ms. Lightfoot sometimes. She has many duties at the school the men can't cover for. Owa never of course. Not dignified to Cats. Only time they run is when running after prey and never five miles.

Owa is a real curiosity to the Master. He does not know how we communicate of course, but he knows something is different. We act as if we read each others thoughts, through intuition or something. I have even caught him trying to learn a few of Owa's moves. We are not built the same of course, but some things do work. Between Owa and the black belt I am sure I am no longer a target. It is Dory I worry about. She is smaller than me, which is not easy, and even after this month of training, no where near as strong. I am sure in four years she will be as strong, especially if I go back to my art. Maybe because of her size, she tries too hard. Training is now more important than anything. Owa approves. She thinks all kittens should practice their hunting skills as much as possible.

Owa has tried to get me interesting in the hunt. The Master approves and wants to come as well. We will have to wait until dusk. The Master practices nearly the entire day slowly. He says this is how bone knowledge happens. For me, it is just another way to zone out and forget my pain.

Both Marie and the Master have seen the 'bear' and she has taken him to a few ceremonies that happen this time of year. He is impressed and see some similarities to ancient Chinese traditions. He thinks this comes to the core of existence. He has watched me draw a few times. He says he now understands where my ability to train comes from. No difference. This does not make sense to me. How can drawing with one hand and training with my whole body be the same? The fugue is the same. Even feels the same. Maybe that is what he means.

Ms. Lightfoot comes in to our bedroom, "It is time Sue. Owa is waiting outside with the Master. The Master is trying to talk to him in Chinese, figuring she can't know Chinese and therefore if she understands him it means she can read his mind. Well, she can, but she has to pretend not too. Hard to do when this sometimes means anticipating a slap on the rump. Don't be too hard on Owa tonight, she has been through a lot today."

"Any idea when he will go back?"

She shrugs, “Next week is my guess. He does have students back home after all.”

“Has Owa said what we are to wear? Black?”

She looks at me, “Is Owa black? No, she blends with the desert landscape. Wear bland neutral colors. Most night creatures cannot see in color anyway.” She leaves me to get ready. Dory is out with friends.

I dress quickly and get outside to see Owa staring down the Master. We will never leave now. They are both so determined to win.

Honor is at stake. You got a black belt. All I have is this yellow one I can't even tell is yellow.

“Poor kitty. Is the old man bothering you?” I smile and that breaks her concentration. The Master looks at me like I interfered. I did. I want to get on with this. Ms. Lightfoot comes out and we follow Owa out of the village.

Too noisy. Learn from the Master. I look at his feet. Hard shoes. I take mine off and leave them by the trail. We are close enough to home still that I will find them.

By the smell no doubt. Ha-ha! The Master looks back at me funny. Is he starting to hear all of this?

No, we are purposely being very careful. He is huge with intuition though. Nearly the same thing. Great.

We must have walked for a mile. Owa has sprayed a few times. We are walking the edge of her territory.

There are a few village dogs who think to take me on by ganging up on me.

Well, dogs are pack animals. That's how they work. Not everyone can have a Cat's brains for stealth and sneak attack. She looks up at my sarcasm. I pretend not to notice.

The Master comes up to me and whispers, “We are not cats. How will this work?”

“We will help flush the prey out. Owa will do the rest. Unless of course you like eating game raw.” He smiles. Probably not.

Go around that clump of bushes and then make some noise.

I whisper, “This way.” I lead the Master and Ms. Lightfoot around to the other side.

“We can talk normally now. The louder the better.” I purposely run into the bushes some pretending not to be able to see them by the half moon.

We hear Owa run and pounce.

“It's over now. We can go back home if you like. She got a nice fat

rabbit.”

The Master looks at me then turns to go around the bushes to see for himself. We follow him.

“How did know?”

“You can tell by the loudness of the pounce.” To cover myself, because of course I have seen the entire thing in my mind, I add, “I am not always right of course, but most of the time.”

Be careful, this is your first time on a hunt. Easy to mess up.

Oh, I have experienced hundreds in my mind. Not easy to sleep at night when you have all these dreams of the hunt.

Owa beats us to the house. I had to spend a moment finding my shoes. My sense of smell is not that good. She has cleaned up the blood on her face and paws at least.

Dory is waiting for us. She speaks to Ms. Lightfoot, “It is time.” Time for what?

“Master do you remember the way to Marie’s house where you are staying? I am sorry, but we are being called away for something you are not permitted to attend.” What could that be? The Master has been going everywhere. It seems our most sacred ceremonies are open to him.

They say nothing, so I just follow, confused. We proceed to the old village of Hotevilla and climb down into a kiva. Not crazy about confined spaces, especially underground. Dark too. Couldn’t they have lit a torch or something?

Not enough oxygen. Duh! Wait, what about us? Shhh!

The chanting starts. I can’t follow all of it. Some of the dialects are still foreign to me. May even be the old form. Few but the priests can follow that. I suspect they may not even know what they are saying any longer. Wait, those aren’t priests voices. Old women I am sure. I smell burnt sage. They use that all the time for some reason.

Purifies the air and the mind. Okay. Good idea I guess.

Dory and I are gently pushed forward and urged to sit down on the dirt floor.

“Sue Bear, you are new to our way of life. Most unfortunate as you have certainly proven yourself since coming here. Normally what is happening here tonight would have happened for you years ago, but it is good you are here now to be with Dory of the Blue-bird clan. We understand you are close and it is good for us to be close at this special time.” What special time? Human sacrifice? Do they do that even?

Stop it. Pay attention. You don’t hear Dory freaking out. Pay attention to your thoughts and be quiet. Okay.

“We are different people at different times in our life. Tonight we celebrate such a realization of a change. A change the rest of us have personally experienced, a change we have all seen in the two of you. It is time to put aside your childhood and become respected full members of our community. As such you are given new names to reflect this change.”

Hands are put on me first, I guess because I am the oldest.

“You are to be known from this point by the name of Cat Bear, Moosa Hoonaw.” Owa must have snuck in at some point as a loud purr starts up at the sound of my new name. Wait, how did she get down the ladder?

“This name should not be a surprise. All of your official forms will be changed. You won’t have to do anything.”

“Don’t worry, be Hopi.” I whisper and a few snicker.

“Hmm, yes. Dory Blue-bird.” Hands are placed on her by everyone. I am encouraged to join. Owa’s head butts in too.

“You are to be known as Soaring Blue-bird, Puuyawma Tsooro. Now blue birds are not known for their soaring skill, but we all feel this is what you do, want to and need to do. We encourage you to continue.” I nod my head in agreement until I realize no one can see me.

I can. Puuyawma answers me. Thanks!

At some point in the quiet I have fallen asleep. When I wake I can see a faint light coming in through the hole in the ceiling we have all entered by. The air in the chamber seems lighter, more oxygen, a bit cool even. I can just barely see around. Owa and Dory, I mean Soaring, are curled up together. I can see the depression in the dust where I was. No one else is here.

“Sorry to interrupt dream time, but I think we should leave now.”

“Huh?” Soaring rises, Owa yawns hugely and stretches, nearly hitting Soaring with her paw.

There is a ladder of sorts going up to the hole. As I am trying to think of how we will get Owa out she bounds past me and runs up the ladder like this is a normal activity for a Cat.

“Whoa, did you see that? I did not know she could do that.”

“Why the surprise? You know she manages to get into everything. Your turn Cat.” She gives me an evil smile.

The ladder is a single pole with ‘steps’ of branches crossing it at one foot intervals. Not a normal ladder that I have seen. Wait, there was one in the model in the museum.

I go up to it. When I place a hand on one side and start to pull myself up the entire ladder swings towards me with the steps now facing me.

“How the hell do I climb this thing?”

Soaring pushes me aside and places both hands on a step and pulls and hops up a step. She balances and goes for the next step. She manages to get up the ladder, not as fast as Owa, but she does get up without turning the whole thing around.

She calls through the hole, "Come on black belt. We are waiting for you. Breakfast time." Breakfast.

"What no run first?" I reach up and try and duplicate her moves. It works, sort of, a little wobbly. I do manage and it gets easier as I get closer to the top, either because of practice or because the top is more secure from an angular point of view. No practice. People grab my arms when I reach the top step. I was wondering how to get out actually. At least I do not embarrass myself by kicking the ladder down, though it is no longer centered.

Everyone else is waiting outside. The elder of the Bear clan comes forward.

"The entrance, now an exit, to the Kiva represents the birth canal. You have both been reborn into a new world. Your past life is gone. Welcome to your new life, Moosa and Puuyawma." No applause, but ladies greet us with happy words and pats on the back.

Does this mean I am Bear clan or Cat clan?

Bear clan officially, Cat clan as a great honorary designation. I roll my eyes and giggle.

Puu says, "Does this mean you need to learn a new language, Cat?" getting in on the fun.

"I already know Cat. Cat is simple. Do whatever the Cat wants. Done."

Treat now. Puu laughs.

The others are looking at us strange. I explain, "Owa is hungry. Not a real surprise."

"We have a meal prepared. Come. All Bear clan will be there."

"No raw rat I assume. Guess you will have to do with fry bread and chicken."

Chicken surprise!

"No chicken surprise. Hopi food."

"I think we need to go to Flagstaff for some. Soon."

"I don't get a drivers license until another year. Maybe when the ban is over we can ask Mike."

Puu gives me an evil look, "Better we don't wait and just show up next to his truck before the ban is lifted."

"Mike has been good to us. I will not take advantage of him when

there are so many others who could use the humility.”

“Your uncle?” Puu says softly.

“Who? I have no relatives.” They ceased to exist on that day.

“Well, the entire Bear clan are my relatives. You and Ms. Lightfoot are relatives.”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. We are allowed to call her Turtle now in private, when only adults are present at least.”

“What is Turtle in Hopi again?” All this training and I am forgetting my studies.

“Yöngösona” That is not an easy sound to say.

“Turtle works for me.” I shake my head.

“If you are not born to it, a language is much harder to pronounce properly.” she says matter of factly.

The food is great and Owa ate a lot in spite of her complaining. She is passed out in the sun. Do Cats get sunburned? A yearling Cat comes up to her and stiffs her rear end. Normally she would not tolerate this. No way. That kit would be toast. Most of the rez cats know better than to get near her. Not a very social species.

The little one actually curls up with Owa. I point this out to Puu.

“Yearling. One of Owa’s kits from a year ago. They were weaned just before you arrived. Kind of surprising. They usually don’t come this close to people.”

“Why not? We are the food givers and servants.”

She smiles, “No everyone on the rez has the same understanding. Sometimes it is just easier to avoid people than try and figure out which ones are good and which are bad.”

“Do they, ah, talk?” I whisper.

No idea. First one I have seen since I learned how.

Hey little one, what’s your name?

No answer.

It does not work that way dear. Turtle is looking at me. Going to take awhile for me to get used to that.

I grab some chicken, without too much spice on it, and slowly, carefully approach the sleeping yearling. She moves to the smell of the chicken near her, or rather, his, nose. He bites at the chicken without even opening his eyes, swallows it and goes back to sleep. I back away.

“Yep, definitely one of hers.” I giggle.

Go away annoying monkey. Do I bother you when you sleep?

“Actually most of the time in fact you do.”

As is only right. She humphs and rolls over with little one adjusting

quickly.

The days pass quickly. Between training and working on art projects in the classroom I do not have time to think. The women being allowed to talk to each other got used to calling us by our new names. The boys do not know yet. Only a week left for the separation. We have been attending meetings on what to expect, what the men have been going through, what not to expect. The effect, as nice as it is, will not last. Our schools have to begin reinforcing the new way at every grade level. Ms. Lightfoot has been extra busy preparing.

No more attempts at rape. No one has had any sex since we began. No difference to me. I would be happy never to have that experience again. With the men running the cultural center there were complaints from some of the tourists expecting female wait staff. The men quickly put them in their place. Tourist traffic went way down for the season and not just because the men were bad cooks. Manuel was still running things and his work was still great of course. The men tried wearing more traditional garb, but this only helped a little. Their attitude became worse. Any woman knows it does not matter how bad your day is, you have to pretend nice to the customers.

Explaining to the tourists, especially the men, that the Hopi nation has had trouble with white men raping their women. That really did not go over well, especially from the men you would expect to harbor such ideas. Go hunt somewhere else assholes. I know from extra history classes we have had for this project that rape is as old as time. There was a time in Europe where the way you got a wife was to raid a nearby village and knock down someone you liked and took her away. Shopping I guess. Not that we were any better. A similar practice occurred among many tribes.

To be civilized you have to let go of certain 'freedoms' in exchange for a much better existence. Some still have not gotten the message I guess.

The Master went home weeks ago with the promise that any of us would be welcome at any time. He will be missed, as much for his curiosity about everything, as for his knowledge and wisdom. He was the only male we talked to in almost two months now. Even at his age I am sure he got marriage offers. Silly. He is totally devoted to his art, as am I.

The day some of us have been dreading finally arrives. I was getting used to having all the dirty work done for us and no hassles, not that I am a looker that got a lot. True rapists don't care.

I am no longer helpless though. Never again.

Owa, Puu, Turtle and I enter together and stand next to Marie, Frog and Rat. We are off to one side, but up front. The men come in and stand on opposite side of the hall. They look tired.

The council comes in. Fire Oak gets up to speak.

“Um waynuma?”

We all answer in unison, “Owí, nu' waynuma.”

“Ladies it is time to make a decision. Do you allow us a second chance? We can't promise to be perfect. We will make mistakes. We will try damn hard to respect you and defend you if needed. We will stand beside you, not in front of you. Never again, are your words, but it has become ours as well.”

Ms. Lightfoot steps forward.

“We have seen how hard you have worked. That can't stop by the way. Oh, we will SHARE the load, but we won't do it all for you ever again. We have worked hard also.” She grins and calls Marie and I forward. “We now have the means to enforce the new understanding. You may get tricky and catch one of us unawares, but know we stand united. If ANYONE, male or female is attacked by another tribal member, we will be there. You will not get away. You will never do it again. Never. We are Hopi, we are one.”

She bows to the two of us and with extra noise than we ever did in any training session we attack each other. No damage, but lots of yells, flips, throws and slaps. We practiced the choreography for days to get this down. We end, bow and remove a scarf around our middles showing that both of us are wearing black belts. On cue the others remove their scarves showing their own belts.

Ms. Lightfoot shouts, “Never again!”

We shout in unison, “Never again!”

“Ah gentlemen, have we received their message or do we need another two months practice?”

A moment of silence and looking at each other they shout back, “Never again!” Not sure if this means the same thing as our never again, but I'll take it as a show of good faith.

We bow to them in unison, they bow back, well not exactly in unison. To be fair, they were not told in advance. Unlike the two hundred of us wearing belts, they did not work in unison at any point either.

“The council will meet as usual every month and reassess our progress. More ‘training’ may be needed. Oh, the ladies intend to keep up their new training by the way.” Fire Oak grins evilly, steps back and we break up to mingle with each other.

I hear a nap calling me.

“You just got up from one. It has only been twenty minutes.”

You will lose your name if you don't take enough naps. You can get Alzheimer's if you do not get enough sleep.

“Cat's don't get Alzheimer's silly.”

Now you know why.

“They don't live long enough.”

I have nine lives.

“And how many are left of those nine?” I look down at her. Yeah, no response to that. I have certainly used up a lot of mine too.

Puu comes up to me with Mike in tow.

“Brought someone over to say hi.” She smiles and leaves.

“Sorry about that Sue. Just wanted to know how you were doing through all of this. After that demo though I am guessing better than ever.”

“Hopi name change. I am now Cat Bear and Dory is now Puuyawma, Puu for short.”

“Got it. I am still Mike. My last name change was oh, four years ago.”

“What's it like being graduated?”

“Would not know. The day after is when all this hit. I can almost make an edible fry bread now.”

“Good to know in case I get really desperately hungry, as in nearly starving to death, on my last gasp.” We both laugh over that.

“Are you really a black belt.” I nod.

“No shit. In less than two months? How is that even possible?”

“Actually did it in one, but I am still training too.” I give my best evil grin.

He is clearly upset, but changes the topic, “Dory, I mean Puu has grown.” Is he flirting? All this small talk after two months.

“She will be taller than me soon. I will be back to being the smallest again. Lulls them into a false sense of security before I attack.”

He looks down, “I notice Owa uses that strategy a lot.” She is curled up strangely, nearly snoring.

I am not snoring and I hear every word stupid monkeys.

“She is not really asleep. Just pretending so she can attack our ankles when we least expect it. I hear monkey brains are quite a Cat delicacy.”

He looks at me strange, “I can never tell when you are joking.”

Who is joking? I laugh but make no open comment.

“I have chores to do now that you gentlemen are no longer doing everything.”

“It will be different. We are all committed to that. My only worry is how long it will last. Even in my ripe old age I have seen countless people fall off diets, booze, etc. for maybe a month, tops.”

“There will be reminders, wah-ha-ha-ha!” Owa licks her lips on que.

“Yeah, see you two around.” He backs away feigning fear. Then laughs.

He is nice. Will you mate with him now?

“Is that all it takes to get under your fur.”

Pretty much, at the right time anyway.

“Well then think of me as a Cat who has been fixed. Not interested. I have my art and now my training. That is more than enough.”

Puu comes back, “What did you do to Mike?”

“Just small talk. I need to get back to chores.”

“There is a party planned to celebrate the end of the separation, the men are preparing it.”

“Hope Mike is not making the fry bread.” Puu makes an ugly face and laughs. Guess word has gotten around.

I do not stay long at the celebration. Hard to eat when everyone, meaning mostly the young boys, are asking you about your training. They have all seen martial arts movies, but it is usually the man who is the hero and usually the evil one too for that matter. Martial arts and women really do not go together in people’s minds. I refuse to do any more demonstrations, in spite of numerous requests. I suspect the boys at least will want to learn. Marie will have her hands full. She graduated with the same class as Mike. She has a ready made contribution to the tribe.

Being behind, I start my junior year in a week. Puu will be a sophomore. She is already way ahead of me in Hopi class. I will be lucky to pass the final exit exam in a year. The other subjects I should do okay in. I will admit I am fascinated by history as it is taught here. More First Nation, as the Canadians say it, history, than the white centric history I grew up with. We learn about the nasty bits too that somehow got glossed over. Columbus was not a nice guy. It really should have been labeled as genocide. Ninety percent of the people living here died, mostly from germ warfare, but also the countless campaigns against us ‘savages’, the starvation from displacement, the indoctrination that destroyed our cultures and so on. There was even a city near the center of North America that was bigger than the biggest city in Europe at the time, but since it was wood, all traces are gone. Taken in the context of all of human history, it is not hard to understand. Even we warred on each other for thousands of years before the whites arrived. Our closest neighbors,

the Navajo, were notorious for raiding our villages from time to time. And they came from the north because they were pushed out from war and famine. We were simply in the way, having been here for hundreds of years before they came. We likely did the same to the Anasazi who were here before us and taught us most of our own culture. We became the archetypal pueblo dwellers instead.

There is new evidence that there were some kind of human here as early as 130,000 years ago. I am not so sure. Evidence of tools is not evidence of Hu. Other primates may have done the tool making in my mind. Take those monkeys used in movies. They are smart and get into everything. They can be taught all kinds of things.

Home never looked so sweet. May take Owa's advice and take a nap. I did not eat that much, but I am still full from all the food shoved in my face I was expected to at least try. They did work hard and I guess to say the wild Cat lady approved, would be a bragging right.

As soon as I get in the door I am greeted with a huge, "Happy Birthday Cat!" Puu, Turtle, Mr. Smith and Jones and of course Owa are there.

"What day is it?"

"August 12th," Puu answers smiling.

"How did you find out?"

"School records dear, confirmed by tribal birth records. As your guardian, I have your birth certificate to prove it," Ms. Lightfoot says.

There is a birthday cake with candles lit. I make a show of counting them to be sure there are the correct number.

"Are you sure this is right. I thought I was much older. I feel much older. Two months of training have left me sore all over. Isn't that what happens in old age?" I look to Ms. Lightfoot.

"Don't look at me. I'm not old yet and I am as sore as you are from training." She looks to the boys.

"We have been doing ALL of the chores. We are the sore ones if anyone." Mr. Smith bumps Mr. Jones and whispers something.

"It's okay, we can talk to them again. Fire Oak said it was okay. I asked him after the assembly." He looks up at us to be sure.

"I don't know. I kinda liked the peace and quite. Should we let them ladies?"

No. Better when quiet. She is looking and sniffing at the birthday cake though. Being careful about the flames.

"Owa wants some cake. What's in this? I had better blow out the candles before we start Owa on fire anyway." I do so very quickly. Guess

my lung capacity has improved too.

I cut the cake and pass some around to everyone, including a smaller piece for Owa. Before she can get past her sniffing though the little one runs in, grabs it and darts out the door again.

“If he is going to be around he needs a name so we know who to blame for everything at least,” I suggest as I give a piece of my cake to Owa.

Thief!

That’s not a name, but a profession.

“The boys have already named him Dobby.” I roll my eyes and shake my head upon hearing this. The boys look up at Ms. Lightfoot in surprise.

I can hear their thoughts even if they don’t talk to me remember.

I smile. They will be more careful around us now at least. Spooky!

Suddenly Owa goes ballistic. She jumps up and hits the door at full force, hissing and growling. She finally gets the door open more pissed than I even known was possible for a Cat to get. She rushes outside kicking up a ton of dust.

“What the hell is wrong with her?” I can only sense extreme hate from her mind.

Ms. Lightfoot sighs, “Silver has finally shown up.”

“Silver, as in the books Silver, the head of the TKs Silver?” She nods and sighs again, but does not get up.

“There is nothing we can do. They just have to work this out themselves. We really should not get involved.”

“I am still curious. What does Silver look like?” I slowly go outside. I can hear Owa growling up a storm and looking up. Just how tall is Silver? I look around but see no one. Finally I try to look up to where Owa is concentrating. The largest owl I have ever seen is roosting on a corner of the apartment next to us.

“Owa, it is just an owl. Come back inside. Leave the poor thing alone.”

Evil, evil one.

I shake my head and go back inside, “Just a very large owl.”

“Great horned owl, Siiva Mongwu is his name this time.”

“How do you know it is a male?” She looks at me like I am stupid.

“Really, I don’t know how to tell.”

“Males are smaller in most birds. They don’t have to carry the eggs.”

“That makes sense. Wait, you said his name is something.”

“Siiva Mongwu. Silver Great Horned Owl in Hopi. Siiva for short.

The real Hopi word for silver is qōtsasiva, but Siiva is easier to remember

and say I guess. Sort of sounds like silver too.”

“How come I have never seen a silver owl before.”

“Did you suffer a concussion during the demo? His name is Siiva Mongwu. He is the Silver from the books, just in a new form. Just like I am in a new form, and Puuyawma is in a different form, as are you. Come on Cat. Wake up please.” She turns and leaves the room upset.

Puu looks at me, “They are real? This was not just a fantasy story we were forced to read?”

“You did not know either?” She shakes her head no. I look to the boys who are playing ninja in the living room. They don’t seem to care.

“Who are we?”

“I am of the Blue-bird clan, but the only birds were the Ku. I don’t remember any of their names. Wait, there is a clue. In the ninth book. If I remember it says something about how reality works. There are essentially an infinite number of realities, each a little different from the rest.”

“And they split every thirty one million years or so. I remember that much.”

“Yeah and the last one in the last book was around 1950 or so. Before we were born anyway.”

“And they can jump between different split worlds, but get in trouble if they jump time dimensions.”

“Wait, they can also DS distances on this world. So, why don’t Turtle and Owa do that? Have you ever seen them do this?”

“Nope, but then we could not even ‘talk’ until recently.”

“Yeah about that, wasn’t TP something like TK7 for Hu?”

“How come we don’t have the other six abilities?”

“We don’t really have TP do we? I mean we can read each other, Turtle and Owa, but not everyone. Shouldn’t we be able to read everyone?”

“Now I am even more confused and I don’t think we are going to find out soon either.”

“I can’t hear Owa any more. Wonder if it is safe yet?” I poke my head outside, looking up to where the owl was. Nope gone.

“They are probably out playing somewhere. Good to know Owa has some friends other than Hu.” I smile wickedly. Puu laughs. Hope she is okay out there.

I am fine. Going to have owl surprise for lunch.

Be careful, owls have talons and know how to use them.

Tuba City

School has started again. At least I still have art. I would die without it. This time I have physics instead of chemistry though. It is ALL equations. I hate equations! Sort of math on steroids. Oh and math is now trigonometry. Guess they sort of go together and in fact some of the lessons purposely seem to overlap. Owa is not going to be able to help me though these classes.

“Cat, pay attention please,” Ms. Lightfoot says loud enough to wake me up from my thoughts and the rest of the class giggles. The seniors from last year are gone and freshman have arrived. It seems like the entire class has gotten younger and sillier. Owa is asleep next to me and yawns and turns over. Big help.

“This year we have our own booth at the Tuba City Native American Craft Fair. This is a big honor. Normally you have to be an established artist to get space. And no, we don’t each get our own space, we all share one space. This means only your best work. Half of any money made comes back to the class and half goes to registration and overhead.”

“That seems high. We do all the work and all,” Gretchen comments.

“Well, I guess we can do without a toilet, shade and food if you want. Oh, no advertising, transportation, and . . .”

“Okay, okay, I get it. Never mind.” I don’t question stuff like this any more. There is always a hidden side to things you don’t know about but are very important. Unlike San Jose, not everyone here is out to rip you off either. So nice not having to haggle. Well, except with the tourists. Always ask twice as much and expect to get what you wanted in the first place anyway. Makes them feel better to have ripped the injun off I guess.

“So if I sell more of my pots I get a bigger share?” Frank Ööqa. I love his last name, bone in English. How cool is that? But I sigh and roll my eyes. He is a newbie to the rez. Just came in during the summer after his father lost his job in Flagstaff. Probably just thinking about how to help support them. Pots are not that good yet either. He will learn. Very determined.

“All proceeds will be shared equally. Don’t expect much. No one will leave a millionaire.” She smiles. No danger, ever, of that happening.

“When?” Puu asks.

“First weekend in October. That means clean up and get ready what you are already working on. No time for new work. Since everything can’t go, we will decide as a class what should be included at class the

Wednesday before. Thursday we pack and Friday we leave for the entire weekend. We do want to make a good impression. Everyone will have at least once piece, but not everyone will have the same number. Remember we do want to make money on this and we share whatever we take home, so it is in everyone's interest to make this work as well. Class dismissed. See you Monday."

Guess I know where I will be this weekend. Only ten days is almost no time. I can put that much time into a single pot if I really concentrate. Fortunately I have work still here from summer and last year. Too bad the drawings don't sell as well as the pots and weaving. The Navajo will beat us on weaving. Ever hear of a Hopi rug? Pots yes, but no rugs. Now why would wool sell better in the desert than cotton?

Puu comes up to me, "Think about it. There are fifteen of us. The booth will be tiny. That means we will have time off to look around at everyone else's work too. I have been once before when I was the boy's age."

"How come we did not go last year?"

"Cat, you were in the hospital at the time and no one really felt like it after what happened to you."

"I did not know."

"Every action has multiple reactions," Puu stiffens up to look like Ms. Lightfoot. I sigh, shake my head and give her a gentle shove. Owa is walking like she is drunk. Sleepy cat syndrome.

You sure you will make it even? Do I need to carry you?

That would be nice. Puu laughs and people turn to look at us. Oops.

Unfortunately, it is not straight home. Dojo time. At least September is cooler. The first two weeks were really warm, but fall has arrived. Must have dropped below a hundred even. Even Owa is panting less.

Cats do not pant.

"Or snore either," I nudge her. Puu, being careful, looks away like she has not heard all this.

"What are you going to enter? We can pretty much submit anything we want."

I think about it, "Has to be something we don't want to keep for ourselves, but is good enough to sell to the stupid tourists."

"Not just tourists. We buy from each other too. Wait till you see the Navajo silver work. It becomes sort of a competition. Even prizes for best in each category." Can't see how that would work, as each culture is so different.

"I like the Hopi work better. Silver and black are more to my taste.

Silver and turquoise are too much. Like shouting.” Some of them must wear ten pounds of the stuff. Men too. Showoffs.

“I am thinking something tiny. We could never afford the big stuff you are thinking about. Maybe a set of earrings?”

“Why Puu, are you starting to think about BOYS?” I tease her. Of course she is. We can’t hide anything from each other. “I have seen the way Mr. Bone looks at you.”

She looks at me in horror, “He does not! Besides I have my eye on someone else and he only has eyes for wihu Minny.”

“We will just have to feed you more I guess.” She already eats like a horse but can’t seem to gain any. Getting taller though. Already slightly taller than me even. “The qöötsa taaqa like skinny girls.” She sticks her tongue out at me and laughs, then runs ahead of me to beat me to the door.

We rush in out of breath to Marie’s dirty look and remember to bow respectively before taking our place.

The boys cook when we have dojo practice, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. We do Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. We are on our own for Sundays. Throw together leftovers. Ms. Lightfoot will help either group as need arises and fits into her schedule. Everything has become routine again, with the boys helping out more, which is really, really nice. Even if it is mostly cowboy chow on their nights. Other households are appreciating the extra help too. Life is good. Everyone is more relaxed and friendly even.

After dinner I go to my desk to study trig. Not happy about it, but if I want a diploma I have to pass this class too.

Marie is coming up to the house.

“Thanks Owa.” I give her a quick head scratch and get up to greet Marie at the door just as she arrives. Freaks people out, but has become part of the legend of Cat Bear.

She motions me outside, “We need Owa too, but not Puu.” Not good. Owa has heard and jumps out the window of the bedroom to join us. We go some distance before she tells us.

“There has been another incident.” She frowns.

“Who?” I sigh.

She pauses, “I am not sure how to handle this one. It is Tommy.”

“Little Tommy? He is so sweet, who would hurt him?”

“He has had a lot of trouble with bullies. I can’t exactly pull an evil Marie any longer.”

“You want me to? I can’t do that Marie. No way.”

“I know that. I want you to help talk to him and I want you to help me go after the bullies.”

“Finally, something that makes sense.”

“It is not Hopi to seek revenge.”

I shake that off, “Who are they?”

She smiles, “Your Uncle’s nephew is one of them.”

“Crap, that makes it a hundred times harder.”

“Remember how you dealt with me?”

It seems like forever now, “We paired up. Never leave a little one alone.”

“We start with that. Do you think Mr. Smith and Jones will help.”

“They are not that big themselves, but they have been learning the moves and as long as they are together, no one picks on them. We will have to see what classes they overlap. No problems after school of course. How are the parents taking this?”

“Frightened. They know Tommy is different.”

“No crime there.”

“You know most Hopi are Christian now?” I nod. My Aunt certainly is.

“Think of a behavior that would drive them crazy. Something a male could do.”

“Oh.” I think, “Really? Why would anyone care?”

“It is considered an abomination punishable by death.”

“That would never be allowed!”

“No, but there are many ways to ah, induce, death.”

“Suicide.” She nods. Bully someone enough and it is the only way out. I know that feeling well. Very well.

“Or something that looks like suicide.”

“Wait, who is his partner? We need to protect him as well.”

“There is none that we know of. We don’t even know if he is gay. But suspicion is enough. No one will befriend him for fear they will be labeled too.”

“But hanging with girls would be bad too.” She nods. No male survives being called a sissy.

“How many of our sisters have brothers?”

“You have an idea.”

“We can’t act directly. We get the entire network on this. Everyone but the bullies can be in on it.”

“Someone will tell them.”

“And how will that hurt? They will then know everyone is watching

them.”

“Did not stop me.”

“You had a much, much more important reason. You were not doing this to be a bully, but to help people protect themselves from bullies. I doubt they are on that page.” She shakes her head no.

“Have you talked to Tommy?” She grins.

“Not that way. I mean calmly.”

“I am always calm,” she smiles. I frown at her.

“Have you talked with my cousin?” I almost choke saying he is a relation.

“That is one possibility,” she slams her fist into her other hand suggestively.

“Do we need to become like them to stop this? There has to be a better way.”

“Most of the time there are no easy or perfect answers. Always, ah, side effects.” Like everyone fearing her when she really had the best of intentions.

“I suspect my aunt and uncle are behind this.”

“Trying to get back at you by showing you are helpless to stop it?” I nod.

“I don’t think we should go with our gut reaction. How about the elders? Ultimately they are responsible.”

“We can try. Do we have enough time? At his age it would not take much to push him over. Took me years to accomplish what I intended and only because you stepped in at the right time. Otherwise I would probably still be working at it.”

“Shit, sorry.” She grins. “I really have no answer. We are all set to go to Tuba City soon. Both Puu and I are on the bus. Tommy is not. Can you and Mike start asking questions? I just hope this does not blow up before I get back to help.”

“We can only hope. You understand there may be nothing we can do. Some things are outside our hands.”

“Except attending his funeral.” She nods. I really hope it does not end that way. I don’t know if I could handle that. Beat me up if you have to, but not some little kid just to get back at me.

I have to let go and let Marie and the others deal with this one. My primary attention has to be on the trip. Too many people are depending on our success. I suspect a lot of our art budget comes from these trips.

When I get back, I go straight to bed, but do not sleep. I toss and turn all night. I am totally dead in the morning.

When I wake in the morning. Mr. Smith is peering over my bed and Mr. Jones is at the doorway.

“Ah, what do you want?”

“We heard there was a zombie in your bed. We hate zombies.”

“Are you saying we are having brains for breakfast?” I rise from my bed with my arms outstretched, “Must have brains!” I growl and snarl. The two disappear quickly. Not up to the book level Smith and Jones yet.

“You kept everyone awake last night with your nightmares. Wish you would stop broadcasting.”

“Sorry, I would turn it off if I could.”

Ms. Lightfoot looks in. She points to me indicating she wants to talk to me. Puu shrugs, indicating she is not surprised.

“Don’t forget we have a run this morning,” she says before leaving the room already dressed and ready. Sigh . . . I cannot get up that fast after chasing ghosts all night.

“Yes Ms. Lightfoot. You wanted to see me?”

“Sit.” she is writing in some kind of journal. None of us have ever been able to find it. All of us are curious. Part of the problem is she never seems to sleep and she takes it with her whenever she leaves.

“These nightmares need to stop. I understand your concern for Tommy and the many others you have kept everyone awake with.”

“Yes, ma’am. But what can I do?”

“You can let go. You have already done more than several lifetimes of what others have done. You are not responsible for everyone in the tribe. You are only responsible for yourself until I tell you differently. Understand?”

“I will try.”

“Do not try, do.”

“Yes master Yoda.” I bow to her. She waves me away.

When I arrive at the kitchen I am surprised by the others waiting for me. At my seat is a plate of something that looks remarkably like brains, covered in what I suspect is ketchup.

“Ah, perfect. Brains! Just what I need.” I shuffle over and sit and devour the mixture with my hands being sure to smear as much as I can over my face. I was right about the ketchup, but unsure of the rest.

“She ate it. She actually ate it. Eeeuuu!” Mr. Smith appears to be grossed out. He is the more squeamish of the two.

I roll my eyes without focusing and dig in again.

Puu finally tells me, *Calf brains*.

“Good! Want more! More brains!” I play it up as much as I can. Mr.

Smith leaves looking like he is going throw up. Mr. Jones is looking green and leaves too.

I tell Puu, "Not bad really. Must be the ketchup." I finish what's on my plate. Owa looks up at me expecting a portion. I scoop up the rest out of the fry pan and place it in her bowl. No ketchup.

I appreciate that. You are right. These are good. She licks her lips afterwards.

Puu looks at us disgusted too, but does not turn green at least.

"I will clean up," I offer as she leaves the kitchen without looking back.

As Owa curls up in the sun, I start in. They made a real mess, but I am used to that and make quick work of it. When I am done I find the others gone. I am too late for the morning run, so decide to just go for a walk instead. To clear my head. Having been given permission to relax I decide to give it a try.

I am the first in the art room and hard at work finishing the pieces I hope to enter when Ms. Lightfoot enters.

She raises an eyebrow then goes to her desk. The others file in talking up a storm.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Your cousin Kev has been banned from the rez." That was fast.

"Can they do that for someone so young? What about his parents?"

"They had given up trying to control him. Apparently there were all kinds of problems. Mischief, vandalism, alcohol."

"That could apply to half the people near our age." She shrugs.

I am relieved though. Maybe Tommy has a chance now.

You are not the only one looking out for him. Concentrate on your own work.

I do. For the next week all I think is pots, pots, pots. There are so many from everyone we are going to be allowed to have some in backup in the bus. Last thing we want is to be sold out. Right. The secret is to price things right. Slightly high so you can come down and the 'mark' thinks they have a deal. But, not so high they don't even try to talk you down. The longer they talk, the better your chances. The one exception is if they suggest a value so low there is no compromise that can work. Just drop them. Make space for better chances. I have never done anything like this ever. I can make pots, but have no idea how to work a customer.

Of course other tribes know all this and expect an NA discount. Here we use a set price agreed upon ahead of time. No negotiations. I would be proud if someone else local wanted one of my pieces, but we need the

money for our classroom too.

I thought we would have pots leftover from last year but I was told they all went to local trading posts. Not as much money, but we don't have to do the selling either.

There is always a trade off between showing your versatility, the ability to do many styles and methods, and having a style that says this was done by you. I guess the last style is to make one winning version of something and then make a lot of them. Never any two at once showing so people still think they are getting something special. Could never do that. I can't make the same thing twice the same way. It bores me.

I decide to do one style, mine. All black pottery. Not strictly Hopi, but I love the look. Design is life on the rez in Hopi style on the top half of the pot. Each piece unique. Dances, growing food, Kochina, making food, etc. I know some people like to make sets, but I want to be seen as an artist, not a manufacturer. A piece of art to be prized and shown to others, not something on the dining table.

Puu does not want to compete with me, so she is carving Kochina. Always a good seller. She carves the heads and bodies herself. The younger ones use a standard base to add feathers and clothing. I am proud of her desire to be as authentic as possible. She must have studied the ones at the museum and elsewhere for some time. To me they look very authentic. If they could be aged with dust and time a bit, they would pass for the real thing. To be authentic though, she would have to get apprenticed by a shaman and inducted into the sacred rites. Those are never sold of course and only Hopi ever see them. Any that are stolen are immediately disavowed and no one on the rez will ever say they were real.

One sneaky way to insure this is to leave an essential piece of the figure off. Only the shaman have the piece and it is only placed on the figure during ceremonies and removed afterwards. Then, anyone seeing it could state it was not authentic. Not complete.

At least I do not have to worry about this with pottery. Okay, to be fair, there are official sacred clay objects. Not an interest of mine and my designs have been approved as representing the tribe and not revealing anything sacred. No Kokopelli art for me either. Way overdone.

To make the pottery black, I have to fire under low oxygen, called a reduction run. I am the only one doing this type of work and means I have only one chance. Can't hog the kiln just for me of course. That means whatever is in the kiln for this run is it. Good or bad. Whole or broken. Everything is loaded and the run started. All I can do is wait now.

That still leaves me a week.

I decide to have some fun. Between helping others get their projects ready I make very small little animal figures. Something that will dry fast and fit into a normal run. Whimsical and silly. I poke fun at all of our leaders. I do not leave Owa or Turtle out of course. I even make ones of Puu, Marie and myself. No favorites. Mine is a tiny thing with a huge over sized stick to poke fun at my tendency to overdue everything. Owa is done regal, the queen. She seems pleased actually. No fun. Everyone else laughs though so I take that as having done a good job.

“I think you should accept the position of teaching assistant Cat and stop pretending you are taking it as a class.”

“Hey, as long as I can keep creating, I don’t care what you call me and I love helping everyone else. Ah, those who want it anyway.”

“The Barclay twins.” I nod and she smiles and walks away. Owa yawns and turns over to catch the last of the afternoon sun. Rough life.

Your tongue is sticking out again.

Don't care. Another yawn and it disappears though.

D-day arrives way too quickly. There is a mad rush to get everything on the bus. Owa and I take the last seat near the emergency exit. This is our home for the next four days and three nights. Not crazy about being at the back as I am worried about being motion sick. The road is a bit bumpy, but Ms. Lightfoot is a good driver and takes it easy. Tuba City is only a few hours from First Mesa. We got a late start, but we will be there in time for the evening meal and Native pow wow before the tourists invade tomorrow morning.

We have tourists on the rez of course. I put in time at the visitor center again now that my aunt is gone. But they don’t haggle over the prices of anything. Most want to try fry bread and Hopi chili. Easy enough. Not like we have to make it over a heated stone any longer. I have had enough myself that it has lost any romantic appeal. In fact, most food on the rez is boring. That is only so much corn, squash and beans you can eat. People are creative everywhere and we learn quickly who makes the best of each, but there is only so much you can do with limited ingredients.

Mike and others do make regular runs to Flagstaff, but our funds are not limitless and so most is just staples. Maybe an occasional chocolate bar, but that is even likely to be milk chocolate. Once you taste the dark side you never go back. I have heard that we will have some Aztec dancers this weekend. Hopefully they brought the ‘drink of the gods’ with them. Chocolate and chilies. My mouth waters even thinking about it.

I am only a little queasy when we arrive. I am unstable on my feet at

first, but quickly get over it. I have never seen so many Dine ('people' as the Navajo call themselves) in one place before. I know there are over a hundred thousand Navajo. It feels like a good portion are here today. Lots and lots of silver and turquoise. Incredible craftsmanship, if you like that kind of work. Too flashy for me as I have said before.

"Cat, close your mouth and help out." Puu nudges me. She has been here before, so I follow her lead. We leave the work on the bus and concentrate on getting our booth set up. It is way bigger than I thought it would be, about on par with the others. We are near the last ones to arrive, but we have an assigned space and everyone appears to be friendly.

"Puu, why is that man staring at us?" I indicate with an open hand. Pointing is seen as rude.

"He is waiting for permission to approach. Go ahead and wave him over. Navajo custom, though it is mostly only the elders now." She is fussing over a bracket. I see her problem but decide she will get more out of it if she figures it out herself.

Thanks a lot. I hear her though. I visualize the solution. Ah, so simple. Thanks Cat.

I wave the elder over. He nods and comes up to us.

"Welcome. I am glad you are here and had a safe journey. I am called Carries Big Stick." Okay.

"Pleased to meet you Carries Big Stick, I am Cat Bear, my house mate and helper here is Soaring Blue Bird. Our teacher is Ms. Lightfoot."

"I know Ms. Lightfoot. You are fortunate to have such a good teacher. If you have any questions please ask for me and someone will point you to me."

After he leaves I ask Puu, "Is that really his name?"

"I doubt it. Just wants to be bigger than he is. NA does not mean saint," she shrugs.

We find him latter passed out drunk behind a camper. Hopefully he does not intend to drive it.

The food is better at the visitor center. We eat it to be polite. I am guessing this is more of a social thing and a chance to hook up or show off. I leave early and go back to the bus. Though the bus is hundreds of meters away from the pow-wow, it is still noisy enough to prevent sleep. I surprise myself and fall asleep anyway.

Usually I know when I am dreaming, but this one is so real. I am awoken by pounding on the emergency door. When I look out I see my aunt's face peering in at me.

“Go away!” She points behind her. There are four men holding Puu. When she sees that I see this, she signals them and they force her to the ground and proceed to rip her clothes off to rape her. I try to get out, but they have jammed the door. I run to the front of the bus, but they have blocked that door too. I try windows and get one open enough to squeeze through. I run to the back of the bus and prepare to do battle to save Puu. I hear the cocking of a gun. A gun beats Kung Fu any time. I freeze.

“We are not in Hopeless land any more dear. The rules are different. First we do your friend and then we do you. We want this to be the last thing you see. Oh, a special treat. Your nephew will be doing the honors.”

I struggle and get hit in the side of my head with the butt of the gun. I am stunned, but not out.

Owa, Turtle, where are you? Where are our protectors?

My head is on fire. I don't know what is going on. I feel like I am between two enormous pieces of steel pressing my head like a watermelon. My mouth is open and I must be screaming, but I hear nothing. I only feel the pain.

Owa, get her out of here now! She is going to kill someone and is destroying the place. NOW OWA! NOW!

Not in Kansas Any More

I open my eyes. It is weird. I am in some thick leaf litter. Leaves? The sun is high in the trees. Not normal trees either. I have never seen anything like them. Headache is gone. Have I been out for hours?

“Where the hell am I and how did I get here?” I say softly to myself.

Owa runs up to me scared, *We need to run now! Not safe here. Get up now Cat!*

Something is out there, more than one and I decide not to question her. I get up. I am still in the light clothing I went to sleep in, but I am outside the bus and I can't see it anywhere. I see Owa some distance away looking back at me. I run towards her picking up speed. I am essentially barefoot, only wearing light socks. The ground is soft enough and I still have my calluses from all the training fortunately. Owa runs faster. Where did all these trees come from? We are in a desert! No trees for miles and miles. Kilometers, whatever. How far did they take me? I have not been raped. I know that feeling. No sign of blood either.

When I catch up to her she is resting waiting for me, but looking around nervously. I see nothing, but the trees can hide a lot. I catch a glimpse of something, but when I turn it is gone.

They know where we are. They will try and encircle us. We need to keep moving. We are the hunted. This is not a game.

She takes off again weaving through the trees in a seemingly random pattern. I take the straightest route to where I think she is going. My legs are going to be shredded from the branches. There are bugs everywhere. Some are as big as my hand. There are very few bugs on the rez.

“Okay, stop. Where the hell are we? Stop playing with me.”

If you stop you will be eaten. Keep moving. I will explain when we are safe.

We reach the edge of this forest and I can see open space ahead. Finally we will get to see what all this is about. It is hot and humid here. I am sweating up a storm, but not feeling any relief. I need water or I am going to get heat stroke.

Out in the open. Owa is still running. There is some sort of fort like structure about a half mile, er, kilometer away. Not sure what it is made of just yet. Too far away. The ground is rocky here. I am going to get my feet shredded to match my legs fast. I stop. Turn.

I see nothing following us.

Something pokes a head out and then retracts it. Not sure what.

Another one. Then two, no three. They see me and come out slowly. Clearly more comfortable in the forest where they can stay hidden. Look like some kind of dino, pack hunters. Dogs with scales and natural camo. I hate dogs.

I stand facing them. Running would be pointless, they would continue to circle me until I tired.

I AM NOT PREY!

Whoa, did I just TP that? The pack haults. They must have heard me. Usually it is just Puu and Turtle that hear everything. Oh, of course Owa and probably Silver too. Sometimes the boys. Okay most people close by. They start to advance again, more slowly.

I AM NOT PREY! DEATH IF YOU COME CLOSER.

Two try to out flank me and run to each side. My peripheral vision has gotten better with practice. I can sense just where they are. Two come slowly towards me. I stand my ground without moving a muscle. Somewhere along the way I have held onto a short branch in each hand.

I imagine the attack in my mind. When they come close I will spear them through the throat, through the head and out the top. Clean and easy. Quick death.

They stop in their tracks, looking towards each other. I concentrate and visualize their death again and send it out with as much force as I can.

They are clearly disturbed, but one, the alpha no doubt, still does not believe me or my mind. Her eyes tell her I am easy prey, even if she has never seen a Hu before I am guessing. I drop the sticks and open my arms to embrace her. The females are larger in birds and reptiles. They have to carry the eggs. Matriarchal society. I smile with as much evil intent as I can.

When she gets close I visualize her head exploding.

She drops dead on the spot. What the? Never heard of a thought killing anyone.

A little twitching, but she is gone. There is blood coming out of her mouth and ears. I think those are ears anyway. The others see this and decide I am not worth it and disappear into the forest without a sound.

Is she safe now?

A mind I do not recognize. I turn and see a huge white dinosaur. Not shaped right. Head is too large. Soft white feathers all over. Not threatening at least. Arms spread wide and no teeth showing.

Definitely not a threat to the rap killer.

“Who are you?” Has TP. Reminds me of one of the book characters.

“My name is White. Pleased to meet you Cat. I have heard so much about you.”

“White, like in the books. No way. Those are real?” I am feeling faint.

“This is just a dream. First Puu gets raped and then I am chased by dinos and now one is talking to me in English.” I pinch myself. Feels real, but that just means I am in deep.

Owa is licking at the rap body.

“Owa that is disgusting.”

Even White is looking in horror at Owa, I think. Do Di have the same expressions?

“Kitty, they are much better cooked. Though most people just plow them into the field as fertilizer,” he says.

This is an honor killing. Best served raw. She rips off a claw and drops that to one side.

“Then the young lady should be doing the eating, not you.”

She will not, therefore I must.

“Okay. Enough! Am I dreaming? Where is Puu? Where are we? How did we get here? Why is it day when it was just night?” I am panting from getting out so much so fast.

Honor has been satisfied. You must take the claw as proof of your kill.

“Puu needs our help. What are we doing here?”

Puu is fine. That part really was a dream at least. Though the entire city experienced it, including Puu. Shit.

“How did the rap die? I did not touch her.”

Owa looks at me like there is something wrong with me. Sniffs me even. *You really don't know? No wonder she asked me to move you away. Just as well, this is as good of a place as any to commence your training. Stupid monkeys.*

White laughs. At least I think that is what it is. “She still says that about Hu I see. Dear, you have been upgraded. You are now a TK3. A double upgrade. Rare and dangerous. You seem to have survived. Who is your TK leader?” He looks back and forth between me and Owa.

Turtle did not do it. And no, we have not found Br'thn yet either. Only could have been Qr'thn, though we have not been able to sense her either.

“Sector ‘thn are stronger than we are, so likely just outside your range. Still it is strange she has not shown herself.” Owa growls. *Poor kitty.*

Looking at me, “Also strange that you are following the predator path and not the Hu one. You have TP, and now Scan and DS. You should have had, Scan, TK and micro TK. Very strange.”

She follows the superior path. She is my student. No doubt Or ‘thn realized that and adjusted her path to match more closely the ideal.

He laughs again, “Kitty you are full of rap piss. They think too highly of themselves as well. Still, we are done here. The scavengers will have their fill. Best we retire to the summer city where we will not have to be on guard the entire time. There are more about.” He turns and starts to run towards the structure. Of course, he likes to run I remember now. Why does everyone like to run so much. There is blood under my feet, mine or the rap’s I don’t know. Socks are ruined. Oh well.

Just outside the fort, clearly made of wood and mud, Owa stops to sniff something. I go up to it to see what is so interesting. A bloody mess of something. White looks back at me and sort of smiles.

“That my dear is the rap brain you removed from her skull. Where did you think it went?” I never thought of a reptile having such an expressive face.

Be polite. They have taken just as long to evolve as you did. Owa starts to eat the brain.

And you are clearly still a wild beast.

Thank you Cat.

I should have guessed she would see this as a compliment.

It would appear that Owa is going to be of little help.

“Mr. White, will you answer questions now?”

“Just White, and come inside first. Not polite to greet you without food. Cooked food.” She turns away from Owa. Cooked or raw, she will eat almost anything. Just like a . . .

Don’t even think such a foul thing. I am not a dog.

Both White and I laugh and then enter the gate. No one here. Not a sound. Everything covered in dust.

“I thought you said this was the summer place.”

“It is not summer. Winter actually. In summer it is much hotter.”

“Hotter! I will die here. I am nearly dead now. Any hotter and I will die.”

“Then you had better pay attention and do your training as fast as possible.” White smiles, “Oh, you should know that Owa did her training

here as well.”

“Really! That’s interesting. Very interesting. I am guessing she failed, but you sent her back anyway.”

White laughs, “Now I see why you two are a pair. Tea will be here in a moment.”

A clay pot floats over. The water inside starts to steam. Cups appear out of thin air and the tea is poured. A bowl is prepared for Owa and floats down to the ground covered in stone and very clean. Lots of fancy scroll work and some kind of lettering which I have never seen before.

White sees me looking at the stones, “Sacred text. That is why we can be here during the off season. During peak times, hundreds will visit, braving the rap forest to get here. Not all make it. What helps make this place special.”

“I guess I passed the first test.”

“They do it without TK.”

“I almost did. I certainly was prepared to. I did not know I could do that.”

“Fair enough.”

“The tea is good. Thanks.”

“The bitterness does not bother you? I thought bitter meant poison to Hu?”

I spit it out, “You intend to poison me? Why? I really did not know I would kill the rap. Honest.”

“You are as jumpy as one. Not poison. Okay to kill a rap. A nuisance really. Breed like leaf jumpers. Mature in two years. Takes us fifteen. Hard to keep up with them.”

“What’s a leaf jumper?”

Those large bugs you passed in the forest. Tasty too.

Of course they are. You will eat anything . . . She growls at me and White smiles.

“You killed the rap with what is known as a Rooi bubble. A variation on the DS talent. You need to learn how to do a jump and a portal as well.”

“Okay. The last thing I remember when Owa, I am guessing, DS’d us here was that I was likely to kill someone and had already done some damage.”

If you had pulled the rap trick with a Hu, the result would have been the same. As it was, you filled the roof of the bus with lots of holes. An improvement in my opinion.

A solid looking stone cube appears.

“What is inside the cube?” White hands it to me.

I shake it and something rattles inside.

“No idea. You tell me.”

“No, you tell me. Concentrate please. Close eyes too. Helps in the beginning.”

Okay, I close my eyes and hold the cube in front of me and try to imagine it in my mind.

“Whoa!” I open my eyes quickly.

“Really? A stone fish? I can see inside stuff?”

Scanning, stupid monkey. Pay attention or we will be here for summer too. Or at least you will be.

I look at Owa and can see inside of her. All of her organs, the brain she just ate sloshing in the tea. Lower, wait, what is that?

“You are pregnant!”

“Seems you are a quick learner. Good.”

“There are TK cats around the rez? How did you get PG?”

We are not as picky as you Hu, who make such a fuss over it all.

“Hybrids?” She shrugs, yawns and prepares for a nap.

“Wait, not fair. I did not get a nights sleep. Strange, I am not tired at all.”

“TK does that.”

“They why does she sleep so much?”

Not sleeping, just resting.

I laugh, “Right. Just resting. Getting out of chores you mean.”

Do not do chores.

“Oh we know that. Lazy kitty.”

Smart kitty, stupid monkey.

“Got me there.”

A strange sphere appears in front of my face. I reach up to touch it.

“Not wise. Where does it go? Could be dangerous. If you did not make it, leave it alone. Very easy to lose a finger or worse.”

“Lesson number one. Can I close one made by another person?”

“Not if they are stronger than you and don’t want you to.”

“If I remember the stories right, this is an alternative earth. Raps, you and the strange tree and large bugs means the split was sixty five million years ago, more or less.”

“The first split. Both lines have gone through two splits since then. One recently.”

“There are two of us on different worlds?”

“Split was before you were born, before your parents actually, and

approximately a thousand years ago here, but if the time line followed a similar route, it is possible someone like you, but never exactly the same, could exist. Same with me. My 'double' did not get TK, so that is one difference at least."

My eyes are wide, "You met your double?"

"Only from a distance. Not fair to mess with their life like that. Not that similar to me really. I am impressed you are adjusting so quickly. Most Hu are dacca goo for some time. Some never recover. We send them back, but they usually end up on the street homeless."

"That means there are other TK3s running around crazy on my earth? It would explain a lot."

"Of course not. If they had TK, we fit them with limiters. Kinder."

"And it would not be good to let norms know we exist. This feels very strange being on the other side of reality. I have a question. What would have happened if I did not kill the rap?"

"They would have eaten you of course. Being TK is not a video game where you can press reset. Very important you take your studies seriously. You did a good job learning Kung Fu, this will be even more intense."

"You have video games here? We don't even get those on the rez."

White laughs, "No, we are basically 18th century tech at the moment. I have been to your earth though. Important as a teacher to understand where my students are coming from. And no, you will not be my only student. Your ah, arrival was not expected, having been raised without any effort on our part."

"Ms. Lightfoot is TK though?"

"That was not a hard guess. Of course. There was a conscious effort to choose people from the rez."

"I was only on the rez by accident. Right?"

"No we did not engineer your parents death. If we had to we would have worked things out for all of you to return. You were pretty messed up when you arrived at the rez. None of us were sure you would pull through."

"Wait, how long have you, personally known me?"

"Several generations back. TKs are not easy to make and we are very selective."

"Was it the same for you?"

"I was raised by Qr'thn. A first gen for this quantum reality."

"Okay, then Owa is still Owa and I am guessing Silver, the owl is still Silver." White nods. Then Ms. Lightfoot is who? She obviously plays a large part."

“In the books you would know her as Jesan, a chimera of Jesus and Susan.”

“And Puu?”

White sighs, I think it is a sigh, “Pushy Paws. Still on the rez as always. She will be undergoing training with Silver. As always Owa and Silver do not get along well. Just don’t hold it against her no matter what Owa says.”

“Oh, we all noticed they do not get along. Owa thinks she will be able to eat Silver at some point.”

I will, I will. Shashimi owl is a Cat delicacy. White shakes his head no.

I am starting to shake, but I have to ask, “Who am I?”

“Understand we are all a bit different each time. Just because you behaved one way or had experiences in an another existence means nothing about this time. Only our core being makes it through.”

“Who?”

“We are still looking for most of the others. You should be a great help when you complete your training.”

“Who? Please! I will die of curiosity if you don’t tell me. I will hound you till the end of time.”

“I don’t doubt that. Who do you think you are?”

“Not someone from the rez. Weren’t that many. I don’t feel like I was male, though, maybe a tomboy. I still have that tendency despite my size.”

“You do.”

“Could be Rooi. I did make a Rooi sphere quick enough. But I don’t feel any affinity for the Ceph as much as I liked her as a person, er, sentient.”

“We use both terms interchangeably. You were not Rooi.”

“Maybe one of the minor characters then. I don’t feel important. A nobody. Probably not even mentioned in the books. Are there other records?”

“There are, but not to drag this out, you are likely Rachael. Daniel would have been your father. We have not found him yet. Edwin is missing too, along with Doc and Rooi herself. We have time yet. The earth one event is not likely for another few years.”

“She was the Japanese bike rider after the plague.”

“The event, yes.”

“Also somewhat a warrior. Hung out with James and Q.”

“Very good. Surprised you remembered that much from the books.

Maybe there is some connection.”

“That is a lot to take in.” He nods.

“The day is nearly done. Good time for a run. The raps will have retired to the forest to hunt the ones who come out at dusk. Rodents I believe you would call them.”

“Guess my ancestors never made it past that on this earth.” He nods.

“They are of course different now. They have evolved too. Nasty things. We really cannot get rid of the raps or we would be eye high in them. They eat anything, and I mean anything. The mud on the outside of this city is loaded with mercury and arsenic. Otherwise they would eat through the wood itself.”

“Crap. That is nasty. Please point one out if you see one.”

“There are hundreds of species. They exist in nearly every ecological niche.”

“White, where did you learn English? You have no accent at all. Given your mouth structure I would expect some differences.”

“Dinos are related to your birds are they not? A parrot can say almost any Hu word. Mouth is totally different. They make use of two voice boxes if I remember correctly. I do the same, even though I do not have a beak and do have lips of sorts. We are very adaptable.”

“Can you teach me the Ceph sign language?”

“We have not found the Ceph world yet, nor has anyone come through from there. The DS works a little different this time. It should have been close by. Remember, there is no guarantee that Rooi will even be Ceph this time. Silver is not Hu.”

“And Owa will never change.”

Perfection cannot be improved on.

“Let’s run. Getting too thick here.”

There is a path around the enclosure which is much smoother than the field, so we just go around five times to get the kinks out. Feels good after all that has happened. I can’t believe the last twenty four hours. Things were going so well I really thought I was coming out to an almost normal life.

Life is never ‘normal’ my dear. Always surprises.

How about a few less surprises?

Scan around you. This needs to become a habit.

“Crap, they’re back!” A pack is watching us run. No, two packs.

Do they communicate with each other? Don’t they know it is dangerous here now?

They can communicate a bit better than a pack of dogs. So, yes, they

know.

“Enough!” I stop and stare back at them. They seem a little nervous, but their curiosity is too much and they watch me back.

“Humph, how about a little tree action?” I concentrate and after a few tries bubble a trunk off a tree so that it immediately falls down. They all watch it, but of course do not connect it with me. I do a few more and they decide it might be better to be in the field than in the forest.

“Well, that backfired. They were supposed to run away. Is this how the field got made? People like me making beginner mistakes.”

“Not entirely, but certainly explains some of it.” He smiles.

He continues, “Nothing is without side effects, especially in our work. It is SO easy to expect a simple solution to work, but it never does. The raps are part of our eco system and are no longer a threat to you. Best to just leave them be.”

“Yes oh wise one.” sigh . . .

“You may find this hard to believe, but Owa used to run with me in the mornings.”

White stops and stares at me, “NO way, as you Hu say. That Cat is the laziest creature I have ever met. I am so happy you are a runner, though we need to work on your speed some.” He laughs.

“Hey, my legs are less than a tenth the length of yours.”

“A bit of exaggeration, but some truth to what you say. So, maybe we need to make your legs longer.”

“Might be best to wait until I reach the higher TK levels so I can undo whatever is done.” He smiles at this truth. Always side effects.

“Hungry again yet?”

“So far all I have had is tea, so yes, very much so. Please.” He laughs. A lot actually. Who would have thought a Di would laugh so much. Are Hu that funny to him?

Food, I am guessing it might be about lunch time, is vegetarian. Nothing I have seen before. Seeds and leafy stuff mostly. I have not seen any flowers or grasses. It takes over an hour to prepare, even though I help as much as I can. Not as easy as on the rez.

“Too bad I did not bring some seeds with me.”

“Don’t ever do that. Would totally mess with the ecology. Even your being here is a potential problem. I will have to sterilize everything after you leave.”

“Great, I am the evil one no matter where I go. Well, this tastes good anyway. Thanks.”

“You are bring nice. Most of our food has little to no flavor for Hu.

Your food is super spicy to us. Our digestive systems remind us not to eat that stuff again. Ever.” Now I laugh.

“Oh, but hot peppers are essential, oh and chocolate. I would die without chocolate. I wish we had some here.”

“We have smuggled in some chocolate for you. If you remember from the books it is good for you after an upgrade.” He puts a bag on the table in front of me.

“No sugar and it is roasted to prevent anything we don’t want from getting loose.”

I am already stuffing my face, “Just fine.” I mumble. White continues to eat a large bowl, a huge bowl, of the seeds and stuff. Owa snores. She will likely hunt at dusk. This may be where she got her taste for lizards.

Rap babies are the best.

“Be careful kitty, the adults can bite.” She unfurls a paw with a set of claws. “They outweigh you by ten to one and there are more of them.”

She is TK8 and knows how to take care of herself.

Never showed any of this on my earth.

Earth two does not know of TK yet.

“I may have screwed that too.” I sigh.

“I am sure Turtle has cleaned things up by now. She was my teacher by the way. Qr’thn never sticks around for the hard part I find.”

“She was first? The first TK on ah, earth two?”

He laughs deep, “Much to the eternal shame of Owa, Silver was first again.”

Stupid Birds.

I think he sets it up that way, when they are in the whatever it is. I think of it as the Warehouse for lack of a better term.

Works for me.

How does one describe a place that has no physical presence?

“Now is the time for you to do some independent practice. You have read the books. Showing you will not help any more than what you know can be done. Best you just figure it out. Don’t worry about the raps. Owa and I will keep them off you during these homework times.” He abruptly turns and walks back into the fort or whatever it is and closes the gate.

Now what?

Practice I guess.

I know I can make a Rooi sphere, but I cannot control the size or exact location that well. It would seem that they are all about the same size so far. If I remember, Rooi’s first ones are all the same size too. For her, a Ceph, it was at level TK1, or one meter maximum size. Hers sound

like they were a tenth that. Okay, I am TK3, or a thousand meters. One tenth would be, ah, ten meters. Shit, that's huge. Mine are roughly twenty centimeters at best. Maybe even ten. Same size as Rooi. Maybe all beginners start out this way. Wait, Owa, in the books anyway, did DS, not spheres or portals. Granted I am Cat in name only, but I am on the same path.

A portal sounds easier, just a flat sphere. Concentrate. Concentrate.

A sudden pop! I jump at least a foot. Shit. How did that happen? Wait. How do I decide or control where it opens to? Scanning must play a part. All of my spheres have been random. I need to think both ends.

Okay, both ends. Yes, in the books the Cats have to 'see' the place they want to go to before they can 'pop' to the new location.

Not a lot of landmarks about here. Wait, if I can just walk to the new location there is no challenge in that. I lean against the wall and look out.

What a stupid Hu! Of course. The wall! I need to get through the wall. I could not possibly open that massive gate and given they were willing to let me get eaten by a rap I am sure they would leave me here all night if need be. Okay, I know my task now.

Scanning is easy. I walk slowly around the fort seeing what is just on the other side. The entire fort can be 'seen' at once of course, but I am not good at this yet and would prefer something closer. Just one wall at a time for now. Ah, a storage room, empty at the moment. Perfect.

I could of course just bubble a hole, but that would be cheating at this point. Where would the bubble go? No more bubbles until I understand this. Well, maybe if one of those raps gets too close. Don't think I don't sense you guys are out there. I scan and find some of the rodents, then transmit the location to the raps. They immediately jump up to the first. I did tell all of them where to find the nest. That should keep them busy.

Now, the wall. I scan just in front of me, and just on the other side of the wall. In my mind I bring the two together to form one image.

"Holy Mother of Corn! I'm through!"

Dignity. Must be dignified. I nonchalantly open the storage room door and casually walk out yawning like I am bored to the center of the room. Owa and White are playing some sort of game using TK to move the pieces.

"I showed the raps where to find a nest. Hope that was okay."

"Fine." They are concentrating on their game.

"How do you avoid reading each other's moves before you make them?"

Shhhh!

I decide to go looking around. I can't believe I can walk through walls now. How cool is that? I go everywhere, not bothering with doors. I just pop through them. Easy peasy.

Always side effects. Be careful.

Maybe enough for today. What would happen if I did not walk through a wall, but into a wall? Is that possible? That would hurt.

That would kill me! And those two would not even notice until my corpse started to smell.

There does not seem to be any logic to the layout. One could get lost here easily without scanning ability. Hey what do I know about Di religious beliefs and practices. Maybe there is a reason for all this. Not like I have a normal Di community to compare to. An allegory for life being confusing? Only the ones in the 'know' can get around without a guide. A guide. Yeah, how many religions depend on a guide. Sigh . . . maybe they are not that different.

Wish I had a book to read. How high a TK do I have to be to navigate back to earth two?

Six.

Great. Can't get away with a single thought around these two.

I hope Puu is doing okay. Is she a TK3 too? If she really is Pushy Paws, she certainly deserves to be. I can't remember if Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones were TK or just camp followers. I think they were. I vaguely remember them having DS. That would mean at least six then.

When does the plague happen this time? A TK3 is not immune, though probably has some resistance. I know it has to happen. I did pay attention in biology. Whenever a species gets too dense, a plague invariably happens. Or famine, or war, or, whatever.

Now what do I do? I look around, but without anyone here it is basically empty. Being a 'spiritual' retreat probably means a lack of possessions, extra clothing, though White does not wear much more than a utility belt.

You are being annoying. We are trying to concentrate. GO outside and play. Please!

"It is nearly dark." I know I can scan, but this is a new world for me. "GO!"

Fine. I DS out from where I am. Never tried from such a distance, but the principal is the same and it works without difficulty. Theoretically I can DS up to one kilometer approximately. As far as I can scan, so I know where the edge is.

No one in site. I DS to half way to the forest. That gives me a good

half kilometer into the forest. The rodent dens are easy to find. Underground, in the trees, self built structures. They are not totally dumb if they can do that. I don't see anything flying except bugs. Lots of those. They seem to annoy the raps as much as they do me. My guess is the rodents have filled most of the bird niches.

The raps seem to be slowing down having filled themselves with the rats or such. At least they did not get this nice juicy, okay, tough and chewy, Hu.

It is actually kind of fun watching and listening. Wait, what about TP? I should be able to get something out of everyone here.

There is a bug crawling on my leg. I concentrate, but there appears to be no one home. Autopilot organism. Not so much thought so much as programming. Makes sense. Make a lot of bugs and one is bound to get to the right place to make thousands of more bugs to make up for the ones who did not make it. I was never much into coding a computer, but I can imagine how it might work.

What about the raps? Most are asleep now. It is pitch black. The rodents who were not eaten are coming out by the thousands. Some are coming this way! No, just the edge. The ground must have been gone over many times. They could easily climb the walls of the fort. Explains again why this buffer zone exists. A rat in the open would be easy prey for any predator too.

Whoa! They are dreaming! In sync! The entire pack sleeping together are sharing the same dream. I am seeing their world from their thoughts. This must have been the group that came after me. I see myself from their point of view. Wait, that is not nice! They see me as some kind of rodent variety. I do not have whiskers! The whiskers disappear. Oops. Am I interfering?

Can I join?

I don't want to be dreaming. I want to remain conscious. White seemed to suggest I might not even need to sleep. Owa would see that as blasphemous.

I am already sitting. I adjust myself. I could be here awhile. I enter their dream state. Instead of just watching though I start to interact with them in a positive way. I help in a hunt. Helping them spot food and strategies to capture it. This is really a lot of fun. I am given some respect as I killed the alpha female and I am also female, albeit a different species. In some ways that makes me the new alpha. Their culture is based on performance, continually tested. One mess up and you are lowered in rank. Do something heroic or beneficial, especially at risk to

self, then you rise. Ah, and there are fights with other raps for territory and prime hunting locations.

Before I realize it, it is starting to get light. They are dropping out of the dream state one by one and starting to get up to pee, drink water from a local stream. Hmm, I am thirsty myself.

I rise and walk towards the forest. What the hey. Why not join the pack for a bit.

I stop at the stream and get some water. Tastes great. Makes me think all of the water on Hu earth is contaminated.

Where are you?

Playing. Leave me alone. Go back to your game. Please.

You diss me and then want back in. Not till I figure this one out. Yes, I know they bite. They bite each other even. All pack animals seem to have similar behaviors. Have to remember, these are NOT the raps of sixty five million years ago. Does not mean they are smarter, just different. Not that we really know what they were like, no one having been there. Scientists make theories, not necessarily facts. Besides I have real advantages I intent to exploit. This is practice for me after all. I will be gone at some point and White says he will undo my evil influence and bugs.

All creatures need water. Sure enough the rest of the pack comes down one at a time to drink. One at least stands guard. One comes down. They watch me carefully, but I remain still and non threatening. They drink, but jerk up suddenly randomly trying to catch me being sneaky I guess.

All this time I am reading their minds. One to get advanced warning about their actions. Yeah, they may act more on reflex than thought. That is why I am remaining still. Second is to learn their language. I remember from the books that was how the TKs did it. Problem is, is that they are being quiet. There may a lot of non-verbal stuff I am missing. They must be able to signal each other during a hunt without alerting prey. I suspect they may only 'talk' to scare prey towards the rest waiting to pounce.

The one up on the ridge yips and immediately the one at the water spooks and jumps with amazing speed up the ridge and over. I scan and then DS to the top of the ridge. Ah, there is another troop. Show time!

I DS to well in front of the pack and take a stance. An aggressive stance. The newcomers do not know me unless they communicate between packs. Unlikely. Or, if they saw what happened. Also unlikely.

Appearances are everything and my small size with no large teeth or claws is not impressive. I am at best a curiosity. An unknown. Every species has learned this the hard way. Even mine. SO, what to do. I can

scan and find lots of suitable branches I could hold as spears or pikes. I focus and merge my two scans and a branch falls to the ground in front of me. I may not have TK, but these bubbles are nearly as good. Sort of 3D portals really. I reach down and pick up the branch, then use small bubbles carve the end to be sharp. I remove my knife (never sleep without one in case you are wondering how that came with me) from my waist strap with my left hand. The spear in my right.

You are my prey. Prepare to become my meal!

That stops them, but again, I still do not appear to be a threat. I DS a large rock to appear over the head of the leader about ten meters above. Not a direct hit, but grazers her on her right side. That causes her to turn and snarl at the rap on her right, thinking he did it. I do another DS of a smaller stone. Still large enough to get attention and proceed to bean the pack randomly. Soon the entire pack is wondering what the hell is going on. I decide to press the issue and run towards them screaming. This spooks them. Too many unknowns. It was already a risk confronting another pack on their own turf, but this is not worth it.

Great! The rest of my adopted pack is behind me and running towards the invaders too. A few go off to the side in a flanking move as they normally do when hunting prey. This really gets the others running. They could easily out run me, but don't and remain just slightly behind me.

I trip the invaders alpha by DSing a rock at her legs. She loses her balance and goes down. The others do not stop for her. They are now running for their lives and it is every rap for themselves. Besides, I am sure more than one wants her place in the pack.

My pack descends on the alpha and rips her to shreds quickly. I know it is repulsive, but I set this up, so I use my knife to reach in and cut out her heart and take a bite. This is truly gross, but I pretend to love it and gnash and snarl as well as I can.

I have solidified my place as the alpha. The other pack has stopped and it looking back at us. They are now leaderless and see a strong leader before them. There is strength in numbers. With a little snarling and non-lethal clawing my pack has doubled.

"Let's get some more rats while they sleep." My original group is pretty full, but the new comers need to see me as a provider. I quickly find a colony. Too big. Would be a waste. I find a smaller group a little further away. I send out the location to the entire group. My originals know what this means, give a screech and take off. The new comers race

after them. Soon all are feasting again. Again, I have to participate. Hope I do not get any parasites. Side effects.

Then I think. Fire would be nice. Of course, White and Owa used fire in the fort. I open a portal and stick my branch into the fire until it lights and then pull it out. This makes everyone back off from me. I ignore them. I am the alpha. I make a small fire from twigs and small logs near by. I then spear one of the rats and hold it over the fire. They come closer, curious as to what I am doing.

The fur burns off quickly charring the skin and sealing in the juices. Once done I pull it out of the fire and blow on it to cool, then pull it apart to eat. I offer some to the bravest of my group. He is surprised. I hope I do not have to mate with him now. Would not work on so many levels. Soon others are finding branches and trying to do the same thing. Most get burned of course, or char the flesh so madly it is nothing but carbon, but they persevere. Partly because it really tastes better and partly to prove their bravery.

Does not take long for everyone to get full. Okay, took some time and a lot of wasted food. The rat colony is decimated. White says they are a nuisance. I just made it easier for the raps to do their job.

We are soon all in one large ball sleeping it off. I do not sleep of course, but pretend to, to be included. A good day's work.

It is not all play though. I nearly lose my hand a few days later. It was all play, wrestling, but I am not as strong as them, so I have to be extra careful in the excitement of the moment. It is really easy to lose focus.

I am finally allowed to see and interact with the young ones. I knew they were around, in hidden locations, but I pretended not to know. I don't want to lose their trust.

Like birds, the newly born, live births, bond with the first one they see. They do not open their eyes for two days. Not as helpless as Hu, but not fully functional either. The parents chase everyone else away when it gets close to time. Obviously I will never give birth to a rap, but there is one instance where a pair have triplets instead of the usual twins (not identical). The parents would normally abandon the weakest of the three. So, I become a surrogate mother unintentionally. "Squeak" follows me everywhere, always hungry. I never want to have a kid. Never. I do not need to actually sleep, but all this means is that I never get a break.

I don't have a birthing nest like the others, nor a mate to help, so Squeak comes with me everywhere. I weave a sling so I can carry her where ever I go.

It turns out Raps are highly imitative and watch everything I do. They

can't make a fire, but they can take a flaming stick from one location to another. I am waiting for them to burn down the forest by accident. There have been enough burns so far to keep them cautious. It will only take one forgetful instance though. I exaggerate making a large clear space around my fire, with lots rocks as shields. When I move to a new location I also use large leaves to carry water to the fire to drown it. I know this will be copied without understanding now. Hopefully knowledge will come with time.

When they see me weaving soft leaves and vines together, others try to do the same. No big deal, as I was taught in art class how my ancestors did the same. Of course the materials are different here, and I doubt it will last very long. Anyway, some are better than others. When they see what I do with it and Squeak, they get very excited. Apparently being stuck in one location with a slow infant is a real handicap. It makes the young and old more susceptible to attack. Other raps are the principal threat, but even raps can be overwhelmed by a kerakk migration and other critters.

A month later most of the raps who have kids are carrying them with them when we need to move fast. It has vastly increased our range. Squeak no longer needs to be carried, running along side this poor slow Hu. She is already half my size. I am guessing the improved nutrition from cooking our food may have helped.

Our troop, can't really call it a pack any more. Too big. People come and go as they please and I have long ago stopped trying to learn all of their names. I know the core and that seems to be enough. The others help protect me and have taken care of most of the administration duties. I can't impose my beliefs on them and try to adapt as much as I can.

I have no idea how far away from the fort I am, at least a kilometer, and I really do not care. They abandoned me to their game and I know their TP ability can find me any place on the planet. I am kind of surprised that we have not run into any more Di. The retreat center must be really remote. Do penitents walk the whole way? I have heard of such behaviors among Hu.

I start to get worried when we meet another pack we have never met, who are also carrying their young. It was an obvious thing to do. I am sure I am not the only inventor. When I see they have fire too, I get more worried.

You are in so much trouble in so many ways I cannot even begin to count. White of course. Owa would not care.

Ah, ha. And where were you when I came back and a game was more

important than your only student. And how many skills had I learned in only one day, much less more than a month? Any of your other students do that?

You told me they were no more intelligent than dogs. Not what I have seen. They are communal. Have a language of sorts. Work well together, are willing to learn new things. I could go on, but way more intelligent than dogs. From what I read, we are supposed to never show favor to one species over another. I have not. I worked with what you left me with.

She has a point. Not up to the Cat level of course and not hard to be better than a dog.

Stay out of this Owa, this is my world.

White appears in front of me. Clearly pissed. Squeak immediately runs and hides behind me. He looks around. The rest take up a stance to protect me, circling around me, all holding crude spears. Two with flaming torches. Di are their worst nightmare.

“This is not Di territory. You are not wanted here. Do not interfere.”

He growls at me, “You are going home and everyone here will be destroyed. It is your fault, so don’t look at me that way.”

“So, you are going to destroy every Rap on the planet? The contamination, as you seem to see it, has spread. The cat is out of the bag. You could not stop this without destroying your own ecology.

In a month I have not seen a single Di. We are not a threat to you. The only reason they came anywhere near you was because that was their food was. The retreat center is in the middle of the Rap world. Who decided that? They only attack you because you attack them. It is not me breaking the rules, it is you.”

This is why I do not argue with her. Owa appears next to me.

“Both of you, just leave. I will have to call a council meeting to decide. I will book no more interference. You will have to do your training elsewhere. You two are hereby banned from Earth One. That means the rest of the Hu and any Cat TKs as well.”

“I doubt you have the authority, but so be it. Any mistakes I have made were made with no comment at the time by you, my instructor. It is as if you did not care. You did not supervise nor instruct. Just telling me to figure it out myself and go play would not hold up in any court of law.” I have already warned everyone to run as far as they can. We are alone in the clearing. I was just stalling for time.

“Take us home Owa.” This time my eyes are open. I intend to learn how to DS between worlds. This is not over.

The Middle of Nowhere

We come out in Hell itself. The ground is at least fifty degrees Centigrade. Squeak immediately jumps on my back and I am jumping from one foot to another.

“Owa! Move us now!”

We jump again and are outside our home. A place I thought I would never see again, I was sure. It was morning on Di, but looks to be late afternoon here. No one about. No idea what day it is. Cold. Must be December or January by now if time runs at the same rate, there is snow on the ground. From fire to ice. Feels good, but I am only wearing a severely worn out nightgown.

Where were we Owa?

A side trip to a brown world. Need more practice.

I run inside with Squeak still attached. Once in an enclosed space I see Mr. Smith and Jones staring at me with mouths open and food in hand. Then they react. To my smell. The expression is priceless.

“I think a bath might be a good idea.” They both emphatically nod without a sound. Squeak makes what must be strange noises to them. They notice her for the first time and their eyes go even wider.

“Yes Squeak. Two more monkeys. Young males. They are safe and will not hurt you. You can play with them or be rained on with me.”

“Rain!” She is getting good at some English. The boys are frozen. I can’t help but turn away from them and smile. Owa has curled up in her corner pretending to be sleeping. She is certainly partly responsible for my situation.

Squeak played with the shower controls the entire time. The most fun she has ever had in her short life. My gown is ruined and I throw it into the trash and wrap a towel around myself. Coming out into my room Puu is waiting.

“You’re alive!” She runs up to me and gives me a hug. Squeak growls at her.

“It’s okay, she is my sister, ah nest mate.” She looks up at Puu curious, then sniffs her.

“Is that really a dinosaur?”

“It’s complicated. Technically this is one of the forms that evolved from them. This is Squeak, my daughter, ah adopted daughter that is.”

I turn to Squeak, “This is my sister, Puu.” Squeak attempts to say it, but it comes out more like, “Poo.”

“Close enough,” Puu says, “I have been called worse.”

“We should probably go outside, Squeak has never been in a house before and is not, ah potty trained. They have habits more like birds.”

“Whatever is below you is your toilet.”

I look out the window, “Shit, she has never seen snow before today either. Used to a tropical environment. This is going to get very complicated. I need help.”

“Why is she even here? I am surprised you were allowed to bring her from her home.”

“I did not ask. The reigning TK was threatening to kill everyone and I could not let him kill Squeak. I told the others to run, but Squeak stayed with me. Not her fault, that is what the young ones do. I am afraid I imprinted her by mistake, sort of, she was going to be killed or abandoned by her parents.”

“And you could not let that happen. I am guessing this is not the only TK rule you have broken.”

I snap at her, “It would have been nice if someone had told me what these freaking rules were before I broke them. Then at least I would know to come up with an excuse ahead of time instead of making one up afterwards on the fly.” Puu laughs.

“So, nothing has changed.”

“Nope.”

“How smart is she?”

“Knows about a hundred words in English. Can understand more than she can speak of course. Probably several hundred in Rap.”

“How old is she? That is amazing. You were only gone a few months.”

“She was born about the third or fourth day after I arrived. Long story.”

“That makes her more intelligent than any Hu I have ever heard of.”

“Tell that to the Di who think they are the equivalent of annoying feral dogs. The only reason they do not exterminate them is because they need them to keep down the rodents.”

“Which Squeak prefers raw I assume.”

“Ah, no, she prefers cooked. Another part of my crimes. I taught them fire.”

“Is that all?” She looks at me horrified.

“Ah, I also taught them spears, working together is better, organization of government, how to find hidden rodents, oh, baby carriers, which led to clothing and possibly jewelry.”

“In three months!” I nod.

“Do you insist on over achieving at everything?” She is both smiling and shaking her head. I shrug.

The boys burst in, “Did you see the dinosaur?” They look around the room, but Squeak is back in playing with the shower.

“Squeak, stop it and come in here now!” She comes in but the shower is still running. I go to turn it off, but it stops on its own.

“That’s weird. Self aware shower now? When did that happen?”

“When I was upgraded to TK3.”

“What talents did you get?”

“Scanning and TK. Why, what did you get? Something sure made a mess of the bus when we were upgraded.”

“Shit I forgot. Are you okay Puu? You were not raped?”

“No, I was awake when it happened. I am used to your nightmares, so this was nothing new, except for the loudness. Besides, it was from your point of view. Strange seeing myself being raped without feeling anything. Like a weird 3D movie with some actress.”

“Great. I was so worried.”

“So, what did you get? I am assuming not TK or you would have turned off the shower yourself.”

“Scanning, we are the same. As to the other,” I pop to the other side of the room. “Can’t do TK for the life of me. Certainly would have been useful at times. But, I have adapted.” I bubble an apple from the kitchen and start to eat it. The boys are staring at me again with their mouths open, having forgotten all about Squeak.

That’s when we hear a growl of the Cat kind and a yip from Squeak who comes running in to hide behind me.

“Don’t mess with Owa if you want to remain alive Squeak.”

“Bad!”

“Yes, bad.”

“Amazing. And the Di do not see the Rap as sentient?”

“Nope. To be fair, before meeting Owa would you have thought cats were sentient.”

“Still don’t.” We are rewarded by a loud hiss and we both laugh.

“Ah Cat, I do not mean to be rude, but what is that smell?”

“My nightgown. It was the only piece of clothing I had the entire time. Not really a problem. It rained a lot and it was freaking hot, so I did not need anything more, but I slept with the Raps, so it, ah, picked up their natural odor.”

“Squeak is going to take daily baths in that case.” I nod in agreement. Squeak does too.

“Didn’t you make toys for her to play with?”

“Of course. Alas, she managed to break all of them. She is insanely curious and likes to take things apart. We REALLY need to keep an eye on her.”

“I have already prevented at least a dozen disasters Cat. We need a solution.”

“Not a cage. I could not survive her being in a cage.”

“No, I am thinking maybe it would be good for you two to spend time with my teacher. He was infinitely better than what you got.”

“I concur.” Turtle has arrived. “Sorry I am late. Welcome home Cat. I understand from Owa your time was not entirely good.”

“No one told me the rules. No one explained anything in fact. I was left entirely on my own. I used and learned everything on my own.”

“Owa was distracted. Please to demonstrate and explain.” Okay.

^RI am fluent in Rap.^R “Used TP to learn that, and being among them for three months. I was not sure of the time until Puu told me how long I was gone. I can do a Rooi sphere up to ten meters.” I make a ten centimeter one. “I can make a portal large enough to use for transport up to one kilometer away.” I make one to behind a hill nearby where no one is present. The setting sun fills the room. I collapse it. “I can scan of course up to one kilometer. By the way, Owa will give birth soon. I saw them inside her on the first day. And I can do the traditional DS.” Popping across the room again.

“As you can imagine, there being no TK male Cats around, Owa has a lot of difficulty with her pregnancies and is not entirely at fault. White should have known better, but again, the political situation there is precarious at the moment and needed most of his attention. It was not intentional to leave you alone.”

“But shit happens.” She nods. Squeak is keeping an eye on Owa from the doorway. A cat shut inside for the first time would be freaking out. Squeak must really trust me. As I am not freaking out she must assume it is safe. I sense nothing from her other than curiosity.

“Puu is correct that Squeak cannot stay here where others might see her. I will have to instruct the boys not to talk. That won’t be easy. Fortunately a live Rap is not something believable and boys their age have active imaginations anyway.”

“They are likely to be obsessed with dinos for a time as it is,” Puu says. When did she grow up?

“Does not help that Sauron was a dino.”

“He has not been found yet has he?”

“No, but he likely knows of us. Keep your guard up. We are convinced that Qr'thn raised the two of you two TK levels and the boys one. This would not have happened if something was not eminent.”

“So, who was Puu's teacher?”

She smiles and Squeak and I pop. Shit.

We arrive, if you can call it that in total darkness. Not a real problem for me, but Squeak is nervous. Puu pops in disoriented a meter away.

A glowing sphere appears and slowly gets brighter. The room is roughly a cube with nothing in it. No windows, doors, nothing.

I scan as I am sure Puu is doing too. We are only about ten meters below the surface. I sense nothing else above us. Nothing but air, I am guessing. I hope. I make a small bubble to the surface and it becomes a sphere of light similar to the first one.

Puu sees this and rises above the first sphere to get a better angle.

She rises further, almost touching the ceiling, “I can see your sphere about the same distance away as it is here. Just ordinary desert ground above us.”

“Do we go up or wait here? The air will run out eventually.”

“Squeak will hate it up top. Too dry and the ground too hot for her.”

“We need air, so figure it out Cat.” She looks at me like I am being stupid.

“Yeah, okay.” I do a series of bubbles making a path with gentle slope to the surface. Turns out we are inside a hill and I have made a tunnel nearly level to the outside. I should have seen that. Worked anyway though.

“Just a guess, but I suspect we are to make this our home. Let's get to work. Even if we do not stay, it will be good practice.”

“There is dirt above us, but stone part way down. I can cut out chunks of rock to make tables, sleeping nook for Squeak. You don't sleep do you?”

“No, though I sort of miss it. I do try to keep quiet for a few hours each day just to orient myself.”

“What, and not be stupid impulsive like me? Ah Puu.” She smiles.

I make a stone sphere with a hollow center and give it to Squeak to play with. She is soon chasing it around the room. Kids. We make a cooking vent to the roof. That gives us a breeze of sorts.

Puu then uses TK to make the stone ball fly in random directions. Soon Squeak is bumping into us randomly. Puu sends the ball out the exit.

“She will be back once she gets hot.”

“Hopefully worn out by then. We need bedding for her and water.”

I scan down and find a pocket of water. I make a stone bowl and DS a bubble of water to it. “We have water. There is more down there when we need it.”

“There is nothing alive within one kilometer I am afraid. And we don’t have the ability to make our own food yet.”

An old man appears at our entrance with an old fashioned stop watch in his hand. Puu runs up to him and gives him a hug.

Squeak comes back in, sniffs him and yips as a warning.

^RDon’t mess with him Squeak. He is one of us. ^RHow did I know that?

“You must be Cat. Pleased to meet you. I am guessing the fact that Puu is back so soon is because of trouble?”

“And you are?” Rude male.

“I am sorry, I thought it was obvious. I forget she did not train under you. Or was trained at all unfortunately. Cat, this is Silver, Silver, Cat.”

“You don’t look very owl like. How was I supposed to know?”

“Sauron can change form too. You did read the books?” I nod.

“It has been a tough day. Sorry. An honor to meet you TK Silver.”

“Why, Cat, I have never seen you so formal.” She teases me.

“Hey, I can be polite when forced to.” I don’t want to be turned into a toad. He smiles at me.

“We had to come here because Owa is, ah, indisposed.” Squeak yips and jumps on my back as a way of getting attention. I hold her in place. She likes being in contact with me.

“Amazing. A raptor correct?”

“My adopted child actually. You heard me talk to her in her own language. She is sentient, well as much as a three month old can be.”

“Good Squeak.” She says in response to my speech.

“Yeah, she knows some English too.”

“Three months?” I nod.

He smiles wide, “It seems we truly have found our Rachael.”

“I prefer Cat.”

He shrugs, “She used many names over fifty million years too. I am sure you will this time as well.”

Puu comes into the conversation, “We are still missing many. I think I know of two more, but they have not manifest yet, that I know of.”

“Go on please.”

“I believe that Marie, our Kung Fu instructor may be James. A friendly young man, Mike, may be Edwin.” I nod. Both make sense.

“Turtle and I can raise them if they check out. Good work.”

He turns to me, "So, how much trouble did you cause?"

I sigh, "All Hu and Cat are banned from the Di earth. Forever."

He laughs, "White is stressed out. He was so much nicer when he was not in charge of so much."

"Ah, Turtle mentioned something to that effect." Still not used to calling her that.

Then I remember, "He said something about others coming for training. I guess we will miss out on that. I am sorry. I just did not know."

"Like that would have made a difference Cat? You have to do what you believe, no matter what."

"Hmm, will have to keep that in mind and send you on all the difficult missions. I am sure we can get Marie to go too." He smiles, but I am not sure he is not serious.

"Too bad we have not found Q yet and the Three Musketeers would be complete again." He smiles.

"How are Mr. Smith and Jones coming along?"

"Apparently they were uplifted to TK1, scanning, not TP when Qr'thn got us."

I comment, "Aren't they kind of young for this?"

"I was sixty eight the first time I was upgraded. We don't have time I am afraid."

"Doc, Hey Long, Fa and Rooi especially would be good to find."

"We have candidates on other earths. See if you can find Ron and Daniel."

"My father is dead I am afraid."

"Likely not your father this time. He was very attached to the K! The last time I met him. Might have gone straight there this time. We will just have to keep our minds open."

"Do we have to find the old ones? Might there be some new people who would work out?"

"Cat you did not pay attention to the books. Certain combinations of the thirteen come up time and time again. It is those combinations we need, not the particular person. We look for personalities, not species or names."

"Right, must have skimmed over that part." Most of it actually. Sigh. Squeak is snoring.

"When she wakes I will need to feed her. She is overdue as it is."

"Right. This should work for the time being."

A metal bowl appears full of what looks like something from a feed bin at a farm store. He takes a handful and pops them one at a time into

his mouth with apparent satisfaction.

Puu sighs and takes a few with less enthusiasm. I take one and gnaw on it and spit it out.

“Cardboard would taste better.”

“Cat, this is SAP Chow. From the books? Remember?”

“You mean, you remembered how to make this across incarnations?”

“Ooh, good word for it. It was not that hard. Just a variation on Purina monkey chow. Good for them is good for us. Should be good for your Rap as well.”

“She has a name. You higher TKs are speciests. And, it may be good for us, but now I know why monkeys throw it at people along with their . . .”

“Cat, be nice!”

All the same I hand one to Squeak and she loves it. Silver smiles and continues to eat his.

“You do know Raps are carnivores. They rarely eat plants.”

“Should not harm her. Maybe a bit of gas is all, oh, and increased output.”

“Lucky for you she does not throw it.”

“I am sorry Silver, she was raised by you-know-who.”

“Yes, that would explain a lot. How is the old rug?”

Okay calling Owa an old rug is just too close to her personality.

“She does sleep a lot. Good analogy actually.” I am laughing so hard I can barely get this out. Puu starts laughing at my laughing. Silver just shakes his head.

Turns out I am not limited to one kilometer, just one kilometer jumps. We have been put out ten kilometers from the nearest tiny outpost. No one knows us there. Silver gives us enough money for basic supplies, though I know he could make anything we need. He says it is good practice.

We fix up the place as well as we can, adding glass windows and a door, that Squeak very quickly figures out. She does not go far in the heat and emptiness anyway. She is always waiting for us when we return from foraging. She and Silver get along great. I think he is teaching her stuff as well, out of curiosity, boredom or some plan I don’t know. Works for me so I do not comment.

We have homework too. Turtle has been sending information on our potential candidates and her own thoughts. We all agree that Mike and Marie should be included. There is no immediate rush. They are very important to the Hopi community too, so we really do not want to mess

that up before we have to. We also all agree the boys are too young for another upgrade. That leaves about twenty people we are still thinking of. It is a big decision to pluck someone out of a normal life, family, hopes and dreams. Granted with the event just over the horizon, it is only time that keeps people thinking their lives will continue. We know from past incarnations that none so far have skipped this step. None. Shit, really, shit.

I am not complaining personally, mind you. I am much better off where I am now than were I was when my parents died, even before my parents died actually. San Jose was not that great. But I know my life has been weird. Most people do not have this much ah, drama. Besides, I would have missed out being with Squeak. Never thought I could love another being this much. Two months after returning to Hu earth and she has grown both in size and abilities. She is only five months old. She will reach adulthood at 24 months. Well, technically Hu are adults at eighteen, but can get pregnant at thirteen, so many two is really the short end and three years may be more adult. So, if we equate their three years as our eighteen years, then thirty six months to full adult, she is not even three years old by our time line. Most Hu three year olds can talk, not a lot, mostly questions and the most important word, "No!" Squeak is near fluent in Rap and Hu. I think Silver may be teaching her owl too.

When you think about it, it starts to make some sense. They normally run in small packs. It is easy to become separated from your pack in an attack of prey or from the outside. The faster you can adapt to a new pack, the better your odds. Each pack seems to have their own variations on key words. I read the Chinese did this too to prevent enemies from understanding the orders given to their soldiers.

I hope my pack are okay and White did not find them and kill them. If there is anything like a United Worlds, then I would gladly testify that the Di were blowing it in regards to the Raps. The Raps are clearly sentient. To deny this and treat them like vermin is wrong, very wrong. Long standing beliefs or not, I have shown White they are wrong. Wake up people! I am out of the equation though. At least for now. They will not leave me out when I reach TK7 or above though. White should of all people, know better. You don't get to TK8 by being blind.

Rogues rarely make it past TK3 in fact. Puu and I are TK3. I have not seen any indications either of us are in trouble. The power has not gone to our heads, that I can see. Hope it would be visible to us. I could be crazy and not sense anything was wrong? I am not running a rampage and trying to take over towns or killing everyone is sight. Have not killed

anything since running with the pack in fact. That was cultural. Can't say I was happy about it either. Definitely no blood lust.

I am all caught up on chores and have some time off. Granted, it is the middle of the night, but I need to be creative. And I have some new tools to play with!

I bubble a two meter sphere of solid stone to the surface. Yes, I realize I have just left a whole in the rock below me. Hopefully that won't cause any problems. Now for the fun. Using decreasing sized bubbles I carve away at the stone to make my sculpture. Even though this is way easier than hammer and chisel, it still takes me most of the night.

Done, I go inside. Everyone is pouring over the files.

"I'm done."

"That's nice Cat. Take a look at this one."

"Doesn't anyone care about what I made?"

"You do remember we can all scan? We have seen it."

"Looks better in the light."

"Squeak likes it and put her mark of approval on it."

"Shit!"

"Nope, pee."

I go outside and it is gone! What the?

I run back inside, "Where did it go?" I look straight at Silver. I know Puu can't move something that heavy, weighs more than the thousand kilograms. Best she could do would be to knock it over.

"I thought it would be fun to put it outside the Bodega."

"What?" I am laughing imagining what they will make of it.

"We can go later after they open and explain that these creatures used to live in the area and this is our way of saying thanks."

"You did not have the right." He looks at me sternly.

"Okay, but it would have been nice to have been told."

"Cat, you just were. I have a crazy idea. Make lots of little ones, twenty centimeters should work. They can sell them to tourists. Would keep you busy anyway."

"Squeak needs feeding." Silver smiles.

I look straight at them and bubble a twenty centimeter Rap to my hand carved in one piece from the stone under us. I certainly know the shape well enough have spent the entire night on it.

It moves to Silver through the air. TK of course.

"Impressive. You did a Rooi bubble the exact shape you wanted. Amazing amount of detail too. Very impressive. I cannot remember anyone being able to do this before."

Puu rolls her eyes. *Of course, the great and wonderful Cat Bear does it again.*

I really do not try and be a pain. Sorry Puu.

“Bet you did not know Owa had her kittens. Three males and a female.”

“What? Why didn’t she tell me? We are certainly within TP distance for her.”

“Have you heard anything from her in the last two months? It is because we are with Silver.” She looks at me like I am the most stupid person in existence.

“Guess I really am clueless about social stuff. Sorry.”

I concentrate and make twenty more of the statuettes. Every shelf is now covered with them.

“Cat, there are too many. These will weigh too much to move safely. They are stone, they are fragile. They will break. Think Cat, think!” She storms out of the room. Silver raises an eyebrow.

“Oh crap!” The world goes dark and my head is in extreme pain.

I wake up. There is a plate of chocolate waiting for both of us. Puu is coming out of it too.

“No rape this time Cat. Thanks for that at least. What level are we at?”

I scan. I can just reach the Bodega as Silver called it.

“TK4 I think. Otherwise I would be able to reach home. We mustn’t have that must we.” I give Silver a dirty look.

Puu asks, “If we are TK4 now, what level are you now?”

“Same. I do not change levels.” He smiles mischievously.

I ask, “Did you do this one?” He shakes his head no.

“In the books Qr’thn raised you one level each month approximately. How come we are different?” He shrugs. Not much bothers him. Very different from the ‘old rug’ who gets pissed about everything.

“Squeak! What happened to Squeak?”

“Let’s just say, she will not need to open the door any more.”

“Aha! That proves she is sentient. A non-sentient does not get TK abilities. I knew it!”

“Awfully young though. If she upgrades every five months, she will be a handful when she is an adult.”

“Already is,” I whisper.

“Back to work people. We lost almost a day this time. I took the liberty of delivering the small statues on a push cart. I explained they were a gift. The owner was confused at first and then got really excited. It will place Lone Pine on the map.” I noticed he immediately got ideas on

how the entire town could become involved making all kinds of rap paraphernalia.

Puu laughs, “Serves you right Cat. Even you will become sick of them soon enough.”

In shock I answer, “I strongly suspect you are right. White kept warning me about ‘side effects’. I should have listened.”

“White is a good person. We all come with prejudices and a past. The good ones figure this out and adapt. Even if it hurts.” Foreshadowing?

New Ones

There are times when Cat drives me crazy. She is SO impulsive. She never thinks before she acts. I am the younger one but feel way older than her. Yes, she has been through a lot, but everyone has. I don't even remember my real parents. I have had to put up with Owa longer than she has. Marie almost got me once too. Granted I have never been raped, except in Cat's dreams, much less gang raped. I have not had to put up with gangs, drugs, police and all the rest she grew up with. She also have a LOT going for her. A black belt in three months. An amazing artist in almost any media she touches. Now a TK. I grew up with the books, she barely read them. Not fair.

Turtle keeps reminding me that people are different. We need all kinds in the coming times. I would probably try and negotiate with Sauron. Cat would attack without a blink. Guess which one would survive. Not me.

How come she got DS and I got TK. What can I do with TK besides push pebbles at near supersonic speed? I can kill. Great. Okay I have to give her credit for doing things with DS that not even Silver knew could be done. Ahhhh! Blast her creativity. It is so easy for her. Ahhhh!

TK4 means I can move ten thousand kilograms at one meter per second. Great, I can toss boulders now instead of just pebbles. And pebbles at hypersonic speed. I can blast holes in buildings. I need to find a creative outlet or I will go crazy too. Hmmm, 10,000 kg. I could build a pyramid if I could get Cat to cut bricks for me. I really do not want to be dependent on her.

I have to give credit to Silver who was a way better instructor than Owa and White obviously, whatever the circumstances. I passed the bubble dye test quickly. I can 'fly' when I need to, and gracefully. The Kung Fu training helped a lot there. It was hard for me to stop showing my hand by using my hands. The hand plays no part in TK. I had to wear my hands tied behind my back while I practiced. It is so instinctive to point. I argued that if my adversary sees me pointing all the time, they will think this necessary and try to tie me to prevent my ability. Then I will show them it is not necessary. Silver argued that it has to become reflex. One rarely has time to think carefully in an emergency. If I practice with my hands and then can't use them I will hesitate.

This was reinforced by Silver TKing pea sized stones at me to test me at random times. At first it was slow enough I could see them coming and bat them out of the way. They go so ever much faster now. No time for

thought. I am on perpetual scan mode. I never even think about it any more. Background reflex. He rarely gets me now. Granted, I am not ready to face a gun just yet. Silver assures me he tosses them at me as fast now, but the sound. It would totally spook me. If I wait for the sound, I will be dead.

One very nice aspect to TK is shielding. Cat can DS out of trouble. I can shield against it. I could walk through a Medieval battle and not suffer a scratch. A football game and not feel a bump. I could walk through a pile of gravel and it would rearrange itself around me. Okay, looks impressive, not sure it is really useful. Hu are so two dimensional. Yes, there are airplanes and drones, etc., but the normal flat lander does not even think to look up. Coming down from above. Now that impresses and throws people off very nicely.

Not that I have much practice, being all alone for ninety percent of the last three months. I was back all of two days before Cat showed up and we all had to move out again. Not just me and Silver. Now we have Cat and Squeak.

Ah, Squeak. She is supposed to be Cat's responsibility, her adopted child, yet I do most of the cleanup and servicing. A TK4 and I am a lizard's servant. Not fair! Granted Squeak has some enduring traits too. She is so clever and curious. She loves games and hide the treat. As TK4 I can now rearrange at the molecular level. Not at the atomic level yet. I can't transmute matter, like turn lead into gold, but I can rearrange something into a different shape. This means I can make the most intricate puzzles for Squeak to figure out. It is so much fun watching her with a new toy. And, it stretches my mind in the third dimension, which pleases Silver. Now that Squeak can DS her range will be extended. It won't help her solve the puzzles until she gains scanning. Maybe next upgrade dear.

"Incoming! Incoming!" Cat pops into the room looking for some piece of clothing, throwing everything all over the room like a tornado. Sigh. Guess who will have to clean it up? Right, me again.

"Well, come on, we are about to have visitors."

"Visitors? We never get visitors. Who would want to visit us?" Squeak is already at the door begging to be let out. That's strange. She can DS. I scan the door. Ah, someone has added another door. The space between is not large enough for her, so it prevents her from DSing into the space. That has to be frustrating. I open the first door and she uses DS to get past the second. Like a puppy dog.

I can hear her welcoming everyone. At least two. Not Hu! Not Hu!

Oh, thank goodness. Something new. But why here? I grab a bag of Silver's horrible SAP chow. Everyone is hungry after travel. Maybe even hungry enough to eat some.

I am the last one out, not being able to DS. Sigh. Everyone else is gathered around the two new comers. A Ba and a Ku I am guessing. They don't look happy, very nervous in fact.

Turtle is the apparent lead, "We welcome two more to our growing TK family, Flor from Ku Eden and Alessa from Ba Eden. Eden is another word for the source earth. They are both TK1 for the moment and very confused. Please do not freak them out with too many questions or sudden moves." She looks straight at Squeak when she says this. Good.

I understand partly why Owa has abandoned Cat now. Squeak is just a dino dog. Owa hates dogs. To have Cat embrace one is blasphemous at least. That and her attention has to be on her kits of course.

"My name is Squeak!" Too loud Squeak and they don't speak English.

I open my bag and take one of the horrid things out and eat it. I then pull more out and offer them to the two. They each take one. Flor is the first to try one. She eats it, but does not reach for another. Alessa is more shy.

It is okay Alessa. Not great, but will feed you.

^You speak Ba?^

I shake my head then realize that she probably does not know what that means. *I do not speak Ba yet. I can mind speak. Don't worry, I will not invade your privacy.*

^I am unworthy of your concern. I am nobody.^ I offer the pellet again and she takes one this time.

^Good, thank you.^

You are welcome Alessa. You are most welcome to our community.

Silver TPs just me, *I have quickly prepared more dwellings suitable to their needs. The one with the low perch is for Flor. Alessa will sleep on a pad on the stone floor. This is what she is used to.*

"Everyone, this was an emergency rush action. We barely got them out in time and they have been passed between a half dozen TKs each. They are tired and confused. We need to allow them rest and time to orient themselves."

It seems everything we do is emergency rush lately. I miss the simple going to school, dojo and morning runs.

I take Alessa and Flor by their front appendages. They sort of look like hands, but I do not want to assume. Alessa has flaps that go all the way up her arms and are attached to her side and wears a simple white

robe, slit at the side to accommodate this. Flor has feathers all over her body and wears very little, just a tool belt.

Come with me. I will show you to your rooms, show you where you can take of personal needs and the communal food area. Feel free to eat anything that appeals to you. I have no idea what you will like.

I lead them into the new quarters that Silver has just made. There are glow bulbs all over the open area. He did a much better job than Cat and I did with ours. Looks like decorated ties on the walls and larger less ornate ones on the floor. When I look closely I see a subtle owl theme. Cute.

The new communal food area appears well stocked with lots of types of food I have never seen before. Strawberries! I can't resist and grab a strawberry and put it in my mouth. I offer one to each of them and this sets off a feeding frenzy as we are the only ones in the room at the moment. Far less intimidating than a whole crowd watching you.

Flor gives me a strange look moving from one foot to the other. Universal sign I guess.

I laugh and show her where the restrooms are and how to flush. Just a hole in the floor. This was a rush job and everyone can figure this out, no matter their anatomy. Alessa watches then waits her turn. Surprised Silver did not use a composting toilet, but they are likely nervous about being different and this gets rid of the problem. I scan and see a large tank on the roof to supply us for awhile. Oh God, I can just see Squeak now playing with the flusher. She really is just a little kid no matter how quickly she learns.

Once done I lead each to their rooms. There is straw underneath Flor's perch. She settles right in. Alessa insists on helping to clean up. She will be a welcome treat. Cat is always distracted or too busy.

Silver said they were TK1. It can sometimes take time to notice one now has TK. TK2 punches you in the face. Like Dorothy in black and white waking up in color Oz. I have already scanned their anatomy on instinct. Alessa, a Ba, is mammal like. Her breasts are lower down than Hu, but I assume serve the same purpose. Flor does not have them. Definitely more bird like, but with three fingered hands instead of wings. The mammal can glide, but this bird is earth bound. For now. Both have finger nails tougher and longer than Hu.

You are doing a great job Puu. Please stay the night so there is a known face if they need anything. I will keep everyone else out until they emerge tomorrow. Turtle has gone back to First Mesa.

Got it. Not a problem. We are getting along great. Duh, he knows that.

Alessa comes out in the middle of the night noticing that I am sitting at the table reading.

^May I help get the morning things ready?^

Alessa, I have read your story, assuming you are the same one, abused by brothers and family, taking sanctuary and ending up after a long trip at another abusing home. Just like Sanctuary, you are not a servant. No one will hit you intentionally. Accidents happen. We are all new at this. You will help, but we all help with the mundane duties, even Turtle and Silver.

^What happened to us?^

Well, you are not on the Ba home world any longer. You are on my home world. We are called Hu, short for human. I am a female, like yourself. Silver, the older Hu is in male form at the moment. I grew up with him in a bird form called an owl. Similar to your current house mate, but with the ability to fly well, but no front hands. You will meet a few other forms soon. We all come from some earth variant. Best we go over that as a group.

As to why here, why now? Silver or Turtle could answer that best. I would only be guessing.

^Why do you mind speak and not Hu speak?^

“I can speak in a Hu language called English. I also know Hopi, my home group, and some Spanish.” She looks at me confused. I can read that without getting personal.

There are thousands of Hu languages. Which one would you like?

^Thousands? I thought each sentient species had only one. Ba speak Ba, Dia speak Dia, Ceph show rather than speak. I have not met any others. There were some Hu in our past, but they all died, the last at their own hand. None know their language.^

That explains why you are not having trouble seeing all of us.

^Not my place to question. Most of you are Hu I am guessing. You have one juvenile Dia. Anyone else?^

I am picking up her language quickly. I don't think I can help it, TP being my first TK level.

^We will fix that.^ She is shocked. That we have that in similar. Mouth open.

^Squeak is not a Dia, but a Rap. A possibly new sentient species from the Di world.^

^Di, not Dia?^

^We know of three. Di, Dia and Dio, and finally the Diu. The last are not ready to join the TK club yet.^ I am not convinced about the Rap

either, but don't say anything more.

^How many Hu worlds? How many Ba?^

^At least two of each. The Front passed through this world about a thousand years ago this time I was told. I do not know if it has even reached the Ba world yet, though likely.^

^When do I go back?^

^Likely never. I doubt I will be going back to my home either. None of us are here by choice, but by design. More at the group meeting. You are safer here in that you are alive. Best if you get some more rest. We will have a long day tomorrow.^

^You do not sleep?^

I sigh, ^Side effect of being TK4. Get some rest Alessa. I have my book to read and there is nothing to do here at the moment.^

The next to appear a few hours later is Flor. In her case I think it is because she is an early riser.

+Excuse me, ah, Poo? When does the sun rise?+ Now I have bird mispronouncing my name. And another language to learn. This one will be harder with all the whistles and clicks. Not sure I can even make those sounds.

I do not know your units of time Flor. Soon enough though. It has been a long day.

+Which way is the rising sun?+

It is part of our tradition to have our entrances face the rising sun. I point to the exit. The door is open to allow in fresh air. There is a dull glow, but no sun yet.

+Thank you.+ She leaves to greet the sun I guess. A lot of NA do this and I have certainly seen birds chirping just before sunrise. Guess it is a deep genetic trait.

Alessa must have heard us. She comes out next and follows Flor out after looking at me. I encourage her and then follow. Oh well.

The sun is just peaking over the horizon. Flor is sitting on the ground facing it.

The others are gathering outside as well. Some sit just behind her and keep quiet themselves. At least Squeak does not howl. There is nothing to hunt in the area. There is nothing for kilometers in fact. I am guessing this place was chosen on purpose.

Of course it was. It needed to be far enough away from the wrath of Owa if anyone she does not know gets near one of her kits.

Especially Squeak. She would think they were a snack meant for her.
True. Cat agrees. They do attack anything smaller than themselves

that does not look like it could harm them. Wonder what they would think of a skunk or porcupine. We will never know. I am sure none of the non-Hu earth visitors will be allowed anywhere near others. At least not in their current form.

True. Silver comes over and stands next to me.

“Any problems?”

^I can now speak Ba.^ “Unfortunately Ku is beyond me for the moment.”

+Good that you see that. It is possible for the Hu form to speak it with enough practice, humiliation and horrible accent. The grammar and tone inflections can get you into a lot of trouble.+

“Good to know. Ba by contrast is compact and logical.” He nods.

“Rap is interesting too. Not as bad as Ku, grammar wise. They purposely use innocuous sounds that can carry a good distance and soft notes that only someone right next to them can hear. Almost two different languages.”

“Not to mention all the pack variations to prevent eaves dropping.”

“True. Oh and the hand signs. Three variations.”

“Reminds me of the secret languages teenagers make up to prevent grumps from understanding them.”

“Excellent observation Puu. The old TKs used to use Hopi to prevent norms from understanding them. Third Mesa dialect.”

“No one speaks Third Mesa any longer. Good choice. Some of the words are similar though.” He shrugs.

“So. What happens next?”

“We will decide as a group, with some coaching and limits.”

“Of course.” *Thank you, thank you, thank you.* He smiles at me.

Cat comes up to me, “Puu, we really could use some tables for everyone to sit at. I can DS some thin stone shapes, but they will fall and break without TK to hold them in place until all the supports are in place. Would you help please?”

“You mean you want to stop feeding Squeak out of a bowl on the ground?” I say snarkily. She laughs and nods yes.

“The sun is nearly completely up, we had better hurry then.”

“Picnic table sized?”

“Sounds perfect.”

The first table top appears and I hold it in place as Cat brings in four supports. We move onto the next, making five total. With benches of course. More than we need, but I really think more people will be arriving eventually.

“Maybe a fire pit to cook over?”

“Like a Mexican outdoor oven? Good for bread and pizza.”

“Squash, beans and corn too. Lamb for the meat eaters.”

“Silver can make dupped meat. I feel bad about killing anything at the moment. If Squeak is sentient, I have a feeling most living things may be.”

“Why Puu, are you becoming Buddhist?” She bows to me and smiles like a serene monk. I just shake my head.

We make two ovens, one for vegans and one for carnivores. Separate kitchens at opposite sides of the clearing.

“I can now change the shape of things Cat, but I cannot transmute into new things entirely. We need something for fuel for the ovens.”

“And food. Hopefully Silver will help.”

He does. And Turtle arrives too. Only ones missing are Owa and the boys.

Food of all kinds appears on the tables. A lot of which I do not even recognize. Flor and Alessa apparently do. Some Squeak and Cat do. At the two different food tables. Guess which ones.

“Oh, that is disgusting.” The largest beetles I have ever seen are steaming hot.

“Be polite Squeak. Wait for the others.”

Silver smiles, “It is okay, everyone should eat what they wish. In spite of appearance, nothing here should hurt anyone.”

“Squeak, use your hands. You are not an animal.” Teaching a toddler. Sigh.

Flor and Alessa eat their native food first, but then both become interested in the Hu chow.

Both of your worlds have flowers correct? They both nod after looking at each other.

This is called corn meal mush. It is made from the seeds of a kind of grass. Something my people like to eat. This second bowl is called oatmeal, also popular among Hu, also from a kind of grass seed. Some like to put things on top like fruit or nuts. I like spicy hot peppers. Be careful with these.

Both reach for one. Alessa looks like she is going to explode. Flor reaches for another handful.

+We have these on my world. Wonderful.+

I give Alessa some sweet fruit.

^This will help make the heat less painful. Better stick to the berries.^

Interestingly both love the insects. Guess it is just a Hu thing to avoid

them. Even my ancestors were known to eat grasshoppers. That just creeps me out.

“Gather around and pay attention. Continue eating if you are not finished, but I want to begin. I am using TP for those who have not finished learning English yet. Having both may help you learn.”

We all sit on the ground around Silver so we are all at the same level.

Cat speaks up, “I have a question. The book that describes Flor and Alessa must be at least five years old. Has there been some kind of time warp or has five years really passed.”

Nodding to Alessa, Flor answers, “We both have now read the journals and we both wrote our own stories. It has been five and a half years since they were written. The journals were written when we were first approached by the community to which we have now been invited. We went through training and soul searching during that time in preparation as to whether or not to join this group.”

“Alessa and Flor are up to date about each of us, within a few months anyway.” And with what you were willing to share no doubt. Silver looks at me and smiles. Shit.

“Everyone should be aware by now that Hu is about to experience a crisis. We don’t know exactly when, or even exactly how, but every indication is it will be soon. Flor and Alessa have volunteered to help. They obviously will not be in the open, at least not until after the population has fallen. They will upgrade with everyone the next time Qr’thn visits.” In the books he is able to upgrade people without Qr’thn.

I could, but it is better to follow the ‘thn timing. Safer on all of you.

Cat again, “How was everyone chosen? I really don’t believe I am good enough for this work. I mess up all the time.”

“TKs are special. As you might have guessed, none of us is exactly ‘normal’. We don’t really fit in our cultures. Something in each of us prevents us from ‘making it’ either. None of us are powerful. None of us are rich. None of us are leaders in the classical sense.”

“But you and Turtle are leaders.”

“Not of norms. To continue, we are all defects. Even me. Even Turtle. We are old enough to mask it well. I took the owl form for a reason. No one expects an owl to be good at social tasks, a solitary creature at best. Turtle is weird because she takes in the lost ones, something no other teacher does. She teaches art and Hopi studies, not exactly what the council thinks will advance the tribe. No one can make a good argument why they should not be taught, but she does tend to attract the ‘different’ ones.” He looks directly at Cat who smiles and waves her hands.

“We team of losers.”

“Not how I would say it, but true. As to specifics. Some were chosen by Turtle and myself. Some, by Qr'thn over our suspicions that we might be making a mistake.”

“Here I am, the mistake.” Stop it Cat. Silver ignores her.

“In some ways, we provide a service. By taking on the losers, we help keep them out of trouble.”

I ask, “Will the others we read about show up too?”

“It gets complicated. We can't just pull people without causing suspicion. Flor and Alessa were pulled at their point of death. We duped them and transferred their consciousness to the new bodies. We have done the same with the others, but we could not be everywhere at once, especially while taking care of Puu and Cat at the same time.”

“Must be hard to guess exactly when you need to be there too.”

“Not as hard as you might think. I do have some advantages over the rest of you.” He smiles with an evil grin.

“Squeak good. Not need watching.” We all laugh at that. Squeak has definitely taken on Cat's personality.

I look around and notice Turtle is missing. She must have her hands full with Owa, the kits and the boys.

“I have asked everyone to read the notes on potential candidates other than the chapters you had already seen before accepting your role.” What acceptance? What role?

“As this is a Hu crisis, most of the participants will be Hu. This was done on purpose. Alessa, Flor and the others will adopt Hu form when they reach the ability to choose for themselves what is needed at the time. I think it is also important for everyone to see our ‘natural’ forms to help know our strengths. Their being from outside the Hu culture will give us essential insights.” He does not say see our weaknesses.

“Everyone has seen my owl form. That was how I was born this time around. As you know from my time in the insectoid world, I am comfortable in many forms. Each form has its advantages. And no, the Hu form is not the best, just different.”

Turtle appears, “We have trouble. A drone is coming our way.”

“Deflect it?”

She shakes her head, “Would make them suspicious.”

“Camo or bug out?”

“Let's try camo first. If they send people we bug out.”

Squeak, “Fight!”

Cat sighs, “There are millions of them Squeak.” She TPs what this

means and Squeak runs inside the shelter immediately, peering out scared.

“Camo it is.” A great wind rises and a structure over our entire camp appears. Only a little light comes in. Much cooler at least.

“This will look like the normal terrain from their height. No lights or fires for the next few hours please.” Hmm, can’t make a glow ball and nothing to burn. What will I do? Light farts?

“Unless they see us from several angles.” I say.

“How did they even know to look here? We are nowhere.”

“Cat, satellites. They are always watching. Got one look at Squeak and freaked out.”

“We could claim it was the stone statue we delivered to Lone Pine.”

Silver nods, “Good, but who is going to tell them that? We aren’t here.”

“Oh yeah.” Think first, speak second Cat.

+What are satellites?+

“From your Hu lessons, they are the objects several hundred miles up flying around our world. They have lots of precision telescopes and sensors to watch us with.”

+Some flight school you have.+ He smiles.

“Where is Alessa?”

I scan about and find her inside cleaning up. Sweeping the rooms, she somehow fashioned a broom from bits and pieces. Resourceful for sure.

“We need to break her of her habit of always cleaning.”

“She suffered a lot Cat. You all have in your own ways. Was not an easy life as an owl either, for that matter. Raw mice are not that tasty.”

“Squeak eat mice! Love eat mice!” I roll my eyes.

Turtle tells us, “The drone is directly overhead. It is watching us. Not moving. It thinks something is here.”

“Turtle go to plan B. I will do the clean up here. Everyone, you have two minutes to get anything out of the shelters you want to keep. Everything is going away.” We are certainly getting a lot of practice making new homes.

We rush about like chickens without heads bumping into each other. Alessa and Flor did not bring much with them. It is Cat and me who settled in too much. Okay, mostly me. I was told I was moving. Cat was just moved. The bowls and such she has made she can make again. I decide it is probably true of most of my stuff as well. Need to let go, Buddhist style.

As soon as we all are gathered we move.

Out of the Fire into

We are in some kind of rough stone structure. Metal roof with lots of holes. It is nearly as hot as the desert we were in, but MUCH more humid. I am going to get moldy fast here. It will be impossible to keep clean too. When given a choice between death and being with this group of misfits I am not sure I made the right choice. I was curious though. Damn my curiosity.

There is a broom in the corner. I reach for it and start my work. The bugs I eat of course. Never know when the next meal will be. Some are not so tasty, but I am not picky, not as picky as Puu. She won't touch even the best tasting ones. More for me.

The others run outside I guess to see where they are. We are here, what is there to know. Not like I ever get to choose. Just make the best of it. No one ever improved their life by complaining about it.

Cat looks in, "Looks like we could use some bowls, plate, etc. I can help there. Alessa, you are really good at organizing. I will make what we need and you decide where to put it okay?" I understand much more of this English than I can speak yet. I rarely speak anyway. Tell me what to do and I will do it. Only need to hear.

We have had our scanning ability since we first were met by the one called Turtle. She seems nice. A good listener. I look in all the nooks and cracks. Squeak is going to love it here. A lot of rodents to hunt.

I try speaking to Cat, "Bowls. Need, ah, covers? Little ones many."

"Good Alessa, I understood that. Very good!" She makes jars with tight fitting lids for my inspection. I am shocked she wants my approval. I am nobody. Still I go through the motions and inspect each one. Most lids fit well. We will need to seal them with something as well.

Puu looks in, "I can help. I cannot DS, but I can reshape what's here to fit better. Cat, find some metal to help make seals. A soft metal would be best I think."

"Sure, I have seen some copper bits about. All green though. I can DS the good stuff into a pile. You can then reshape that into something useful?"

"Great. Yes." They get to work. They obviously have worked together before. Squeak looks in.

"Squeak, hunt rats please" I tell her.

"Squeak eat rats?"

"Yes please."

“Bugs okay?”

“Yes.” That should keep her busy and oh, guano! She is running all around knocking everything about.

Cat DSs her outside and she keeps going without a thought. I hope I learn how to do all of this soon.

Flor comes in with a huge cloth bag full of all kinds of fruit and roots. Some flowers!

“Cat make flower devices?” Cat looks at me holding the flowers I had taken from Flor’s gather.

“Sure. Let me think. Something beautiful, not just utilitarian.” She stops making useful items and just stares at the flowers. This makes me nervous. Have I done something wrong?

You are fine Alessa, this is just the way she is. Wait, you will see.

Silver comes in and the beams above us, the window frames and the glass are repairing themselves.

Puu is watching Cat too. Guano, this is getting worse.

All of a sudden rock vases appear then melt into almost transparent vases of the most amazing shapes. The two appear to be working together on this, their minds combined. Even the windows start to have designs in them of mythical beasts, well at least to me. What creature has that long of a nose?

Then I see it and jump a meter into the sky! A snake! I am on top of the table running back and forth, knocking everything off. I can hear crashing, but there is a snake! A snake!

The snake disappears. Where did it go? When will it return?

“It would appear that Ba are afraid of snakes everyone.”

+We are not fond of them either. They can eat our eggs when big enough.+

“Okay, I will make sure the snakes stay away.”

Puu and Cat concentrate and all of the broken pots and vases repair themselves and go back on top of the tables and counters.

“There is a stream outside the back. Puu, try making some ice. Good practice for you.” Silver does that sickening mouth shape I am told is humor. Scares me silly. The most ugly thing I have ever seen.

“Cat, We need an ice box. I know Puu could do this, but you have shown with your sculpture this might be possible for you. We need an insulated box to put the ice in to keep some foods cool.”

“That will be hard. Insulation means trapped air space. Normally I would avoid this as clay with trapped air explodes in the kiln. I won’t be heating it though.”

She practices make a few bricks. Some are so fragile she can push them in with a finger afterwards.

“Hard shell outside. Soft inside?” I suggest.

She concentrates. I can scan and see what she is doing. Fascinating.

“Better, but, ah, some internal structure. Cross bracing. Yes! Thanks Alessa!”

“I happy serve.”

I don’t think the entire process takes more than one eighth sun time. A little over an hour Hu time. We have eight fingers and two opposers just like the Hu. How did they come up with twelve divisions of sun time? Flor might know. She is good at knowledge.

I go outside to see where we are. There are trees! Oh wonderful trees. I climb the one nearest me as fast as I can.

“Alessa, be careful that is a long way up!” Puu sounds concerned.

“Alessa fly!” I leap off to gasps from below and I glide around and around the clearing finally coming to a halt just outside our new home.

+I am so jealous Alessa. I want so much to be able to fly. With these arms instead of wings I will never fly.+

^I was broken most of my life. Only recently able to glide. We cannot fly as true birds you see about us do. I cannot go up, only slowly down.^

“Like hang gliding. Flor, we might be able to help you. Give us a few days.”

Silver looks at Puu, “Be careful. I have other duties too. Be sure you can TK her as a safety measure.”

“Oh, great idea. Way easier. I can TP to hear where she wants to go and then use TK to fly her there.” Silver sighs and shakes his head.

He comes up to me, “Come with me please Alessa.” He offers his hand. Am I in trouble?

We walk down a path near the small stream to a pool. The water is gentle here. Beautiful.

^For taking baths?^ I ask. He smiles.

“Watch.” I watch the water. It makes me go woozy. Then the water moves on it’s own. What? I am awake. Snakes can swim! I see what looks like one coming to the surface and coming towards me. Another one. Silver blocks my way.

^You are feeding me to the snakes? What did I do wrong? I’m sorry. I will be better. I promise.^

Wait, something larger is rising. The snakes are all attached!

I wave my arms, signing, ^Nease! You are alive!^ I run down to the edge and wade into the water gently touching Nease along her arms.

She shows, ~Yes, I thought I was through, but they rescued me just in time and brought me here. I have been learning how to be a TK also. I feel like I am a young hatchling again, fresh from the sea.~

I turn and face Silver with tears in my eyes, ^Thank you Honorable Silver. Thank you!^ I turn back to Nease. She makes a bubble of water above my head that gets me all wet. I wade further into the water to swim with her. We are not natural swimmers, but I trust Nease.

^You need salt. Where are we going to get salt here? We are no where near the ocean.^

Relax Alessa, all will be taken care of. I will leave you two alone to get reacquainted. Bring Nease up to the house when you are ready. Her shoes are here next to the shore. Custom made. He smiles.

~Oh, yes, they are very soft and comfortable.~

Nease and I spend the next several eighths getting caught up. It is too bad she had to abandon her pots, but the Sanctuary needed them more. Can't exactly fake your death and take everything with you. Besides, she hopes to be able to use TK soon to help even more. As I experienced, she can already make Rooi bubbles. It feels so good to be with someone I know at least.

Maybe what comes next won't be as bad now. Puu and Cat have known each other for over a year and they are both Hu females. Besides, this is their world. I don't know any of the rules. Oh, we had history lessons, but all that did was confuse me more. I have always had a simple life, even if it was judged by many as hard. It was what it was. I did not know any better, so it was not that bad to me. Scary at times, but as we have seen I am afraid of many things. Too many snakes here.

I help Nease get into her shoes by holding them for her. She slips right in and we both cinch them up. She does pretty well with them. Not as fast as a land form of course, but we get there.

^I am guessing you have never met a Ceph before?^

“That would be correct Alessa. How do we talk with, ah, male or female.” They can't tell?

^You can TP Cat. She will hear you. Her name is Nease. She is my Teacher on Ba.^

Squeak bounces up and stares at Nease not sure what to make of her. “Food?”

Cat speaks right up, “No Squeak. NOT FOOD. EVER. Person like you. Besides, she would probably eat you first.” Good call Cat, that should keep Squeak careful. The arms swinging around will be a temptation.

Puu puts it better, “You bite Nease and we eat you for lunch.” Squeak backs away carefully, never taking her eyes off Nease. Nease makes a threat sign with two arms up. Squeak squeaks and hides.

Puu does a Ceph bow, well as well as Hu can do, “Pleased to meet you Ceph Nease.” Nease bows in return with all arms in the correct position and the correct patterns on her mantle. Beautiful.

Turtle does a better job, “We are honored. Welcome to our Hell unfortunately.”

She bows again, ~May my service be of good value.~

“I’m sure it will be.”

I am amazed at how fast the small home has taken shape. There is even a large round pool in the center which Nease sticks an arm in.

~Perfect. Just the right amount of salt and a little mag to help relax.~

I am so happy for her.

Squeak brings over a bowl and carefully places it in front of Nease. It is full of fish. Nease shows a thank you to Squeak.

I try my English, “Nease thanks you.”

“Squeak happy!” But she still backs away. Nease takes a few fish in one arm and while covering her mouth with two more arms she tastes them.

~Very good.~

“Nease happy. Not eat Squeak?”

I have to laugh, “No eat Squeak. For now.” Hey, I need to be sure too. This causes both Puu and Cat to hide their own laughs.

Puu comes up to me, “Your English is coming along fast. We only met a few hours ago.”

“Hear much, speak less.”

“Don’t worry, that’s normal. Have to remember you can understand me. No more secrets. Might have to learn Rap.” She smiles. Hu smiles are weird. They look like they want to eat you with all those teeth showing.

The desert was hot during the day. I am told it cools down at night. Sort of cool when we first arrived. Here the humidity makes it much worse. I am used to freezing, not cooking. And it does not really cool down here at night. I have to remember to drink more water. Not easy for me. Was always afraid of having to pee just when some long task was expected.

The trees are all wrong. I am used to tall straight trees with thin leaves. Some of these are tall, but most have huge leaves. I see other creatures eating the leaves, but when I taste them they are horrible. What

I would not give for a nice juicy grub. Only tasted one of them in my life. It was fantastic. I have lived most of my life on gruel made from mashed up leftovers of unknown origin. Even the Sanctuary food was bland. I am sure it was better, but they were under financial constraints.

Here it is totally different. I might even gain weight. Not sure I would like it. I like being loose and flexible. It is fun tasting all the strange foods. Those large beetles are, well I would not mind them again.

It is getting to be dark. Being able to scan is great, but only for things close by. Hmm, if I concentrate I can scan further, but only at a very narrow angle. Strange effect. I have to move my concentration around to paint a complete picture, but at least I can see the entire room.

“Puu, Cat and Squeak are on guard duty. Flor, Nease and Alessa have the night off to rest and get used to our world.”

“Hey, I have never been here before.” Cat says.

“Oh and exactly how different was Di earth?”

“Ah, the plants were different, no birds. Lots of snakes. They competed with the Rap for the rats. Only saw the one Di, so really can’t say.”

“Okay, enough Cat. It was about this temperature and humidity. Lots of wildlife. You will do fine. Besides, we can’t exactly have TK1s do duty yet. They will have their turn. Now be so nice as to show the others to their rooms. Nease of course will stay here in the main room.”

^I will stay here also. Cooler near the pool and we do not need light to hand talk.^

“Flor, please follow me. Were you okay with the perch you had last night? We made it as close as we could to that. Ah, added a window for some air and Puu made a screen out of some scrap metal so you won’t be covered in bugs by morning. The tiny insect we call the mosquito likes to suck blood from warm blooded creatures, which means all of us. They carry parasites too, so avoid being bitten if you can. Silver can cure you, but the itch is annoying all the same and he won’t do anything about that. He calls it payment for some reason.” They are still using TP as well or I would not be able to follow the quick speak.

+Cat. I need to work. Hopefully you will find something for me to do tomorrow. I watched all of you today and I think I can help. I am very creative with found materials even if I can’t do what you do with it.+

“By all means. Not a problem. Just jump in. Both of you are new to our world, but we are all new to each other and it has only been a few months since we received TK too. All is new. It is wonderful. Enjoy! Sleep well.”

They then leave the area and I can no longer hear them well. The stone absorbs sound better than I thought. I clack and it is sucked up fast. I go to a wall and feel it. Ah, covered in life forms and lots of dust. This must be what is absorbing the sound. I look up and clack and the metal roof reflects nicely. Gives me a better image of the room as a whole actually than scanning does with the narrow limit. Scanning has higher resolution. Well, just have to use both I guess.

Squeak is close and looking at me strange.

“Make sound please.” What sound?

“Mean this?” I clack again. She gets excited and tries to make the sound herself. She leaves the room making the sound that she can. I am sure she has no idea why I do it or the many variations there are. It is in fact one of the way we can speak. She is very eager to learn at least.

Once everyone has left I hand Nease who is out of the pool. In this humidity she probably will not have to spend so much time in water as on Ba earth.

~How are you teacher? Are you okay? Anything you need?~

~I am fine and have no needs. Being alive is a great reward for a life of hard work serving the Ba. Now we serve a greater purpose. Wonderful.~

~I am afraid Teacher.~

~I am no longer your teacher Alessa. I am your partner. We are equal in this quest and task. No one will hit you, punish you, starve you or harm you without your willingness. It is likely we will be called on to play roles for a time, to help others, gather intelligence or just out of curiosity.~

~But why me? I am nobody. I am below notice by anyone.~

Nease shows amusement, which I do not understand.

~Alessa, this is a tremendous asset. A super power. It is very hard for someone who has lived with much, who has never had a master, who has never been punished, to assume that role again. They will rebel and be found out. You can go where none here can.~

~Cat has suffered. Flor has suffered.~

~Not the same way. Can you imagine Cat ever being subservient again? Even Flor has changed. She won her freedom by standing up to authority. She would do the same again. Cat does not think ahead. Good in a battle, but not undercover. She will endanger everyone if not watched carefully.~

~Like Squeak.~

~They are perfectly matched are they not?~ He hands amusement

again.

~Never thought that being nobody would be a positive trait. Sleep well Nease. I suspect it will only get more exciting.~

~A truth well handed.~

I retreat to a corner and curl up on the nice cool stone floor. A 'bed' was too soft for me. I am not used to it. This is much nicer, IF I do not gain too much weight. I will have to have discipline and practice fasting, willingly. What a strange idea.

Men

We all feel we have too many females and this may sway things too far in one direction. It could be argued that Cat especially is not exactly feminine in all her behaviors. My culture is not so distinct as to gender roles. Maybe females take the lead more. We are the ones who lay the eggs after all. We tend to be a little larger. It is true that the males tend to fight each other more. We tend to be more territorial. That was all in my past though. After loosing my teaching position and doing time at the re-education camp I think I have lost a lot of preconceptions.

We lost our Watcher teacher unexpectedly and the group scattered. I looked at my medallion forever trying to decide what to do. I keep feeling that this was all part of the test to decide whether or not we could become Watchers ourselves. I lived off the land and did okay considering my lack of experience. I watched communities from the outside to learn how things worked. There had to be a reason we were called Watchers.

Eventually, I guess it was actually inevitable, I ran into the Black Vests. Not wearing a Watcher robe or medallion on the robe, I was shot on site as a vagrant. A parasite on the community. Even though I was neither.

I woke up on a small island with no one about. There was enough food and fresh water, so I would not die again any time soon. I could find no indication of my wound. No idea where I was. I could be a thousand strides from the main land and not know it. Well, I just had practice at being independent, though there is no trash heap here to scrounge from, there are a variety of plants so it was not too much trouble making shelter. I even managed to make a fire which I kept going.

It was several moons before someone finally showed up, a female with nothing on. Nothing to indicate her rank or purpose. She explained the situation and the training I was to undergo. Turned out Watchers was only a word used during the search process for new candidates. Kept us from spilling secrets I guess.

Months later she turned into the Hu form. This allowed me to become familiar with the form and ask all kinds of questions. A few days later I was in the desert with the others. She was not there, in any form. The male one named Silver said there were teams out and not to be concerned. I was safe and from there you know from the others what happened up to this point.

We spent several months in the jungle. The heat did not bother me like

it did Alessa as Ku earth, at least where I was, was also hot, though drier. Ku have, like Hu, covered most of the world and have found ways to adapt. This time I was present during an upgrade and am now TK2. Thank goodness it was TK itself. I cannot float fast, but I can get there. Alessa, after getting over her fear that Nease would disappear, finally made a home up in the trees after the nature of her kind. I can visit her and she can glide down to help out.

She received the gift of micro TK that the Puu has as well. This makes it much easier for Alessa to understand. This greatly facilitates her work with Nease to understand the local sources of plant products as well as experimenting on the Hu. TK will only take us so far. We will have to rely on materials found on location to help those who survive the event. As we don't know yet what that is, it is not possible to stockpile what we will need. Food and water make sense, but where will it be needed? Radiation, Hu are really stupid to develop these weapons, biohazards, at least this takes out Hu and not everything, etc.

The recent discussions have been centered on who to bring in next. Hence the concern about the gender ratio. Mars Loonie we will have to hold till later, even though he is male, as his adapting to current Hu earth would take some time. There is almost no understanding of current conditions. On the other hand, he has had some good experiences with limited size communities and how authority can take a wrong curve that limits or even leads to extinction. He will certainly be a welcome Watcher in my view. Action without understanding is foolish.

The male named Death Watcher is promising. He, like myself, knows how to use local natural materials to survive. Very important after the event. Bringing him in now will allow him to rise up the TK levels to the point where he will be ready immediately. He has my strongest vote.

Hu Mike from the community that Puu and Cat come from is also promising. He is not as experienced as Death at natural materials, but is good at adapting simple tech to get things done. Unless the planet ends up sterilized there is likely to be some tech left behind. My teacher taught me that what she called "Medieval" level was very likely afterwards. Mike could be good, along with my help, in setting this up, with small amount of temporary leftovers from the current culture, which of course I am not good at. So, Mike is my next pick.

The only male in the Far Out trio is Hu Randy. It would be nice to have a TK6 who already understood the gifts, but given his close interaction with the Di and the Crust, it would be a severe hardship to them. True, with their TK they are likely to live some time, but loneliness

can kill anyone eventually. We need to bring them in as a set. At least Hu Randy and Di Droopy should come as a pair. It would appear that Crust Snap may be fine by herself.

Mr. Smith and Jones are definitely too young and TK Turtle would need to come with them. That makes a LOT of people missing in a short time. I am sure the fact that Puu and Cat are missing is a bit of a problem though neither Silver nor Turtle speak of it.

I put down my writing materials and make my way to the open area where we usually eat. I gather materials I feel like eating today. I don't understand why the Hu make a distinction between foods eaten at different times of the day. I take a few fish that Nease has gathered and Squeak has done an excellent job of cooking and smoking. I think she like playing with fire. Alessa has gathered nuts, fruits, and insects from the trees above. Cat is distracted with another art project. The good thing is that she can do amazing things with her abilities. This is really practice of the highest order and no one bothers her for avoiding chores. Turtle is on the Mesa keeping things going there and Silver is off on a mission he does not share. Word has it Owa's kits are getting larger and causing lots of mischief as is expected from the young.

Puu starts, "Of the current male candidates only Mike knows any of the languages spoken or signed by any of us. We will have to communicate with TP at least at first and as not everyone has this ability yet, time will be needed to do translations. Mr. Smith and Jones are not candidates, so don't even think about them. Their time will come, do not worry."

"How is it even possible for Randy to get here? The group seems to be outside our time frame, not to mention if they are outside our space, how can they be brought? We need to bring Droopy and Snap to be fare. How can we abandon the others to such a lonely existence." Cat of course. Not sure she really wants males to arrive.

"No Di. No Di." Squeak.

"You will need to learn to get along with Di eventually. But maybe when you are a little older." She would never agree to send Squeak back to Di earth no matter how much of a pest Squeak can be. Thank goodness Squeak did not become TK3. She is enough at TK2.

Alessa says, "Mars Loonie would be tough too. Maybe once we have more people at the healing TK level. A lot of change for one person to take in all at once. Been hard for me, but at least I am used to this gravity, trees, flowing water, oxygen rich air."

I finally speak up, "That leaves Death Watcher and Mike. How much

will the community be hurt if Mike joins us. Death Watcher will be missed by no one.” Just like Alessa and myself.

“Good thinking. Death gets the highest mark. Though Mike would already know English.”

“Alessa and I learned quick enough and we are not even Hu. Death should be able to learn too, especially with TP assisting him as it did with us.”

Thus we decide Death Watcher is first, Mike is second with the possible addition of Marie. Apparently they have grown closer in their friendship according to Turtle. With both Puu and Cat missing that is understandable. This might weigh the group too far towards the Hopi culture. Loonie is next. I am worried about him, but would like to have his insights. Turtle and Silver have assured us that adapting to earth could be done. I have to wonder if he is not already here somewhere, or at least some alternative earth. We spent six months in prep, it would make sense he would also.

The Far Out group taken together are last. Turns out Snap might be very useful in ocean environments. Nease pointed this out. I plucked a feather to remind myself not to be so limited in my thinking. I am now convinced we will need their help too.

In reality we need everyone. I also have to wonder about the teachers we each had. Were these Turtle and Silver in other forms or other TKs who will join us as well. If everyone arrives, including a teacher from each group, then our total would be the six of us present, Turtle and Silver, the two boys, Owa and her four kits (are they coming?), two from Rock Ridge, teacher and student, would the Cat come too? Was the Cat even saved? The teacher sounds a lot like Pushy Paws from the journals, but others here think Puu is her come back. Do the Far Out group even need a teacher, they are already TK. Let's say no. That brings the total to possibly twenty one. Much larger than the original eight from the journals, but their group eventually expanded to include many others, so maybe eight is not a necessary number.

Where is Br'thn, where is Sauron? We have not met Qr'thn yet either.

Interlude

Other authors have spoken of the feeling that they are not the ones writing the stories. I certainly feel this way. I think about the people in the story constantly, even at night in my dreams. When I try and force the story in a different direction than it wants to go, it falls apart and I abandon that course. I really cannot even tell you where all of this is leading. I have some idea of a possible end, but only a vague feeling.

So, please bare with me. Hopefully more will become apparent to both of us as we proceed.

At work we have an interesting situation. Because it seems impossible for faculty, students and postdocs to insure doors and windows are closed at night, we have had to hire a guard at night at the cost of seventy two thousand a year. Over ten years that is a lot of money, so an alternative is being sought. The alternative most likely involves cameras, electronic doors, sensors, etc. at a cost of five hundred thousand.

All because people cannot be bothered with closing doors or windows. What have we made? People so lazy and irresponsible that they cannot close a door? Imagine what other uses we could do with that amount of money? Yet everyone seems to accept that this is the way it is and there is no way around it. Other institutions, including main campus, have or are going this route. I blame it on device addition destroying everyone's attention spans. It is like we are a culture of Alzheimer's patients or Zombies. In fact, without these changes, people will not even feel safe. Huh? What happened to being proactive. Rape and assault did not start happening recently. We have all lived with it since the beginning of time. Yet, we are too lazy or bothered even to protect ourselves. Amazing.

Well back to our story and sorry about the interruption. Needed to say something. Sigh

New Arrivals

Silver does not come back for days and we begin to wonder what is going on. Squeak is really starting to adapt to the group. I am so proud of her. Is this what it feels like to be a parent? At least I never had to be pregnant. She tries to help where ever she can. I was so happy she learned to share what she cooked over the fire pit. She also learned that Nease prefers raw fish and is careful to always offer him the first portion. At least it is too damp here for her to set the forest on fire. I did have to DS a water bubble a few times. I made sure to douse her with a large one at the same time to get her attention. She is improving her concentration.

She did not upgrade the last time we did. This is good. I am worn out watching her at the same time I work on my art. TK has really opened up possibilities there. It is like being free for the first time in my life. Everything looks so much brighter, more intense. It is like I am finally awake. I work day and night. I can't stop. Strange statues are appearing all over the forest nearby. I get permission to see images from Nease, Flor and Alessa and make statues of creatures from their worlds. They seem to like this. It is a way of paying respect. We are a team.

Where I am failing is in my duties to the group. I know I am not pulling my fair share. I just can't help it. I have to create. It is driving me nuts. Puu says I have always been nuts about being creative, TK just made it worse. That and not needing to sleep.

Once when I was on guard duty a native Hu made it all the way into camp. We had to hold him until Silver returned from some trip to erase his mind. I watched carefully to learn the method. Silver warned me to be careful. Easy to damage someone's mind. I suspect that just like when the brothers saw Squeak, most would not believe the story. It might even be a good idea to make it scary for anyone to come into our area. It probably helps that whenever Puu or I are on duty we send out pulses of TP to deflect Hu away. Oh, and snakes, at least from the trees and ground near our home. I have started to place some of the scarier statues near the ten kilometer perimeter. I can even makes some of the arms, tentacles, etc. move from a distance now that I have TK as well.

Puu has gotten sub micro TK which allows her to transmute materials. It will take one more upgrade to be able to heal according to Silver. That will be a big help. Trying to keep someone comfortable until Silver or Turtle arrive is not always easy. Alessa and Nease are getting good at figuring out uses for local flora and fauna. Being a guinea pig is not

always pleasant. Nease tells us even a bad reaction is very useful. It is only then a matter of dosage to get a desired effect from a bad one. Hope we do not end up poisoned. They are careful to start with a low amount, but mistakes can happen. Most sting, itch or do nothing. Puu and I have learned to disappear when the two of them come into together. They of course learned to catch us off guard. It has become a game. Squeak seems very curious and is the most willing, especially in tasting. Just not sure that a Rap is the best subject. She does tend to have similar reactions as Flor. Given their lineage this make sense. At least compared to Hu and Ceph anyway. I am starting to sound like Puu. Gaaaah!

“Gather around please.” Silver is back! I DS out to the fire pit where Squeak is playing with the fire again. I bubble enough water to put out the fire completely. Squeak looks at me pissed. I look over to Silver.

He is alone. Damn. I really thought to have a new partner.

The others make it in one at a time. Nease being last of course. Her second gift was TP to the relief of us all. I am never going to learn how to show now.

“Glad this was not an emergency. Response time could be improved.”

“You did not exactly say it was an emergency. Is it?”

He smiles but says nothing.

We wait, but nothing is said or happens.

Squeak gets restless of course. She has improved. I did not say she has become a Zen master. She is still less than a year old and not even considered to be an adult until two. Really a young adult even then.

Alessa suddenly turns and faces into the forest. I don’t see, hear, or scan anything. What is it? How can anything hide from us?

A caveman comes out of the forest into our clearing. A caveman?

“Everyone, please welcome Death Watcher. An expert in disguise and stealth.”

Puu exclaims, “Shit, even our scanning did not see him. Welcome Death Watcher!”

He bows looking a little uncertain until Silver signals he has done correctly.

“He is learning English, but understandably, a lot of concepts are foreign to him. Please make him welcome and use TP and English for the time being.”

I wonder if it would be easier to learn American Sign Language or Ceph.

ASL definitely and yes, Nease could learn it easily. Good idea. Would give us an alternative in an emergency where TP or sound would give us

away.

I have a question. I never found out what happened at Tuba City. Please tell me. I am far enough from the event not to be messed up by it now.

I don't know. You will have to ask Turtle. She should be here soon.

DW looks NA. Wonder which tribe? Ask him silly. I think Puu is finally starting to sink into me.

He is near the food table. He is trying to decide what to eat at the same time he is trying to figure out all the strange creatures and people.

Squeak offers him a roast bug. Oh Squeak, Hu don't like those things until, whoa, he takes it and bows a thanks. He tears it apart with apparent knowledge and starts eating. At the same time he skips the fruit and goes for the grain stew and nuts. A tropical rain forest does not have many plains type food. Someone must have briefed him on us. Granted he did have a Cat guide.

Someone rubs up against my leg, whoa, that is one big Cat. Would put Owa to shame. That could be fun. Female.

“Welcome Cat. Are you with Death Watcher.”

We were recently reunited. Happy to be alive. I still remember the attack that killed me. Very bad Hu. Very bad.

“Unfortunately we are likely to find more. You do understand why we are all here?”

She affirms. *Sad.*

“So, how did this work? How can you be from our time line?”

We come from the alternate Hu earth. Our event happened some time ago. There are only a few million Hu left on earth and some scattered through out the solar system.

“You are certainly well informed for a Cat.” That would explain Mars too. How to explain Far Out is still a question. And how did Hu get to Ba earth?

Of course silly monkey.

I laugh, well that trait is true.

“Are you hungry? Maybe you and Squeak can go hunt together? I know you can't eat the fruit.” Oh, that is sour look. She then looks towards Squeak.

I have hunted with a dog before. Another sour look.

“Okay, let's get this straight. Squeak is a Rap, related to birds, like Ku Flor. She is fully sentient and a part of our team. There is absolutely no relationship to a dog.”

Sounds like a dog, acts like a dog, eats like a dog, poos like a dog.

“Yes, her kind do hunt in packs, but so do lions. She is quite capable of hunting alone too and does so all the time. She knows where all the juicy rodents are in the area. Oh, and she buries her poo.” At least she does now. Don’t ask me how I explained that to her.

“She loves learning new things, especially from a master.” I know how to speak Cat too.

“My first TK instructor, Owa Moosa, is Cat. Would do her good. There is only so much I can teach her.”

Death Watcher is my student.

“You will have to learn some new things too. We are all part of the group here. We have a duty to preform.” Besides, someone saved your bacon, be appreciative for that at least.

She turns up her nose as if smelling something and makes her way back to DW where she curls up to pretend to take a nap. I know that secret now. Getting out of chores.

I slide up to Silver, “How much instruction did these two get?”

“Well, neither will be coding software soon, but we are pretty low tech here at least. Nothing too scary other than TK itself. I did enough demos to convince them to respect, but not fear me as a witch or something.”

“Helps when you tell someone they will become TK too. What levels are they?”

“Both will be TK2 soon. Would leave people out to spread all of you too far apart. Speaking of which, do not expect a gift at the next cycle. I want you and Puu only one TK level above the others. You are experienced and proven yourself. Turtle and I will not always be here for every emergency.”

“Mama Cat. Nice ring to it.”

“You are the one with the baby to take care of.” Shit, I have not been watching Squeak. She sees the new Cat swishing her tail. Tempted, but turns away. You will not catch her on that one you evil Cat.

“What is the new Cat’s name?”

“Sylvy”

“Yeah, okay, not good at remembering names from books. Better not put Owa and Sylvy in the same room together.”

“The fur would fly.” That evil grin again, and then he laughs. I hope he was just teasing. Two females and one with kits. Definitely not good.

“How the hell did Death Watcher get to us undetected. What level TK is he?”

“As I said, just one, scanning, same as Flor and Alessa when they

arrived. We always try at least one level to test for TK sickness. We used to have to wait until three, but we have gotten better at predicting problems. Everyone who shows up here has passed. As to your question. He and Sylvy are really good. TK is not infallible. Remember that. Even a TK0 can get in a lucky shot and kill one of us before we can prevent it.”

Sobering as they say, “Good to know.”

“Turtle is here.” He says it a few seconds before she actually arrives. Eerie. What TK level is he? No one has gotten that one out of him. The books suggest he may be beyond levels. Even the ‘thn can’t touch him.

She is not alone. Mike, Marie and the boys are with her.

Squeak goes up to the boys immediately, “Welcome Smith and Jones.” She is so proud she got that out correctly. The boys are speechless. I have to laugh and nearly choke swallowing wrong. Silver looks at me funny.

You okay?

Yeah, I love it when Squeak does something unexpected.

Proud mama. He smiles.

Puu comes up concerned, “Why is everyone here. Did something happen at home?” I shake my head that I don’t know.

Mike and Marie are looking almost as shocked as the boys, but are looking at Alessa, Flor and Nease. Squeak at least looks like something out of books. Okay, her head is over sized.

Flor walks up to them offering her hand, “Welcome Mike and Marie. We hoped you would say yes to joining us.” I was not expecting both, but this is good.

Puu, ever thoughtful, “Ah, how is this going to mess up everything at First Mesa?”

“They died in a horrible car accident after a hot date.” Turtle smiles.

I come in worried, “They do understand what TK does to that sort of thinking right?”

“Cat, it was not a real accident. Well, it was their bodies, same as the others. Not hard to set up. There are accidents all the time.”

“And the boys?”

“Just visiting. They are going back to help take care of the kits in a few minutes, but I thought it might be good for them to see how everyone is doing.”

“You mean that we are actually alive?” She shrugs. Yeah, I thought so. Yep, we is still kicking. Sigh . . .

“How soon do you leave? I have a question.”

“Go on.”

“Ah, what happened in Tuba City? I was sort of taken out before I saw anything.”

She thinks about it for a moment.

“Is there a problem?”

“No, just organizing my thoughts. Okay. Qr'thn upgraded you, Puu and the boys. We were not told ahead of time or we would have chosen a better time. As it worked out though, she saved you and Puu from a horrible death.”

“You mean my dream was real? Puu was raped?”

“Not quite.” How can there be a not quite?

“Let me try again. You were upgraded. This allowed you to reach out to one kilometer instead of your previous hundred meters. That allowed you to reach out and ‘hear’ your Aunt and her cohorts. She was just in the act of coming to the bus to do exactly what you imagined.”

“Shit. But it did not happen?”

She shakes her head no, “But everyone else for a kilometer around felt your dream too, even them. She is known well in Tuba City, in spite of her short time there.”

“A trouble maker.” She nods yes.

“They were apprehended quickly. Then they were declared to be witches and banished from the Navajo lands. Blamed for your TP.”

“Wow, two tribes in less than a year. Too bad they could not lock them up.”

“No crime was actually committed. But, then you and Puu never showed up.”

“Ah, oh, so what happened?”

“Well no bodies were ever found. It was a nice funeral. Then Puu came back.”

“But not me.”

“Nope. If they ever show their faces again, your Aunt, Uncle, nephew and the four thugs, will be shot on sight. No questions asked. An actual bounty on their heads. Navajo are not normally violent, but these were Hopi who had been kicked out of their own tribe. Everyone was very upset by the dream, you missing and Puu not ‘remembering’ anything.”

“First time men felt what it was like to be raped. That has to piss her off big time though. Wonder what she is plotting now to get even?”

“Probably more worried about how to stay alive, in Siberia.”

“Oh, that should slow them down. Do they even care what they are up against though? Hate can drive people to insanity.”

“Their choice. We did give them a cabin and minimum supplies. They

will have to work hard in an unfamiliar climate, but we are not monsters.” She looks so innocent. Right.

“How come Owa is not here? I would love to meet the kits. Are they showing any TP or DS yet? How long does it take?”

“Slow down Cat. Silver is here.”

“What difference does that make? If Silver was going to do something he could even do it from here. He has range. Besides he would never hurt them.”

“No but he might hide them to tease her. Their feud goes back so far no one can say how long that is.”

“Back to the thirteen.” She nods.

“If she is next to them, she can shield them.” Or try, Silver is sneaky.

“Cat, I really need to get the boys back. We can’t have any more people missing. At least till the big one.”

“What is going to happen to everyone at First Mesa. I have lots of friends there.”

“We have plans, never fear. Just remember, even we do not know what and when it will happen until it starts to unfold. You had better get back to greeting the new ones. They are your teammates now. You will be depending on them.”

She goes over to the boys who are reluctant to leave Squeak. All three of them apparently love to play ball. Well, Squeak will chase anything that moves, teaching her how to give it back for another go was the hard part. Fortunately she can be talked to. Not like a D.O.G.

Death Watcher is showing something to the others. Something to do with his feet. Sylvy is stretching and getting ready for another nap of course. I tune in to the conversation.

^LThe reason I can walk and run so quietly is because I do not walk on the back of my feet like you do, but only on the front tips. Watch. Your way, clumsy, my way, quiet, stealth.^L Arrogant. Hmm.

I DS to directly behind him and tap on his shoulder.

^LI know about your tricks. I have had much instruction. What happens if someone hits you with a limiter?^L

Sigh, I use Kung Fu to put him on the ground faster than a blink.

“I use this method.”

Sylvy looks up at me with new respect.

I told him stealth was not enough. You move like a Cat. How is this?

“You will meet Owa Moosa, Stone Cat, at some point. She was my teacher. I would be happy to train with you as well.” Silver smiles and walks to Mike and Marie. Marie shows me a thumbs up. I walk over too.

Death Watcher watches me carefully. Remember I can see you behind me as well.

Marie says, "To be fair, you did start it with the DS trick."

"He was showing off how he can walk. We know that one from the training you gave us. No, it was something more than just foot work. He is not saying everything. We need to watch him." She smiles.

"When you figure it out, let me know. Nice place you have here. Decorate it yourself? Where is Kokopelli?" I frown and she laughs. She knows how I feel about that over used figure. Shit, that's what my Aunt says. Then she goes inside.

"Cat, what did you do? Every square inch is covered in carvings."

I shrug, "I really can't help it. You should see the carving of the life size adult Rap we left in Lone Pine."

Puu comes up, "Don't forget all the little ones. Might as well show her Cat. A warming gift."

I sigh and DS a mini Rap from the stone under us and hand it to Marie. "The stone is different here. Puu, do your stuff." She has transmutation ability now she has been practicing. She concentrates hard, not easy yet, and a thin layer of gold covers the statue.

"And we will all be able to do this soon?"

"This is just playing. Did Turtle tell you why we are here?" She nods looking sad.

"I know there is no choice but to let this happen. As Owa and I suspect Sylvy also would say, 'stupid monkeys'. We bring this on ourselves."

"Actually Sylvy says silly monkeys, but the sediment is the same. I don't like it either. I feel guilty even after all that I have gone through. Did Turtle tell you about Tuba City?" She nods. Guess she is allowed to call her Turtle now too.

Mike comes over, "Is this how you have been living? Not bad. Not as nice as the Rez, but it will do. Is it always this humid?"

"Never stops. You get used to it sort of. What level are you two?"

"We are both TK2, scanning and TK. Normal Hu series. Not all mixed up like you two."

"Yeah, well apparently Qr'thn messed with us. No sign of her daughter Br'thn is there?"

"No. Or of Sauron either, thank goodness. I want a few more levels under my belt before that happens. I still remember picking you up at the bus station not that long ago. Did you ever think we would be here now?"

I laugh so hard, "Not in a million years. I still pinch myself to see if

this is just a dream. Welcome Mike. I'm glad they said yes to the group request. And to Marie too. We were just not sure how they would pull it off."

"There are more drunks on the rez than in all of San Jose Cat. Was not that hard to fake at all. Sorry, did not mean to be insensitive."

"No offense. Seems ancient now. I am happy here. I love these people, no matter what their shape. Or eating habits."

"Turtle just left with the boys. Ah, Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones. I am surprised they kept those names so long."

I look at him surprised. "You did read the books right?"

He looks embarrassed, "I sort of skimmed them. Hey, I was still working at the Visitor Center. Is there a set here? I could try again."

"Ask Silver, he can probably dupe a set. We are still on our earth anyway."

"That has to be hard on the other species."

"We call them people or sentients. Have to be politically correct now don't we? Meow!" He laughs.

"Did everyone go through the death ritual? Are we all dead to our past?"

"If not now, soon. So, it really does not matter. Our world will be totally different. They could not go back, even with a limiter. There is no future for them on their worlds. Why waste such great people when they can do great work here. I am deeply appreciative personally."

"Amen sister."

Hell

Was I so bad that I deserved to be here in my next life? What about Sylvy? Certainly she does not deserve to be here. I can't imagine a worse place to live. It is hot, sticky, the trees are not right. I have not seen a single rabbit or deer. What will we eat? The two bird like creatures are annoying. One wears a tool belt with strange things in it I have never seen. The other never sits still and makes a lot of noise. One squaw is quiet like I would expect. The other one is the worst. Why does she have to be better than me? I was only explaining how I walk quiet. Surely she already knows that. Her tribe must teach basics.

The old man just sits there smiling like he ate a bird that would escape if he opened his mouth. I can't understand a thing anyone says, yet I hear things in my head that might be what they are saying. What is the strange furry creature with sort of wings that scurries about cleaning everything?

Sylvy does not seem to be as upset as I am, well with the exception of the bird thing that acts like a noisy dog. Hunt together? Are they insane? Cats always hunt alone. Even when we are paired in a hunt, she is not in sight when she works. There is mention of another like Sylvy only stronger. I don't want to be here when they meet. She has never gotten on well with other Cats who insist on being the top Cat. That is her rightful place.

We have been told a crisis will come soon. There are more people here than I can imagine. We were briefly taken to a place called a City to show us what to expect. Horrible place. Strange metal beasts roaming about trying to eat the people walking around in straight lines. Insane. Tall stone walls with openings of something shinny. Almost no other living things.

I requested and was shown what my own people are like on this world. Very sad. They have forgotten all the ways of our people. There are too many in cooped up horrible hogans and settlements I would not put the bullies in. I was not allowed to talk to any for fear of contamination. I am not sure what that means. They showed me enough to convince me I would not be able to fit in. Trapped like a sheep in a pen. Oh, I hope not breeding stock. I shudder that the thought of being forced to mate with either one I have seen. The quiet one is too young. The other I have already stated my distaste for. I keep forgetting we will lose the ability or the desire to mate. Thank goodness.

Largest beetles I have ever seen, but good. The grain mush was too

thick. Barely edible. Nothing here is right.

You are homesick, admit it.

^LYes I am Sylvy. I admit it.^L

I would rather be alive. She rolls over to ignore my constant whining.

Well, at least I know I can hear her now for real and not just my imagination. We are expected to be part of this team, but they are like children, going in all directions at once. Oh, they each appear to have talents, though I am not sure what the strange wet one with eight arms does. How to combine them into a survivable group though? I wish the old lady was here to help. She would know what to do.

I was told she needed to stay to help take care of the world I came from. I was chosen by her to be here. I would rather have stayed with her. I know I can trust her.

That horrible lizard bird comes up to me and rubs against me wanting attention. I pat its head.

“Squeak like you.” Great. That will teach me to be polite. No more of that. I shoo it away. Still watching me. I pick up a stick and throw it. It runs after it and brings it back to me. I can’t win. I pick it up and throw it further away.

Glad to see you are starting to fit in Death. The wild female.

Can you hear me if I think something? Your language is too strange for me.

I can hear you. Guess you won’t be reading the books then either.

Can’t read. We do not have hand scratches to talk.

Maybe you can help cook the food. We have no idea how to cook the plants around here.

Do I look like I am from this place? I sigh. But yes, I think I can improve things.

Great. Seek out Alessa. She could use the help making food for this many.

Alessa is the furry one?

We say Ba, like the word bat. Just like we are Hu short for human.

I nod and go to the cook area. Alessa is hard at work preparing a number of items. I watch her for a few moments. Each item is made separate. I guess this makes sense since each likes different things. One thing that the old lady taught me though is that many things are better in combination.

I go around tasting the materials that Alessa has already done some prep for. Once I understand what there is I go to work. I set a nice metal pot over the fire and add enough water for what I need. I then go to each

item and slice, squash or tear till I get the effect I want, adding each to my pot. I want protein, but noticed the other 'hu' avoided them at the last couple of meals. What they don't know won't hurt them. I am guessing it is the sight and not the taste itself. I grind the beetles and grubs together into a paste and add them to something Alessa is frying. When done I add them to the pot. Sort of like bug dumplings. I will often make something like this out a variety of materials I find.

I search out the herbs. Something that will be good in small amounts, but too strong in handfuls. Something savory, something sour, something just a little bitter, something sweet. Salt. Oh, they have very nice looking salt here. I add a small hand of salt. I taste what I have prepared.

Alessa has been watching me. I offer her a taste. She nods approval and goes and gets another ingredient. She hands it to me. Ah, peppers. Excellent. I smash these up in my hands and add them. Then I carefully wash my hands with salt, water and sand. Being very careful not to touch my eyes. We both taste it this time. Good.

We quickly develop a routine of tasting and offering suggestions, not always taken, but no offense given. We make corn dumplings, stew, fresh plants to be eaten raw together, laying all out on the table. Nothing tastes better to me than pure clean water. We place pitchers of water and cups out. Alessa adds a few drops of some fruit juice to each. I taste it. Good. I smile. She apparently learned this is good. Now we wait.

The others comes for the mid day meal and grab stuff without much thought shoving mouth fulls without thought. Suddenly everything stops. They look at each other and what is in their hands. They taste again. Then rush to get more of whatever item got their attention.

I smile and nod to Alessa who tries to smile back. A lot of sharp teeth. If I did not know she was on our side I would have jumped back.

Silver knocks the table to get everyone's attention.

It would appear we have found our cooks! Excellent food. Thank you. He bows low to the two of us. This clearly upsets Alessa. She is not used to getting attention. She tries to hide behind me. I gently bring her out again.

¹Both of us were needed. Equal credit.¹ Silver translates and I hear his mind speak. Alessa bows to me. I hope she realizes we are stuck making food from now on.

Evening meal is easier and smaller. I hate sleeping on a full stomach. Probably because I rarely had the opportunity.

I wake before dawn and Sylvy nudges me. Squeak is waiting outside our chamber. I rise quiet and leave with them. A hunt. I can't exist on just

bugs and corn. Where did they get the fresh corn? Surely can't grow here.

There are many creatures that look like little people above us in the trees asleep. We are so quiet they do not raise alarm. Even Squeak, who I would have thought would be the noisiest one here, is amazingly quiet.

We come upon a group of three of the largest rats I have ever seen. Sylvy and Squeak circle around, being quieter than me. I wait until they drive them towards me. I am ready and down one with an arrow, one with a stone and the final one, coming straight at me, with my knife at close range. I am covered in blood which Sylvy proceeds to lick off me. Squeak stays back until I offer her an arm to lick too. The second group I have bonded with. This is almost beyond belief. Never in my life have I ever felt like I belong.

Did not belong this morning sad one. Sylvy reminds me.

Smart Cat.

Of course.

I smile. She will not ruin this moment for me. I gut the three which Squeak cleans up. I know the Hu will not eat the good parts. I grab one of the livers and a heart for myself and one each for Sylvy. They show approval. Two of the bladders are in good shape. One pierced by the arrow which had gone through the heart first. Only a nick, but enough to prevent it from holding liquids. I bring it with me to be part of the fire offering. The other two can hold water or other mixtures for storage. I know they can make any kind of pottery or metal, but the animal is sacred. The pottery is just useful. I would not want to waste any part of the animals who have given their lives to us.

We are back in camp before anyone else is up. Strange given that most do not appear to sleep. I can see through walls up to an arm span. Not far enough to see more than an arm or leg near a wall. Up right, but not moving. Prayers?

Alessa is up and working when we arrive in the cook area. She sees what we have brought and without a sound we begin again. Meat this time. Savory herbs, salt, fried in their own fat. Wonderful.

I cut the meat in very small pieces, smaller than I would ever do for myself. We make corn mush at the right consistency for those who will not eat meat. What is wrong with meat? Sylvy and Squeak eat their portions raw of course. I prefer mine cooked. Each their own way I guess.

When we bring the meal to the tables it starts to rain. Silver, who apparently have been watching us, notices and covers appear above us that diverts the rain away to a drain. I nod a thanks.

This time everyone comes in more slowly. They carefully look at each

of the dishes. I smile. They are now awake. I am not fully changed yet and am tired. I go to our chamber and lay down. Sylvy joins me. We are content.

I hope you are feeling better? Silver mind speaks me.

Yes, thank you for your concern. I will adapt.

As must we all. It is not easy for anyone here. Rest well.

I awake floating several hands off the ground. Sylvy suddenly disappears and then appears again below me looking up. Can Cats smile?

Silly Monkey! We have received a second gift.

Incoming

Turtle is next to me.

Once again so I get this all straight. You are Silver, the original. Owa, sigh is Owa. The easy ones. You two never change. I am Jesan, though this time I did not have to go through the actual mixing process.

Correct. But to be fair, I came in as an Owl this time.

A silver one. Oooh, what a difference. Cat is Rachael. Puu is Pushy Paws. Sylvy is Ghost.

Marie is James.

Mike is Edwin. Smith and Jones are Smith and Jones of course.

Is Nease Rooi?

Not sure. Could be. Could also be Doc.

Ah, of course. Death Watcher is Q. The only possibility really.

White we already have. Who is Alessa and Flor?

Do we need to know? Isn't it enough just that they are helping? We are different each time. Best not to expect the same personalities.

True. Might even be better to have some new combinations.

Here they come.

Just received a request for a larger clearing.

We DS to an area a half kilometer away. Wait. Waiting at the edge obviously.

A Di, a Hu and a Crust come in. One extremely large Crust.

Turtle jumps in, "Welcome Snap, Randy and Droopy."

Have to find a better name for her.

Snap does a deep bow and leaves. Okay. Just the two of them then.

"Do you understand what I am saying?" No TP.

The two look at me and then at each other.

Randy answers, "Mostly. Accent deep." It sounds like he is underwater. Accents go both ways. Droopy weighs at least ten times Randy. This should be fun.

"I am Silver and this is Turtle. Please come with us." Turtle bows and I used TP this time. They follow. Droopy walking on a narrow trail is a little like the approach of Godzilla. The ground even shakes some.

Everyone is staring at us when we arrive. Squeak takes one look and runs and hides.

I turn to Droopy, "Squeak, the Rap, is not food or enemy. She is one of us."

"I no eat sentients."

“She is also TK2 and can defend herself to that extent.” She bows.
I TP, *It is okay, you can come out now Squeak. Droopy will not eat you.*

She looks out of the kitchen window. Then comes out the open door slowly.

“No eat Squeak?”

“No eat Squeak,” Droopy says. Her English is improving by the moment. TP helps of course. Must be reading several to help her.

“Everyone, as expected, this is Droopy and Randy. Please welcome them to our group.”

Death Watch and Alessa look at Droopy and each other, sigh, and go back into the kitchen. Going to need a LOT more food I can hear them thinking.

Relax you two. She can make her own food. She is TP6. Just work on the rest of the meal as you would normally. Anything she likes she will make more of.

Death Watch waves a hand out the window. All good.

“Snap is not joining us?”

Turtle smiles, “Snap was their teacher and overseer. She is the one who recommended them to us. Again, as far as the rest of their group is concerned, they are lost and likely dead. In the crash that is.”

Cat ask, “What happens to Snap?”

I answer, “She is grazing near the Galapagos at the moment.”

Puu asks, “Shit, any military would go crazy if they see her.”

“She is TK9 and not likely to be seen and can certainly take care of herself.”

Cat intones, “It came from beneath the sea!” Raising her hands to dramatic effect. I laugh, Turtle smiles, Puu sighs and the rest are confused.

“Snap is the huge Crust mentioned in the journals. She is about the size of a football field now.”

“She was close enough for us to scan her. Impressive. I TP’d the image to the rest.”

“Thank you Cat. Also explains why none of you except Squeak ran when we arrived. Good to see you are maintaining watch.” Cat turns red. Okay, maybe pure accident she happened to notice. Bad Cat. We will have to work on that.

Everyone comes out and bows to the two new ones, introducing themselves.

Alessa comes up and offers both food, shaking her head at how rude

we have all been.

^They have had nothing but sap chow for years.^ She leaves. The other wake up and soon every possibly food we have starts to appear before them.

Squeak comes up with some of her famous smoked fish and offers it specifically to Droopy.

Droopy watches her carefully. They have been mortal enemies for millions of years. It will take time to develop trust. Good for Squeak for trying though.

She really can't hurt you Droopy.

I know that. Just never knew they were sentient. I am ashamed.

Ah, of course. Take some of her food. It really is good. Fresh water fish. Show her you accept her.

She bows very deep and takes the offered bowl from Squeak slowly. I have to give credit to Squeak for not spooking. Of course a Di has never shown her respect before either. She eat some slowly, then bows again to Squeak to thank her.

I will find something special for her to thank her.

She likes any rodent, preferably raw.

Good to know. They did serve and important part of our ecology. How many languages does she speak.

She speaks English, some Hopi, some Spanish, Rap of course and is learning Ceph.

Speaking of which, Nease finally makes it out.

When Droopy sees her she hits Randy with her tail to get his attention. They both immediately drop and give perfect Ceph bows of respect. Nease shows respect back.

Nease comes up and takes a fish from Droopy's bowl and shows, ~Good fish. Squeak works hard to help.~

Randy asks, "May I try?" Droopy nods and he takes one. Her bowl is nearly empty.

This I can fix. A larger bowl appears and it fills to overflowing with fish. Everyone comes over and helps themselves.

I TP Squeak, You did very good Squeak. Everyone loves your fish. Help serve the other food, make sure Droopy and Randy get to try everything.

Turtle comes up to me, "That went a lot smoother than I thought it would."

"Squeak made the first move. That must have been very hard for her. Shows a lot of courage."

“Or that she really trusts us. No ‘wild’ Rap would do this. Maybe being raised by Cat and everyone else has made the difference.”

“Probably. Shows the Rap are ready. I should tell White what we have learned.” She nods her approval.

“You should take the boys back before their eyes pop out of their head. I am surprised that Droopy is allowing them to touch her. Squeak is going to get jealous of their attention towards the new kid.”

“Yes, we all have our burdens. Thank goodness no one believes them. Just don’t bring them to the rez. That would undo everything.”

“At least not until everyone is in Hu form.” She nods.

Then adds, “They will not actually be Hu. Anyone who spends time with them will notice.”

“I am going to get going.”

“Is that wise?”

“Either it works or it doesn’t. Better to find out now while we still have time.”

“Is a few weeks enough?”

“So you have felt it too?”

“Then this may be my last chance for some time. We have one more to pick up.”

I DS to Di earth. Not directly to White though. He is in a conference as usual. I do a quick scan. I am the only non-Di earth sentient present.

I find a Rap pack and DS to them.

^RI am not food. Attack and die.^R My accent is off, but they understand me. A standard Rap greeting. Learned a lot reading Squeak.

It is dusk. ^RShall we hunt?^R I take off at a run towards a rodent condo I have scanned. They follow, but quickly split and go off to both sides flanking me. If I do not deliver, they can always eat me. They think.

I cheat and use TK to help my legs move much faster than any Hu should be able to. I reach the colony first and begin flinging rats out into the open. The others reach me and go crazy snapping them out of the air or chasing after them quickly. When everyone has had a few I stop and sit back. I smear duped blood on my face to show I have participated. Not that fond of raw rat. To each their own.

Sitting together I notice they now carry weapons. Sharpened sticks and chipped stones nearly useful. They carry them in crude belts and pouches. Some are decorated with what I can only say must be jewelry or signs of ranks? Pretty stones tied together. Colored feathers no Rap can grow themselves. Maybe they have learned how to dye them? Not makeup, but loose feathers that have been colored.

They are not sure what to make of me, but leave me alone. I can of course hear their conversations. We are well away from any Di settlements, but conversation still talks about encounters. They are learning how to better avoid Di by talking to each other and sharing intelligence. Cooperation has been learned. Normally they would just compete with neighbors. Some of the pretty stones are not local. They are trading. Weapons, trade and communication. Cat and Squeak have definitely had an effect.

^RHas anyone seen the one like me named Cat?^R I ask. I could use TP, but I don't want them to know I can hear them.

They look at me, ^RYou know Cat?^R

^RI have met her.^R

They get real excited. Everyone talks to me at once. Oh Cat, what have you done? I am at least a thousand kilometers away from the monastery.

I can meet you now, but not here. Hu are not allowed. You remember the hidden cove on the west shore? Meet me there.

I DS to what would have been central California on our earth. The coast is near the same, just no Hu mess. Lots of creatures about. There are rat equivalents in the surf zone taking the place of sea otters. They seem to have developed similar habits, just smaller prey. Mostly snails and small abalone.

White appears, "I cannot prevent you from being here, but you are not welcome."

"I am only here to give you information. Then I will leave. I have no intention of interfering."

"Even giving your information is interfering."

"You want me to leave I will leave."

"No, I suffer from curiosity and no one will see us here. How can you stand the smell of the rotting vegetation? The salt air is corrosive too."

"A safe place then. I will make this quick. You remember your student Droopy, whom you recommended for TK corps?" He nods.

"She was banned to Far Out Station along with the rest. You were lucky not to have been caught up in that sweep."

"Different Di earth. It could still happen. One of the reasons I am working so hard." I nod.

"She is on my earth. She has agreed to be part of the rescue squad."

"Good. Hope she succeeds with you. I could not get her to be serious enough."

"Being on Magenta did some good. Anyway, she has accepted

Squeak, the Rap, as sentient. As have all of us.”

“She is still not serious then. I’m sorry. I could fit her with a limiter here if you can’t use her.”

“She is fine. I stopped off before this meeting with a Rap pack. The contamination has spread out of control. You will not get this sap back in the tree.”

“I know. I have done my own investigations. All it took was a pebble thrown in the pond to set off a tidal wave. They were clearly on the edge and Cat pushed them over. Wrong place at the wrong time as you Hu say.”

I nod. “If I had known I would not have allowed her to come here.”

“As much my fault. I did not give her the instruction she clearly deserved and needed. We will adapt. Say hello and tell her I am sorry for the trouble.” I nod and DS out. End of meeting.

When I return I count heads. Everyone is still alive at least. Now for the big one. I DS to the rez and enter Turtle’s home. She will already know I am here.

You ready? I ask her. She nods and we DS out.

Mars One

We make robes to match low level postulates. We are the wrong shape, too short and wide, but the robes cover us. The air is very thin and cold. We DS into an empty corridor and make our way to the office. This is a very small outpost used for hermits and people who want to be quiet for a time. No one comes out to question our presence.

Turtle knocks on the door.

^MCome in.^M

We enter quietly and wait. The local Haolian is at a desk writing something.

She finishes and looks up. Looks us over. We can't hide what we are from her.

^MWelcome. You have come to collect him?^M We nod. She rings a bell and we all wait. Everything is very quiet. Sound does not carry well in this thin air. Adapted, this is perfect for a retreat.

Two figures come in. One has the head covered completely. The second leaves.

^MFollow these two.^M The hooded figure bows toward the Haolian and then turns to us.

TKI at least. I nod slightly. The Haolian has already gone back to her writing and is ignoring us.

We walk out of the room. The one waiting outside closes the door and then goes down a different corridor.

Once we are out of site, we DS to a nearly identical retreat center we have set up. We enter a larger room where services would normally be held. We have left it empty.

請刪除你的敞篷。 He does so and looks around without comment. Turns back to us. We have removed our hoods also.

你是月亮人嗎 he asks. We both have black hair, well, mine used to be black, but my skin tells him I am old in appearance.

“We are not from the moon. You have practiced our way of speaking as instructed?”

“I have memorized the dictionary for translation. Speed will come with use.” I smile and nod.

“How do you wish to be named?” He looks confused.

“Most just call me, moon man. There was no direct English translation.”

“Loonie. We will not call you that. What was your first name? The

one your parents gave you.”

“Long time ago. I have to think.”

It is several minutes, “I believe my name was Ron.” We both grin wide.

“An excellent name. We will call you Ron.”

“Do you have everything you need?” Confused look. “Anything you want to take with you?”

“I am nothing, therefore I own nothing. Should I leave the robe here for the others before I am processed?” Processed?

I used TP, he means recycled to essential nutrients to feed the farms.

“Too thin. Not worth the trouble. No, you are not to be ‘processed’.
You will come with us to what we call Earth Two.”

He did all that training thinking it was for no purpose?

Turtle shrugs.

Who was his teacher?

The Haolian herself. Looks like she did nothing other than put books in his room. Good thing he can read and apparently remember as well as he does. A strong asset.

Indeed. What a waste on their part.

We have seen this before.

Many times.

“He will need some work before he can survive on earth. Gravity and oxygen level will harm him as he is.”

I ask him, “Would you like an earth body to make your new work easier?”

“I am nobody. Not worth the trouble.”

“Our entire group comes in with this attitude. He should fit right in at least.”

We DS to earth one and then to earth two and finally to the group. Only takes a moment.

He immediately collapses gasping and passes out.

We fit him with a mask to remove the excess oxygen, a wheel chair with soft air filled wheels, to push him to the camp.

We wheel him in.

“My God, he must be eight feet tall!” Cat exclaims.

Puu is more concerned, “What is wrong with him?”

“He insisted on keeping his Martian body.”

“He looks Chinese, only stretched.”

“Everyone on the moon and Mars came from China. He speaks fluent Chinese. Well a Martian dialect anyway. Written language has not

changed. Traditional characters which fits with what we know of the Earth One history.”

Squeak asks, “What called?”

I smile and Turtle answers, “Ron.”

It takes a moment, but Puu gets it first, “The book Ron? The wheel chair Ron? We have our Ron?” We nod.

“He suffers from gravity sickness. He will adapt.” Droopy proclaims.

“He will be upgraded to TK2 soon. That will help. Even if he can’t actually walk, he will be able to get around.”

“Right now he needs rest.”

They all chime at once, “We all know that one.” Even Nease shows the same. Squeak looks confused. All fun for her I guess.

He will also have problems with the humidity. He will grow bacteria and fungus quickly.

We could make a chamber, at least for the moment. A door on his room with a dehumidifier would help. I will set it up.

He wakes enough to see where he is and is in total shock. I wheel him into his room and lay him on a soft bed. I make a ceramic container with lots of dry calcium sulfate in it. I add more carbon dioxide to the room also.

With the door closed it quickly stabilizes. Now only gravity is the problem. The room purposely looks like a chamber on Mars. Same rusty color to the walls. I make small reddish glow sphere for the center of the room. He will have trouble with the food too. Maybe that will convince him to have a body change. I DS out to leave him some peace.

“If he does not go into stasis he should recover enough to interact with us.”

Cat asks, “What is stasis?”

I sigh, “From the books. If it gets too bad to survive they go into a dormant state that can last years even, until conditions improve. They may have started as Hu, but the biohacking has been extensive. I doubt they could mate successfully with a Hu any longer. Not that he will have a chance.”

Puu asks, “Is that what is happening to us? Could we mate with each other successfully?”

“You can mate with whomever you want from a purely mechanical point of view once you reach TK6 for you and Cat. But, you are sterile. Not the same thing. Good question though.”

Flor asks, “Why not? How do you make more TK then? How will there be enough?”

“Soon you will all be TK8. That means you can go anywhere on a planet this size instantly. Too many TKs makes for confusion and conflict. When groups get too large they break up into subgroups and then different priorities, then conflict.”

“What is our purpose then?”

“Two fold. We clean up the mess left behind from the Hu. We help the ones who will continue get restarted. After that they are on their own again.”

Alessa asks, “Then what happens to us?”

Turtle laughs, “That will be quite some time from now. There will be no lack of work to do. After that you are free to seek out other adventures, your help much appreciated. Some go to the Regional Galactic Center, others set up new worlds with new species. Lots of possibilities.”

~But not back to our home worlds.~

“Correct. But in your case Nease, you were born on Ba earth. There is nothing to prevent you from going to Ceph on either line.”

~Something to consider.~

I am not sure we can change Ron enough to survive our world. Shrinking the lungs is easy. The blood pH, temperature tolerance, water needs, skin characteristics. There are countless changes that would be needed. Even their sense of time is different. He is used to a twenty five hour day and a year nearly twice as long as ours. He is on a slower time base.

We have some time. I will monitor him. Best you get back before you have problems there. She nods and DSs out.

Tic, tic, tic.

We now have everyone here. Time for another set of upgrades. When everyone retires to their rooms for the night I begin, starting with Ron. So far he is following the normal Hu line. Let's hope this continues.

Tic, Tic, Tic

I have read the books and I know we need to get organized and practiced. We are running out of time. I can feel it from Turtle and Silver, they way they look at each other.

I talk to each person to be sure they are okay after their upgrades. Each has a new talent that will need to be practiced. We also need to begin practicing as a group. However, this location is wrong.

I go to the food area. Death Watch and Alessa are hard at work.

Alessa comes up to me, "Do you know what Ron will want to eat?"

"I'm sorry, but there was no specific information on what they eat. I am guessing some kind of simple well cooked grain mixture with mashed up sap chow for nutrients would work. Works for everyone here anyway."

She bows a thanks and goes back in to quickly return with a bowl. I follow her as I need to talk to Silver.

She knocks on the door and the bowl disappears from her hand with a shock on her part. She sighs and goes back to the prep area. I remain. If he knew the bowl was here, he knows I am too.

I scan and see him sitting next to Ron's ah, bed. They don't use perches I see. Suddenly I am in the room with them.

"You will not have to breathe in here. Relax and let me take care of it. Not enough oxygen in here for you." I nod.

I TP, *We need to move. This is nothing like the environment we need to train in for the move or the cleanup. We need practice.*

You are right. A drier climate would be good for Ron too. The rez is too close to the tech world and military. We need to be some place they will not be looking for us.

The best place for Ron might be Antarctica. Dryer and colder. Too hot and moist here.

But not a good place for practice. No.

I am assuming the remnant will be taken to another earth. Why not go their now to set up? No tech I am assuming.

We need to monitor here as well. It is close to time.

Turtle is here and knows the new location. Would only take her a moment.

Surprised he looks at me, "Excellent idea. I have told her your plan. It is set up. Gather the others. Usual moving procedures. Remove all evidence of our being here, etc."

"Done." I gasp. He DSs me out.

I run to the others. I need to get used to using TK. I am flying! Oh blessed egg I am flying!

“We are leaving! We are leaving! Cleanup and take what you want.”

“Crap, all that art work gone. Can’t we just cover it all with jungle and let some future archaeologist try to figure it out?” Cat smiles.

“No. Get to work hatchlings!” I yell. She moves rapidly with Squeak right next to her.

Everything disappears gradually but randomly. A lot of running around as we look for something missed. I put a few sap chow pellets in my tool belt. No idea where we are going and I want to be prepared. Even Neases’ pond goes back to being a spring. Good, I would have missed that.

Ron comes out in a space suit. I read about those. Good idea. He is floating off the ground looking around in total shock. Well, what I am guessing is shock. I hear a few surprised expressions as people clue into their new talents by accident.

This is NOT organized. I squawk in frustration. Still, it is getting done. It will take a lot of work to get them organized. I should have started earlier, but there were so many changes I did not know where to start.

Silver looks at me. *Ready?*

I ruffle my feathers and nod. We DS out.

“How did you know this would happen Flor?”

“Obvious. It had to happen. A logical progression.”

“You need to teach me that.”

“I need to teach everyone this.”

New Hope

“What happened? Did the feds find us again?” This place is strange. It sort of looks like the rez, but too green. Would not take much to be different there. The mountains are the same. First Mesa should be over there, but nothing but small sparse trees and a meadow. Not my rez.

I go up to one of the trees. Strange. They are covered in scales, not really leaves. Grass looks strange too. Instead of flat leaves, they are sort of triangular. Nothing is moving. The air is still. Not too hot, a little cool even. I look for the others. They are doing the same as me, trying to figure out this place.

Silver is talking with Flor. She seems nice enough. Strange having new friends who are not Hu. I read the books, well, I skimmed them. Never been much of a reader. More of a doer. We can all float now and I am doing so now trying to get used to it. I am still afraid to go too high. I float over to them.

“So where are we Silver?”

He smiles. He does that a lot.

“Where do you think Mike?”

“Mountains are the same as the rez, so we are still on an earth. Not ours of course. I am guessing not earth one either. Would not be good to bring everyone there. Not fair to the native Hu.”

“Good guesses. We are far removed from our earth, but still on the same line. I am guessing this world diverged eight hundred million years ago. A green world, but animal life never really happened here. Plants and fungi mostly.” He thinks for a moment, “A few simple forms in the oceans is all.”

“Okay. Would be hard to live on just plants and mushrooms. Will we be allowed to bring our sacred plants and the sheep here?”

“We have already tested that and everything does well here. The ‘grass’ you see the sheep love and do well on. Once we have crops planted, the Hu should do well here too. Oh except cotton. A fungus attacked it with a passion. Maybe because of the increased humidity. Anyway, there are several candidates from the local flora that should work instead.”

Puu shouts, “Okay everyone. You know the drill. Lets make lots of housing. This time spread it out. We need space for eight hundred families with an average of four each.”

“Shit, thirty two hundred people.”

“Mike, you and Marie know the rez the best. Help the higher TKs make housing in the right locations. It rains here a bit more than the rez, so allow for drainage. Need to plan for latrines, gardens, paths to crops, etc.”

“You have never been on the rez Flor, how do you know all this? I agree, just surprised.”

“Green plants mean more water. The fact you recognized the location means you know the soil and landscape, therefore how the soil will drain or not. I could go on.”

“No, that does it. The book was right, you are good at organizing.” I pick up a stick. Let me see. The soil is different here, but I say nothing. Good soil. Lots of organics. Things should grow well here, if the local fungi don’t kill everything. There are some small stream beds. We will work around and with those. That’s where the water wants to go. Best not to fight it.

“Let’s start small. Maybe a hundred homes to start. We will make three sets of pueblo apartment complexes like the pictures in the Visitor Center. It worked for thousands of years, should work again. Spread them out in these three locations.” I point where I want them. All on slight hills so they will drain well. “Vary things. No two exactly the same. Have fun!”

Puu and Cat jump to it. They know what I mean. The others watch until they get the idea.

“Marie. I think we should continue your exercise/training program. Where do you want the dojo?”

She looks at the others all working to set up structures.

“Some place central to everyone, but not too close. It is not a religious center. Never want to end up there again. I am guessing it should not be on that low space. How about the level area over there? That feels right.”

I laugh, “That is exactly where it would be on our earth. Good eye Marie.” She bows to me smiling. She knew what she was doing, just teasing me.

Everyone looks over to what Puu and Cat are doing. They did have to make pueblos in high school after all. They know how these things work. Interesting, instead of cutting down a tree, Puu makes another one by transformation then divides it to make the necessary roof supports that get covered in TK clay. The holes are in the roofs like they should be. There are slight rises around the openings and roof drains so all of the rain does not end up inside the structures. I love the way the cubes are stacked at random, but still make a pleasing form.

“Cat! Again?”

“I can’t help it. To be fair, I was doing this by hand two years ago.”
Has it been that long? All of the surfaces are covered in animals, real and imaginary. Well, all of them will be imaginary in a generation.

Squeak is running back and forth between the small clear pond and the workers carrying water jugs. Good for her. Never thought I would come to like a giant lizard. Flor is watching everything literally like a hawk. She points out things and gets everything perfect.

Silver just sits like an old Mexican western against a finished pueblo complete with sombrero and blanket.

Nease is going from plant to plant and mushroom to mushroom, tasting and touching everything. No doubt figuring out what everything will be good for and what we will need to gather from old earth just to be sure.

I set myself down next to Marie and Silver to watch.

“Sure are energetic.”

“Ah yep.”

“Likely be done in time.”

“Ah yep.”

Okay, this is just silly. Ron is sitting in a chair watching everything. Not really at a place where he can help yet.

“What will Ron be doing? Not strong enough for most things yet.”

“Ron is incredible at recording everyone's stories. He is learning 1st Mesa as we sit. His suit is hooked up with a tablet.” I nod as I watch him.

“We he ever get out of that suit?”

“All depends on how stubborn he is. I suspect it might be awhile. Maybe after the others arrive and he feels even more left out. After all, given our variety, he is not that strange at the moment.”

“Ah, nope.” Silver gives me a funny look and then laughs. Nothing seems to bother him much. He is easily amused.

Each of us is different. We each bring something to the whole, but none of us really did well in our old worlds either. Amazing.

“I noticed we did not bring any tech with us.” Except to help Ron anyway.

“You noticed that huh?”

“Ah, yep.”

“What tech level would you have us at?”

“I am assuming we can’t all be TK9s.”

“True. Remember our lessons on side effects? There are TK side effects too. TK depends on life force. Use too much, and it really takes a

lot, so don't worry, it weakens the life force of a planet."

"In the journals there were lots of TKs at the regional center."

"That was spread out over hundreds of light years. All told there were probably no more than a few thousand high level TKs."

"I'm not good at math but I am guessing that works out to be much lower density than what we even have here."

"Ah, yep."

"Not a TK society. That could have gotten real messy real fast anyway."

"Ah, yep. There is a reason why each of you was chosen carefully and in limited number."

"Nearly eight billion on earth two and destroying the planet. Clearly that does not work. Judging from the number of homes we are making, even if people double up to begin with, which I would approve of to spark interest in getting to work, then maybe we could handle up to eight thousand. That is about double the current Hopi numbers. So, who else is coming?"

^MNeed genetic diversity. Otherwise you will die out as is happening on Mars.^M

"True Ron."

"So mostly Hopi and maybe some people who agree to live the Hopi way. A lot of Navajo would fit, some whites from California and Oregon. Arizona is largely red-neck, not many there that are not already on the rez."

"Ah, yep." He does not smile. It is actually sad how few that is."

Puu comes up after looking around.

"The fifth world." Both Hopi and Navajo have that belief at least. We won't have to explain it to anyone.

"Ah, yep."

"I really hope this one works. I am afraid I do not have a lot of hope. Hopi can be as bad as anyone else I have met or read about."

"Yeah, unfortunately." I say. Cat's aunt is certainly an example.

Marie asks, "What language?"

"The easiest would be English. It will change rapidly as people add native words for all the life forms here we don't have on earth two. Most people speak English even if it is not their first language."

"Is that why everyone here learned English?" He shrugs.

"Back to what level of tech. Anything to do with metals is not sustainable. Mining hurts the earth. Tech is always borrowing from the future. The bill comes due."

“People will find some deposits of silver, copper and turquoise on the surface. Hard to miss on an un-touched world.”

“Not enough to mess with things. Just enough for ceremonial artifacts.” He nods.

“Stone age then? That’s harsh.”

“We are talking about bringing corn, squash, beans and sheep, maybe chickens.”

“Back to the way it was before the whites arrived. No horses, weapons, money.”

“I love the idea of no money. Gifting. I would not even allow trade, at least at first.”

“Good idea.”

^MNo church hierarchy please.^MHis voice is still weak even with the suit speaker helping.

“No Ron, we learned from your experience. We have had similar times in our own history. Your history missed the Spanish Inquisition, genocides, etc. We agree no church power. Okay to help people through grief and celebrations, but not power to make decisions.”

“Power to the people.” I raise my fist. That gets a roll of eyes and confusion from Ron. Guess you had to have been there.

“What season is it?” Alessa asks.

“Early spring. Planting season. The rains will last longer than on the rez, but not forever. What we would have called August and September are still largely dry. Every other time has some rain.”

I have to ask, “How long have you been observing this world? You seem to know a lot.”

“We did not get here yesterday if that is what you mean. We don’t do much by chance. Not our first world either. The rest did not work out for some reason or another.”

+Given we have reached the ‘event’ what is wrong with this world then?+ Always a side effect as Cat would say.

“Good observation Flor. No, this world is not pre Hu earth. Best if people see for themselves though. Some of the plants are not safe for a variety of reasons. They do not have to protect themselves from animals of course, but there are defenses against other plants and some of the more aggressive fungi.”

“Great, I love athletes foot.” Silver smiles. Oh please don’t smile at that. Please just deny what I said. Are we going to have mushrooms growing out of our skin? Will we become zombie Hu covered in mushrooms? Seeking other Hu to spread the infection, doing the zombie

walk between towns. Never stopping. Never stopping.

You know you can be heard by most of the people here Mike. Stop it before we all freak out.

“Sorry. Too many monster videos.” I focus and see everyone has stopped and is looking at me. Once they see me watching them, they look carefully at the life around them. Even Squeak is being careful where he walks and what he picks up.

“On the other hand, it is good to be cautious in a new location.” Puu says.

It was that night when we realize that I was not entirely wrong.

Alessa comes up, “We need salt.” Her English is quite good now, no accent. She learned very fast.

“Ask Puu to make some.”

“I mean in the long time.” Okay not entire up on the idioms.

I ask, “Does the salt lake exist here?”

“Not exactly. There is a shallow inland sea between us and there now. People can easily get to the edge in a few days walk, make salt, and bring it back. Should not be a problem.” Cat can scan hundreds of miles now.

“No Mississippi river then.” No comments. Guess not.

Droopy is having fun being taller than the average pueblo, looking over the tops of them. She can scan easily, so I am not sure what she is doing. Squeak has gotten over her fear and hangs with her more and more. She does not seem to mind a little one being with her in spite of the long cultural hate of each other. Guess TKs have learned to be more flexible.

She must be TPing with Randy. A shiny metal ball about ten centimeters appears and Droopy sets it down on the top of one of the new homes and is watching it roll I guess. I can hear it, but can’t scan that far, nor see over the lip of the roof. Cat comes over, then Puu.

“What’s the problem?”

“Average rain fall in the rez was maybe 20-30 centimeters a year. Here it is about fifty. The roofs were designed for the lower rain fall. Adjustments need to be made in the design.”

Flor runs over.

“Finally they bring in the engineer to confirm. My guess is they will need steeper roofs, larger holes to the outside and a way for the water to flow away from the homes without tearing up the paths. Would be nice to save the runoff too.”

Silver smiles.

A moment later I see cisterns being made and the design changing

subtly to close to what I was imagining.

“We need grain storage too.”

Flor comes up to me, “Please join us Mike instead of chirping on from the other branch.” A Ku idiom. Going to be a fun culture.

“Think twice, make once.” Silver says as I get up to help. Now, what am I missing?

The Few

We have lost too many this year. First Cat and Puu, then Mike and Marie. Lucy forced to leave. What is going on? We have a meeting in the high school gym to listen this to a solution. Important to listen. Any bird can chirp.

I come in quiet and nod to others I know as I pass them to sit on the floor in a place that feels right to me. Most of the elders are here. Many old ones too. They are near the center in a place of honor. This suggest some cultural understanding.

As things settle down, the lights dim. A simulated fire appears in the center. Our spiritual leaders do an opening chant asking the Great Spirit for wisdom. As they back away someone whom I did not see, dressed as Moogli, appears in the center. An excellent job on the costume. Reminds me of when I was a child at my first Kiva ceremony.

Moogli speaks, ^HA choice needs to be made. The recent earth movements you have felt are only a beginning. These are birth pangs. A new world is being born, the fifth and final one. The choice is which world will you reside in? This world, the fourth world, is about to die. Do you wish to help with the new birth or remain here and comfort the dying? Both are honorable paths.^H

I am old. Past the years I can be useful. But also too old to offer much comfort. Not clear which would be better for our people.

^HMany mistakes have been made. The temptations of the modern world are many. None of the fourth world will be allowed in the fifth. As we entered this world, so we must leave it. We especially need people who remember the old ways. Not many are left. None who lived that way themselves of course. But among you are those who lived with those who lived the traditional ways. Some who have attempted to recreate those ways. Some who seek those ways. We have invited our brothers and sisters from Navajo who live the Beauty Way to be among us. We have invited others who want to walk the Hopi Way. Make your choice. Those who wish to remain to comfort those remain please exit through any door. Those who would help us live the way Great Spirit intended all people to live remain.^H

Only a few exit. I even hear a cell phone. That is just wrong. We all know better than to bring one of those to a meeting. I admit I have used much from the modern world. I used to use an old pickup to help on the farm. In order to exist in the modern world you find yourself making

more and more compromises to make enough money to afford the poison we really do not need. The holding in your hand of the bright shiny object seems to bring pleasure, but they disappoint fast too. Now I live in a traditional stone and clay home. I plant corn, squash and beans by hand. I am no longer fat. My diabetes is gone. I no longer seek alcohol. I remain sitting.

Moogli rises to speak again. His visage changes. Not a removing of the mask and costume, but physically changing. Soon the largest gray owl I have ever seen is sitting on a log in the middle of the room.

I am not the Moogli of your past, but I am honored to be allowed to assume this role to bring you this choice. You are not the last to be chosen or to choose. But, you are the first, the elders. You will help set things up for those who follow so they arrive ready to walk in truth. A very few, chosen very carefully, have already been in the new home to make things ready for your arrival. You many know them from our recent past. They welcome you to your new home.

People walk in all wearing simple robes. They face out towards us. All at the same time, they remove their hoods.

I know all of them. Marie, Mike, Puu, Cat, Turtle and the two boys, Owa comes in with her four kits behind her to sit next to them. They live. How? I saw Mike and Marie's bodies. No way they could have been revived.

We did not mean to deceive you, but we had to prepare your way and these and others were chosen to assist. In their deaths and rebirths they have gone through special extensive training in their new lives. They are quick, they are creative, but they are all young and lack your knowledge. I know you know what I mean.

The owl raises its wings wide and looks up.

Welcome everyone to the fifth world!

A bright light appears above us. The owl rises and flies up to the sky seen through the ceiling of the gym. A set of log ladders appear reaching up to the edges.

Their robes drop and they climb the ladders naked. Owa and the kits also climb the ladders.

*Come join us. No one you meet will harm you, no matter their appearance. They **all** welcome you. Come.*

Everyone is confused. I am not. This is it. I remove my clothing. Others doing the same. There is no shame. We are all old. No one will lust after this old rag. I make my way to the ladder and climb. I climb towards the light. Towards a new world. A new beginning. There are tears

upon everyone. No one is ashamed. We are new again.

In the Light

At the top of the log ladder I am offered a hand up and then a soft pair of cloth pants and a simple top and hat. I quickly put them on and move away from the opening to let the others come up. Our greeters are wearing the same thing.

There is a giant lizard with feathers in front of me.

“Hi I am Squeak. Welcome. Welcome.”

I bow, “Very pleased to meet you Squeak.” I am smiling so wide I think my face will crack. There are other creatures too. A huge lizard bigger than a house. A small furry one that sort of looks like a bat. Oh, another cat, obviously pregnant. She is sitting next to someone who looks like they came out of a history book from a plains tribe.

Something taps my side. I turn and see no one, then look down and see a giant octopus. Confused I bow, not knowing if this is right. It bows back to me, flashing many colors and patterns across its skin.

I am Nease. I am a healer. Are there any ailments you wish to be without?

“You can mind speak?”

All of the ones you see with the blue circle on their clothing can do so.

A blue circle appears on its surface.

“Okay, this is strange, but we were warned not to judge. I am old, with all of the problems of the old. I want more to help than to be helped. I accept my time is short. It is the way of Mother Earth.”

You are very wise. Accept this gift with my thanks for joining us.

Nease sort of walks away. I notice it is wearing some kind of leather harness. Not a land creature really. Hmm, bet I could improve on that. I will have to think about it. I decide it would not hurt to follow Nease and see if I can help anyone too.

Whoa, what the? The pain is gone! I can stretch to my full height again. I have not been this tall in decades. Thank you Nease.

You are welcome. I laugh. A new world indeed.

Some cannot climb ladders any longer. I worry about them. I turn back to the opening to help and see the last few flying out of the hole! They gently land on their feet and are greeted the same as the others. The hole closes and is gone. I go to where it was and can walk on the ground. It is firm. Strange way of moving. No going back either. I offer a hand to an aged one. We slowly walk to where the others are gathering.

There is food waiting. More food than a group of old ones like us can

possibly eat. Ah, corn tortillas, bean and squash chili. We serve ourselves on wood plates. I make one for my new companion.

“I am rude, not having introduced myself. I am Tuusaqa Sihu. You can call me Tuu.”

“I am called many things. I do not have a Hopi name. This is a new life, so I would like a new name. Would you help me?”

I think for a moment, “You are Muuyaw. Our word for moon.”

“I like that. Thank you. This food looks good.” I get the hint and we sit to eat our food in silence. I can’t help but look around though. It is like we have gone back in time. The sun, the pueblos look like they came from an old drawing, everyone in the simple Hopi clothing. Wonderful.

Nease comes up to us and greets me with the bow as done before.

I cannot tell the gender of Nease, but then that is true of most of the people here. Once you reach a certain age it really does not matter any more.

Moon is startled. I rest my hand on her to reassure her it is okay.

“Nease, this is Muuyaw my new best friend. Muuyaw, Nease is our healer and can help you in wonderful ways.”

“I am also a healer, but I do not recognize any of the plants here. This is truly a new world. I will not be of much use I am afraid.”

I will teach you the new plants. There is nearly everything we need. I will show with Silver to see if we can get the ones we will miss. I am honored to meet you Moon.

I should have guessed a mind speaker would know her name in any language.

“Nease, how do I say ‘thank you’ in your language?”

Ours is not a sound language but a visual, we show and touch. I will show you both. This is thank you in the familiar way. Nease gently lays one arm across another. *This is touch, very similar.* Nease lays an arm slowly across one of my arms. Her touch, how did I know she is a she? So gentle maybe. I slowly lay my hand on one of her arms.

Good. Now you can show in Ceph.

Muuyaw touches me and points, “The cats have found each other.”

We both watch as the one called Owa with her kits lays down next to the much larger one. Strange name for a cat, but we all know her to be one of us. The other one looks like a normal tohu, mountain lion. Hope she is safe too.

“No cat fight today. They are getting along fine. It is the males who are always the problem.” The kits are crawling all over the big one without effect. That has to be annoying at least.

I laugh, "So true."

Also true among my kind. They are such fools competing for our attention.

We both laugh, "No one has competed for our attention for a long time." Nease bows formally and leaves to attend someone else. She stops at nearly everyone.

"What the? I can see again? How can that be." I smile. I know.

"Okay, gather round. We are not here to goof off ladies and gentlemen." Ms. Lightfoot. I remember when she was little. What a change.

"Good. You are the advance party. We need you to help set things up so when the others arrive we already have a working system going."

Puu next to us adds, "They don't think they can mess it up."

Lightfoot smiles and continues, "We are asking you to double up in each pueblo. More will be coming in, so think ahead on how you space things out. Each pueblo is marked with a now mythical creature. Remember this so you can find your way home.

We will not be bringing any 'modern' tech in. I do not want to use the term 'stone age', but basically that is what it is. We make all that we need from local materials. At first some of the leaders will help fabricate in what will be the final style and materials. None of us is young enough to do everything instantly from found items. Once we get going, the leaders will be 'less helpful' so be prepared and learn your crafts. Those good at making pots, make pots. Those who are good at baskets, make baskets. Good at growing crops, start planting. We have seeds. Make the tools you need." Not hard, all I need is a sharp stick.

"What about knives?" someone asks.

She smiles an evil smiles, "Do you see any metal about? How did the ancestors make do?" Stone age indeed. There is flint about or something that looks like it.

"Gentleman, this is your area traditionally. It takes time to learn. We will help, to start, but you need to start learning too. You will be showing the others when they come in.

You are the elders, the leaders. We will help to get set up, but you are the true leaders. We will be following your lead, NOT doing it for you. We will then spend more and more time away from you until you are on your own. It is sink or swim time."

"Salt, where do we get salt?"

She points east, "About a weeks walk that way is a shallow sea. You will need to learn how to make salt and bring it back at regular intervals.

This is spring now. I would recommend learning this BEFORE winter when the rains begin.” She steps back and Cat Bear comes forward.

“Choose partners, find a place to live, determine what you need, find a blue circle person to help you. Lunch will be served in a few hours. Time to move everyone.” She claps her hands.

We look at each other and nod.

“We are now the Flower Clan, I am Grass Flower and you are Moon Flower. Okay with you?”

“Great. Let’s find a home with a flower on it to make it stick.”

“How did they know?” It is the first one we look at. Moon is slower and we are near the last ones to the housing area and yet we still find the one available home with flowers around the door. We climb the ladder to the roof and see a ladder going down into the home. Classic pueblo.

Helped protect from enemies. Could not run from house to house killing the occupants. Hopefully that won’t be a problem for awhile yet at least.

Inside we let our eyes adjust to the lower light level and see we have sleeping areas with wool blankets on raised areas. There is a cooking area with a selection of pots. A flat stone over a fire pit to make flat bread. A stack of kindling to one side. I look in some of the covered jars and find corn, beans, small ones with salt and chili peppers. One with fat, smells like sheep. Very basic.

“How do we grind the corn?” Moon asks.

I point to the mortar and pestle. "Need to learn how to sort the gravel out or we will have no teeth left. No dentists in sight."

“Moon, what are you good at, in the old ways? You mentioned knowing herbs, which of course are different here.”

“Assume I know nothing but am an eager and hard worker.”

“Follow me then.” We go outside and find a blue circle person. A young male human at least.

“Hi I am Grass Flower and my partner is Moon Flower.”

“Ah, Flower clan. Our first. Congratulations ladies. How can I help you?”

“We are farmers. Lead us to the seeds and our plot please.”

“Right this way. You have first pick.” He smiles nice.

We are given a sack of corn, a sack of beans, a sack of squash seeds. Tempted to eat the squash seeds. And no means to move them. He has already left.

“Wait, where is our plot?”

“He said we have first pick, so we get to choose.”

“Stay here with our sacks, I’ll be right back.”

On top of our home I got a good view of our surroundings. I want some place close to home, close to water. Some place they are not likely to want to build on either. It looks like the areas where one would plant have already been cleared of local life. That saves a lot of time. I see a loose stack of sticks. I grab four and ask the nearest blue circle if I can have them.

“Staking out your territory?” I nod. She waves me away. Guess it is okay.

I place one stick on each corner of the space I have picked out, then head back to Moon, grabbing four more sticks, longer ones this time.

Tearing up some scrap fabric sitting in the corner I tie the sticks together in such a way that the bags of seeds will fit on them when I lift one end of the pair. I do the same with the remaining two sticks and place the heaviest of the three sacs on it. The two smaller sacks go on the first one.

“Watch what I do and follow.”

“Oh, I have been watching. Guess we have not invented the wheel yet. Makes me wonder how much knowledge we will lose before we have the base tech to make it again.”

“A lot is my guess. They were not dumb back then. They did the best they could with what they have. We need to do the same.”

It is not far to our plot.

“Good choice I hope.”

“So do I. So do I. We will start by planting a row of corn, then a row of beans, then a row of corn. The squash goes in the center area I will make out. No rows there. Use the end of the stick to plant the corn this deep.” I show her how far up the stick to push the hole in the ground. “And this far for the beans. Three seeds in each hole. We will thin out the weak ones later.” We begin.

It is not a large plot, but there are only the two of us. I figure about an acre. We get it half done. We will do the second half tomorrow. We store the rest of the seeds in our home.

We have missed lunch, but that is good. The old times did not get three meals a day. Breakfast on rising and super when the day is done. When we go back to the gathering location we see others coming in too. Many with dusty clothes. There is a small crowd near one of the walls learning how to make flint knives. Even a blue circle is participating, as a beginner. I thought they knew everything. But, then they would not need us. The leader is good. Makes it look simple even. The others look like a pack of monkey by comparison, breaking the stone nearly ever time they

try.

Ms. Lightfoot comes up to us, “Congratulations you two. You are the only ones who planted today. May they all grow tall.”

“That will have to change if everyone wants to eat come winter.” She smiles, nods and moves on.

There is so much to learn. So much to do. I notice a map against one of the pueblos, well, carved into it really. Very detailed. Our plot is already there! A flower in the center even. I smile. It is some way to where the sheep will be grazing. Good, did not want to have to watch for them eating our corn. There is space for carding the wool, spinning it and weaving it. A kiln has been set up along with potter studios. I have not seen anything here that would eat stored food, but I really do not know very much. A bakery. Good, we will not all have to make our own bread every day. Plants all look weird here. Heard there were fungi but have not seen anything obvious. Nease would know. Hope some are edible.

Life falls into routine. The Bringers as we have started to call them concentrate on making more dwellings scattered about some distance away. There is no way we can all live on one block. Two set off for the sea to collect salt after getting instructions on what to do and what to look out for.

Bringer Cat Bear starts holding art classes. All of the Bringers are adamant that we develop our own culture, that we are not beholden to anything from the past. We are free to experiment, play, learn. A small group is starting to make plays to help preserve our new history. We even have a Moogli that turns into an owl in a puff of smoke. We howl every time we see a Bringer presented in an amusing way. They do too, poking at each other and laughing at themselves.

We are here almost a week before we have our first tragedy. Our roofs only have a thin lip on the tops and someone missteps and falls off. There is nothing we can do. They died instantly. Now we have to decide what we are going to do about death. Do we want burials, cremation (not many trees), sky burials like the Tibetans do? The only one who would be interested in eating us are the Cats. I am told they are sentient and we are to use a capital letter 'C'. Burial makes the most sense. Tens of thousands of years ago, the dead were buried in their own homes under a heavy stone. Sounds horrible. Not sure we could even get a heavy stone into one of our homes. Navajo had a tradition of burning down the hogan of the dead. That's out too. Pueblo roofs could burn I suppose, but not easily.

Speaking of which, there is talk of doors instead of holes in the roof. We have no enemies, but I know that could change. Do we have enough

wood to make doors for everyone? I certainly do not want to see clear cutting. It is said there are places south of us with larger forests, but still. This is our chance to do things right. Our last chance. No more mistakes.

Lots of grumbling about no metal knives, pots, building materials. Some even miss their cars and trucks. That will never, ever happen. No one dares mention their cell phones. God am I glad those horrible demons are gone for good.

“Almost time for the all hands meeting Grass.”

“Okay, I am coming.” I put down what my sewing. No one is going to put up with just white for much longer. Nease and Alessa are working on making different colors from local plants. Some of the lichens show promise. Already have a good yellow and orange, lots of greenish browns. Blue will be the hardest. Maybe black. Purple? Never mind. Just happy to have some yellow and orange yarn to work with. I am sewing flowers on our clothes so when they come out of the laundry we know which ones are ours. How long before the only flowers anyone knows about are beans and squash. Of course the squash blossom is classic. I will miss all the ones that come up after a rain.

We have had two rains so far and I have plants coming up in our plot. Don’t have to worry about birds or rats eating them anyway.

“Moon, has that tree moved? I thought it was several feet to the left when we arrived?”

She looks at me like I have lost it, “Sure with their tiny legs. Come on. It’s beginning.”

We are not the last ones. Everyone is on Hopi time.

Puu shakes her head and starts. When did she grow up? She can’t be more than fifteen or sixteen right?

“Shh, I can hear your gears grinding Grass,” Moon nudges me. I do have a problem there. Think too much.

“We have created ten more settlements. No one is going to have to move. But, you are the teachers and elders now. They will come to you for help and advice. Get used to it. In about ten minutes we will have the first ones coming in through the circle. Everyone is expected to help welcoming them and handing out clothing, etc.”

“Hmm, fresh young meat,” someone shouts out to much laughter. Only old withered vines currently present in spite of the healing we have had.

People bring in stacks of clothing. I notice there some with colored shapes above the heart area. Orange triangles, red squares, etc. Okay. Seem to be random. These are kept separate from the all white ones we

all were given.

Puu shakes her head and looks at me, “Okay Grass Flower, why the differences?”

On the spot I stand anyway, “I am guessing you want the designated family leader to get one of the colored shape ones. Everyone else with them gets white. Once this batch is done a gathering all of the orange triangle families will march off to their new homes. Red squares to their new home.” She nods I have gotten it right. Only logical.

“Back away please.” The circle opens to darkness below us. Ladder tops appear and they start coming out. All ages this time. We work hard for over an hour. The announcement is made to confused faces. Some I recognize and wave to with a smile. Important they see this is a good place. No one starving to death or diseased.

There is a sulfur smell about everyone. Not good. Some have ash on their heads and smudged faces. How many more can come through? Even after today, which was way larger than our group, we must have less than a thousand. Didn't they say something about eight thousand total? Maybe they have more settlements elsewhere on the planet. That would quickly end with language differences and ultimately war. Always war.

There are or were only four thousand of us Hopi. Even with another four from the Navajo? And not everyone will choose to come. Going back to the stone age is not easy for most. A lot of people will think they have some kind of chance staying. That somehow it is not the end, that there will be survivors. First the ash and gases, then the nuclear winter, no crops, starvation, then war and plagues. I really do not see much possibility there.

No family came to greet Moon and I. I was not expecting anyone. Moon came to the rez because she had no one left and being part Hopi she was hoping we would take her in. Not expecting this of course.

I am not upset. I was already on this path, but now I get to see if it will work for real. Real consequences too of course. I have been getting closer and closer my whole life. The existence outside the rez always appeared crazy. So obsessed with money, sex and beauty. Not me. I embraced the simple life at first, but I was still dependent on outsiders for what I thought were essentials. Then little by little I learned they were not essentials. You can actually live on very little. I am not talking about the people who live on the Hopi handout the gov gives us. Most spend it on alcohol, housing being free and food not needed if you are drunk all the time. Some get free meals from those who feel sorry for them. No, I

wanted to be self reliant. I almost made it too. Took me a few years to get the plantings down.

More rain here will make it way easier of course. Assuming the local life does not fight back. Now I know that tree has moved. It is at least a foot more to the left. I go and look at the ground and see nothing obvious, but the soil is soft enough that the traffic alone could have taken care of any marks. Is the soil higher on the side it is moving towards? I try looking at it sideways.

Squeak is looking at me trying to figure out what I am doing.

I tell her, "I think this tree has moved."

She sniffs it and barks at it. I laugh, "I don't think that will, what the?" I swear I saw it move a fraction of an inch.

"Squeak, get one of the others. Get Cat please."

"Okay." She runs off. Seems to know exactly where she is. Cat comes up.

"What's up. Pretty busy right now." Annoyed. Does not come out as a question.

"The trees move. On their own."

"Oh god. You have noticed huh? I thought I was going crazy. This tree was at least a meter more to the left when we set this pueblo here. I am sure the pueblo did not move."

"Someone playing tricks?"

"Hmm, Silver might. Owa might too. She is jealous of Squeak. I will ask around. At least they are not fast enough to catch anyone." She sighs and leaves. I'm glad our home is not next to it. I am going to be watching. There must be a way of making a mark that the prankster would not see. Assuming they are not watching me right now. I look around, but of course I would not see Owa. Cats are sneaky. Guess I will just have to try and remember again. It is two corn rows away from the corner now. Two corn rows. Two corn rows.

Second Batch

“I’m glad we split them into ten groups. Even dealing with just one group at a time was hell. The logistics were bad enough.”

Puu sighs, “But the whining. Oh god the whining. You would think they would be happy to get out of the ash and bad air. It will stink near the portals for some time.”

“We had to give ours a bath. Too much.”

What do you mean no metal? Where is the nearest grocery store? Does Amazon make deliveries here? I thought we were coming to heaven. Nease adds. *What’s an Amazon?* No idea myself.

Stupid Monkeys. Guess who added that?

“Everyone see what happened at the grave?” We nod. We were not sure what the local fungi would make of our heavy protein and fat bodies, but they love them. Maybe too much. A million tiny mushrooms appeared on the surface less than a week later. The fungi are the fast moving ones here. Assuming Cat’s theory about the trees is wrong. Good thing we planted the corpse well away from the homes or crops. Not sure what that concentration of spores would do.

“Nease, keep an eye on fungus infections.” She shows affirmation.

Droopy gets lots of attention, so we do not hang out as much as when we were on Magenta even if we share a room. Not surprising. Another Hu is not exactly a new sight, even if I do not exactly match what they were expecting. Some of them recognize the Star Trek red shirt uniform and giggle. I could not resist. Silver just shook his head, but he seemed to be amused too and did not make me change it. Some have even taken to calling me Red Shirt instead of Randy.

TK Marie really enjoys running with Droopy. They have a following of young people who attempt to keep up. The older ones know better. A class of runners is developing as a messenger service to deliver notes and small parcels between settlements.

In eight thousand people it is not surprising that there are some with engineering or practical engineering experience anyway. A lot of ‘non-native’ artifacts are appearing all over. Someone did find the vein of copper nearby and copper knives have appeared. Cat made sure the vein was small so they would not dig too far. They will be prized possessions. Hope that does not start something.

The first trip to the East Sea as we are starting to call it was successful. Scanning already told me of course, but there are no

vertebrates here. Every other phylum, even some I had never seen before, but no backbones. It was easy to gather all the salt they could carry from splash pools that had dried out. They were able, with those copper knives, to harvest a number of snail related creatures to be salt dried. That will give them a welcome change in protein and flavors. There is talk of having a permanent settlement there to trade with. Salt and dried snails in exchange for corn, squash and beans.

The sheep are doing well. They like the triangle grass. Not too surprising there. They will eat almost anything green. Not as bad as goats, whatever those are, I am told. It will be important to keep moving the herds to prevent erosion.

We have spread out the ten settlements, of about eight hundred each, along a rough line of fifty kilometers. We wanted people in different environments to make use of the variety of materials and to experiment with how they deal with it. From this point now they will be allowed to distribute themselves as they please. Some will die, some get bigger and new ones, like the East Sea settlement will form. Of course there are some that want to range much, much further. To reach what here would be the Pacific Ocean, here to be called the West Ocean, would take some doing. They would basically have to carry all of their food with them for what would take months. Not possible yet.

I am sure the settlements will eventually reach the West Ocean. Maybe in a few hundred years. A lot of crops and sheep have to be grown right now. Winter will be here soon enough. That will not be pretty. Silver and Turtle are adamant that they experience some hardship to toughen them up and give them a realistic view of their new home. My new home.

We have not seen any sign of the 'thn. That's good. Droopy and I were banned to the outer reaches after all. Not sure what they would do finding me here. Maybe just fit me with a limiter. That I could handle. Just don't send me back to Magenta. Silver should have been banned too. I remember seeing him when I was young, so he is from Earth One. Definitely TK. Big time. He is a sneaky one though. No one can read him of course. That just makes him a high TK. No one knows how high, but at least a nine. I thought you had to be coupled with a 'thn to be a nine. And no fluidic can be above a nine. He does not seem to be afraid of the 'thn at all. Anyway, I never saw him at the outer reaches. Somehow he avoided the 'thn.

Why no 'thn here is easy. Br'thn was on earth one. High TKs and 'thn are not duped when the front passes. All of the TKs started on earth two must have been made by Silver and then by Silver and Turtle. Makes

sense. Cat is strange, but fun to be with. I had seen Ba, Ceph, Cat, etc. before, so no surprises there. Sylvy is a little different calling us 'silly monkeys' instead of 'stupid monkeys' but that is not much a difference. There were a lot more species in the outer reaches. Here I am a TK7 among a few instead of a low TK6 among many. Definitely better.

Then there is Squeak. The clown of the TKs. She is so happy all the time. At first some of the newbies teased her. They found out quick she loves this and gets even. That was really amusing. We do not openly show off our TK abilities, though most know we are different. Squeak obeys the rules and still gets away with it. She ducks into the nearest empty room and disappears to reappear in another empty room behind the ones she will get. Not in the open. Obeys the rules, but gets them. Now they have stopped trying to tease her and she is treated with respect.

She is still very young and still likes to play most of the time. Cat tries to teach her to be more adult, but come on, we all loved the play part of being a kid. She runs with Droopy sometimes, but Di are meant for the long run and Rap are great at the sprint. So, she sprints ahead of everyone and poops out when Droopy and the others eventually overtake her and she comes back in.

No one seems to be able to break Alessa of the habit of being a maid. She is good at it, especially with her TK abilities. She is also so non obtrusive that most of the newbies have learned to ignore her once they get past her appearance. She hears and sees a lot she reports back to us. We know well in advance of any strange plots, etc. She is particularly good at preventing rapes. I won't tell you what happens to a rapist. It is not pretty. We don't have iron bars, space or time to deal with prisons. Frontier justice.

The weird thing is that, having been caught, knowing what is going to happen, they do not lie and deny it. Guess they all learned quick that does not work.

That is not to say there are not some bullies among the females. A raped male does not get pregnant. This is usually done by another male of course. Don't worry, be Hopi is taken very seriously. What happened to Cat and Puu was experienced by many here. No one likes violence, but bullies of either gender are not tolerated either. In some ways a death by justice is better than the slow starvation of banishment.

Some of the plants and mushrooms are actually edible, but not nutritious, and hard to tell apart for the moment. They are missing many of the vitamins we need. And especially protein. Trying to exist only on natives would only extend the starvation experience. Probably with

diarrhea and lots of vomiting too.

Some of course are actually poisonous. Not because the plant is trying to defend itself from an animal of course. Some might be a defense against other plants trying to take over their territory, most is likely just accident. This earth split off nearly a billion years ago, so not too surprising things are different. Allergies would have been a huge problem if the people had not been 'treated,' without their knowledge of course. If somehow, somehow, Hu do survive on earth two and then somehow develop tech to come here, they will die a horrible death. The number of allergens is truly amazing. Again, that billion year difference hurts. There are millions of earths between us now. Not going to happen.

Randy, you are needed at Third Mesa. Ms. Pauly again I'm afraid.

I sigh. She is middle age and lonely. Was not lucky enough to be part of the smaller first group, but near menopause, so not of interest by most of the men who, on this new world, want to have kids. Many kids. She tries to hang with the TKs now instead, but for obvious reasons we cannot encourage this. If for no reason than we need to work and forming a relationship with a norm would interfere with that purpose. How do we explain we never sleep?

It is only a short way away, so I decide to walk. Postponing my fate as long as possible I guess. There is a down side to being a TK without the necessary psych training. Guess it is a challenge for all of us.

I arrive mid afternoon. Hopefully I will be done before dark. I shudder. I am many times her age, but of course I look half. I would not be able to convince her I am not a good catch. I guess I can fall back on it's against the rules. No fraternizing with the locals. Can I lie well enough, given we were never explicitly told this.

I climb the ladder which is waiting. I yell down the roof hole, "Hello, Ms. Pauly. It's Randy. I'm here."

She pops her head up, "Oh, hi. A neighbor was able to help me. I won't be needing you after all. Thanks for coming though." She bats her eyes at me. Eeeuuu!

"Okay. See you later then." I get out before she changes her mind. My norm duty has been fulfilled and I am off the hook. Whew! Out of sight I DS back to my room. Not taking any chances of being seen by anyone else.

Droopy is waiting for me.

"Well at least you are not some middle aged lonely lady."

"No, just an old age one. We have to go. They need us topside."

"Great, once an astronaut always one."

“We are the only ones with experience.”

“We cleaned the toilets. We don’t have any experience. Surprised we were rescued at all actually.”

“All so you can keep Ms. Pauly, your sweetheart, happy.” She makes kissing sounds.

“Ah Droopy, aren’t you a little big for up?” I have already scanned the station above us. Will not fit.

“Oh yeah. I have been practicing. Stand back, it gets windy as I loose mass.” She shrinks down to about Squeak size.

“Has Squeak seen this? You make the perfect playmate now. You could hunt rats together.”

“Naw, I only eat sap chow. You ever try one? Disgusting things.”

“Not me. I want my food dead. I know there is life force in everything, so the lower on the scale the better for me.”

“Beam me up Randy.”

I sigh, “How long have you been waiting to say that?” I take us up. Even with the smaller size, it is a tight fit. Guess I have been spoiled by all the open space. Silver and Turtle are already there.

“So where is the plugged toilet?” I had made plunger out of the air to bring with me.

Silver laughs and Turtle gives me a dirty look.

She points to a screen and says, “Look and please tell me your plunger will work on that.”

“I should have been able to see this from the Mesa. That’s a big one alright, going to need a bigger plunger. I thought you said that we did not get hurricanes on this world. Never even thought to worry about them.”

“Surprises us too. Did not have a single one the last twenty years. Then this.”

“No messing around. Anything to do with the close flyby we had earlier this lunar month?” A ten kilometer rock.

She shrugs, “I am not the weather lady. No idea. I doubt it, this is all new to me too. Question is what do we do about it? That will flood everything and destroy all of the crops for this year.”

“Silver should be able to DS it to another ocean right?”

“You could DS it to another ocean. Do we have that right?”

“What, you want to move everyone again? Or make them perpetually dependent?” Droopy asks.

She continues, “Hurricanes need heat. Take away the heat. We each DS small portions of it to the poles or hell, all over. Does not matter. Everywhere is going to be better than here.”

Silver say, "That could work. Good thing we have astronauts on board."

"And extra large plungers ready to go. We need to go slow so we do not mess things up world wide. This is going to take hours."

"Was not due to hit for a few days, so that will work. Let's go."

"Wait, there are life forms in those seas. Ones that are not cosmopolitan. We could be messing up the entire world ecology." Turtle is the careful one.

"The storm already crosses the equator. Likely it is already bringing lots of creatures some distance. Instead of the ocean, how about just the air above the ocean." Silver already knew this answer, but was waiting for us to get there. Guess he got impatient.

Turtle nods and we get to work. Droopy and I cannot reach clear around the world, so leave the distance work to the two of them. We move our chosen air masses to closer locations.

It did not take hours, but only minutes. The waves are subsiding even without the wind getting them so excited.

"That was a surprise. Who would have known it would be that simple."

Silver reminds us, "There are always side effects. We still do not know what happened or if/when it will happen again."

"There were spores in those air masses we moved." Sigh, Turtle.

"Okay, I am not a geo biologist, but don't spores more or less move with the winds world wide anyway? Does this really make a difference?" Thank you Droopy.

"Got you there Turtle."

"Back to Ms. Pauly for you Randy," Droopy teases.

Turtle and Silver both look at me with concern.

"More thorns than roses." They relax and I DS us back to the Mesa. Dark and safe now.

Droopy and I share a space. Guess we have spent so much time together it sort of works. More of a secret hiding space. We have no obvious exit and our hole is hidden deep in a hill.

"You going back to big now?"

"I am thinking of more Dia sized. A bit bigger than Squeak, but not so big as my former Di shape."

"To be fair, you were, ah, a bit over sized even for a normal Di."

"You Hu are so obsessed with weight. Di aspire to a large size."

"Yeah, if your TK ever leaves you, you can always sit on them."

"I can still sit on you now." She DSs to above me and lands on me.

Uhh! We wrestle for a moment before settling down.

“That was fun though.”

“At least it was not a toilet. Glad they use composting ones here.” I throw my plunger aside.

“I sense they are still above. Wonder what else is going on. I think they don’t tell us everything in our meetings.”

“No! How can you say that Droopy. We are essential and must be kept in the loop at all times.” She punches me in the shoulder. Glad she is not full size. I smile. Life is good. We solved a major crises in less than an hour and are back safe and sound.

Though the wind is picking up some. I scan to the edge of my reach. No sign of the hurricane and I relax.

Lost Cat

“What are you looking for Squeak?”

“Cat.”

“There are no Cats here. Go play outside.”

“No. Cat.”

“That’s right. No Cats here.”

She futzes about even more obviously frustrated.

“Mother. Find Mother.”

“Owa is two pueblos down Squeak.”

Even more upset.

Finally she says, “My mother. Find my mother.”

“Very good Squeak. I have not seen her.”

She pushes over a table with lots of stuff on it.

“Can’t find my mother.”

“I will help you find her then. Let’s go outside. She is not here.”

I scan the entire mesa and can find no sign of her. Strange.

I find the boys learning how to make mud bricks to make homes with.

“Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones, have you seen Cat Bear.” I am not playing the same game with them.

“We have been here all day and have not seen her. Find Turtle. She always knows where Cat is.”

“Have you seen Turtle?” The both shake their heads no. Great help boys.

“Now both of them are missing Squeak. Very mysterious.”

“Silver?”

“Okay boys, have you seen Silver, Mike, Marie, Alessa or Nease?”

“We have been here all day. Not seen any of the others.” Mr. Smith answers this time.

Someone left them alone with just norms? I scan the growing home and don’t see anything funny. We have warned them not to pull pranks on norms, but they are young males. Sometimes it just is too hard to be nice.

“Are we the only ‘leaders’ present? Where is everyone else?”

I see Grass Flower coming back from her plot.

“Ms. Flower, have you seen any of the other leaders?” She smiles.

“Sorry, but you are so young. Hard to think of you as a leader.”

“Hard for me too, but this is where I am. I can’t find any of them.”

“Alessa is almost always with Nease as you know. I think they were investigating some new plants they have not seen yet. Mike and Marie

were supposed to be surveying a possible site for the next settlement, nearer the East Sea. Have not seen Silver, Turtle or Cat.”

“Come back inside Squeak.” She is not sure she wants to, but does. As soon as she does I DS us to the East Sea where I have scanned Mike and Marie. We were all close friends before all this happened. Nice to have them with us again.

“Mike! Marie! Do you know where Cat, Silver or Turtle is?”

“Silver and Turtle said something about finding Droopy and Randy and going topside.”

I look up without thinking. Silver would box my ears. Never give away your actions. I scan Silver and Turtle in the satellite in geo stationary orbit above us. That is their secret quiet space, so I don’t want to bother them without an invitation.

I find Droopy and Randy at the 3rd Mesa and we DS to their room.

“Whoa, warn us next time. Not much room here.” Randy exclaims nearly falling over.

“Sorry, we are looking for Cat and can’t find her. No one else has seen her either.”

“Not seen her. We just got back from above. We helped break up a hurricane that was going to plaster us.”

“We don’t get hurricanes here?”

“We know! We were shocked too. But, all went well. You might notice a slight increase in wind for a bit, maybe some light rain, which would not hurt.”

“No, that would be helpful. The crops will welcome it.”

“Thanks Droopy.” We DS out back to our own home.

“Squeak. This is scary. I can only scan about a portion of the planet at once. It will take at least an hour, but we can go around the world to look for her.”

“Squeak come too.”

“Okay, here we go.”

I can’t imagine her being at the poles. They are frozen here same as earth two. I start at the equator. A TK has a unique signature that is easy to pick up if we want to be seen. Not sure I could find her if she did not want to be found. I can see the others easily. Not trying to hide. They are going about their chores, or in the case of Randy and Droopy, just playing around. Oh, of course Owa and Sylvy are sleeping. No surprise there.

We go west and make our way around the equator.

“Nothing Squeak. I am not finding her. Try the poles I guess.” We make another series of DS jumps floating in the air several thousand

meters up to avoid the mountains. Nearly run into what passes for Everest here. That is around eight thousand meters. We DS through it to the other side.

“Okay, this is just weird. I really do not want to bother Silver and Turtle, but I am not finding here Squeak.”

Silver, Turtle. I am sorry to bother you. I know you don't want to be disturbed when you are topside, but I have searched the entire world and cannot find Cat. Squeak is with me and we are both very concerned.

They appear instantly next to us. They look so cool just floating there. I always feel self conscious and awkward. Never sure what to do with my arms and legs.

“We have both scanned and cannot find her either. Very strange. She should not be able to hide from us.” She looks very upset. Turtle is sort of our mother. She scratches Squeak on top of her head and Squeak leans into it, but not with much enthusiasm. Understandable.

“She was the first to DS, well, a Rooi sphere actually. She has had the most practice and is a TK7. She can jump worlds. She has been back and forth to earth two, what nine times now. Not too hard to imagine she learned the way.”

“With hundreds of billions of other earths I hope she just went there. But why? The last jump was horrible. It must be pure hell there now.” Silver nods.

“If she wanted to retrieve something, wouldn't she have done that by now?”

“We did not exactly give anyone much free time to pursue personal interests.”

“You gave us no time at all. The village was already burned the last time, so nothing there to be salvaged. She is not particularly attached to her art work, only the making of it. Once made, she does not much care.”

“We have most of the Hopi here already, so not likely a person.”

“Unless someone from her past.”

“And not say anything in over two years? Unlikely.”

“Not a sweetheart anyway or she would have said something to me.”

Suddenly we are in the room of the Flower Clan. Grass and Moon are totally shocked, but recognize us.

Silver greets them, “We are sorry to intrude, but we have an emergency. We need you to watch Puu and Squeak until we return. Can you do that for us please?” They nod slowly.

“What do you mean watch me. I'm definitely going. No way you are leaving me out.” They are gone. Well, I have been to earth two just as

many times. I try to DS out of the room and am stuck. I can't hear thoughts, TK, nothing. Shit.

“They fit me with a limiter! Shit. That is evil! That is just wrong! How dare they do this to me!”

Grass and Moon stare at me.

“Sorry. Nothing to do with you. I'll just go home and not bother you any more.” Squeak DSs out easily. I am very jealous. I use the door and walk home.

When I get there Grass and Moon are next to me. “We promised.”

Earth Two the Hard Way

“When did you learn to make beer from corn Mike?” Not as good as the wheat variety, but given where we are this is not bad. Of course we are high enough TK now the alcohol has no effect.

This is really nice sitting on the roof. Lounge chairs. Sipping beer in the late afternoon sun. This is not our ancestors way of life. The tech is way beyond what they had. We even have wheels now! Imagine, with only stone age tools we have simple wooden wheels. Not large, but they work and make work so much easier.

“I was not as good of a student as they thought I was. A lot of time watching sheep.” He smiles and takes another sip. Watching the people below go about their business. Not unlike sheep.

“Ah huh! Caught you two in the act.” Silver and Turtle DS in without warning. Not like them. Well not since we got to the higher levels anyway.

“Can’t get drunk as TKs, so why not?”

“And if the norms see you making this?”

“The fermentation tanks are a thousand clicks away and way underground to keep them cool.”

“Tanks, as in metal?” Turtle give him the evil eye.

Then they look worried. Uh oh.

“We have an assignment for you two.”

“You may not make it back alive.”

“My favorite kind.”

“Shit you are going to make us baby sit Squeak. Oh god, anything but that!” Mike feigns horror.

“Worse, we have lost Cat.”

“We think she may have gone back to earth two.”

“So, what’s the problem. Pop over and get her. Either of you two could do that easy.”

They look at other looking very guilty.

Finally Turtle admits, “She may have a limiter.”

“In other words undetectable, but very vulnerable while it is on her.”

“Precisely.”

“Last I heard, it is hell down there.” Why do I think of it as down? Guess because we came up to here, even if that was illusion.

“It’s worse now.”

“Then why the hell did she go there?” Mike asks.

“We don’t know.”

“Where is Puu, she will want to be with us.”

Another sheepish look at each other.

“She has been fitted with a limiter. It would be far too dangerous for her.”

“And not for us? TKs can be killed.” They nod.

“And we are not to reveal our abilities too?”

They sigh relief.

“No, you are free to kill, destroy, mess with as much as you need to. Everyone there is dead. Zombies really. They just don’t know it yet. You will not be changing any ultimate outcomes.”

“And the reason you two are not going? You are higher TK than we are after all.”

“We need to be here to protect this world. We still do not know how that hurricane happened and that last asteroid was very close. We sense something is up.” What hurricane? What asteroid? What else are they not telling us. Okay, a live world is more important than one who is near death and not going to revive.

“Could she have been kidnapped by a TK we don’t know about?” No one says Sauron, but we are all thinking it.

“Possible.”

“Gee and we thought it was only the crazy norms we had to worry about.”

I set down my beer. Won’t be another one for awhile. I sigh.

“Best we get going then. Ready Honey?”

Mike gets it and responds by taking my arm and saying, “Yes dear.”

We DS out. I am not going to humiliate myself by asking them to DS us to earth two. If Cat can do it, so can we.

We pop out.

“Not earth two. I thought you were driving?”

“I thought you were.”

“Go back or figure out where we are and go on?”

I look around. The mesa is still here so we have not moved horizontally. There is nothing alive or formerly alive visible. I scan. Nope. Nothing.

“Black world, brown at best. May be where earth two is headed but this is not it. Take us back and we will try again.”

We make it back alright. Silver and Turtle have left. Good, this is embarrassing enough.

“Should have turned left at Albuquerque.”

My turn. "Everyone knows ladies have better sense of direction."

"You are a lady? Who would have thought?" He smiles. We have this banter frequently.

I take us into DS space. We have been back and forth a few times when I was at a level to register it well. There is a pattern to things if you see it. We come out.

"Another black world. Take us back."

"Ha, ha. I am afraid this is it. Over there is what's left of the Visitors Center and the High School is over there." Rubble. The destruction was done by the people left behind, not the volcano itself. No one here now though. Ash is covering everything and making the world look gray.

"I can barely breathe." And freaking cold. Snow on the ground, well gray snow.

"So don't, you don't need to." I shrug at him.

"Lock and load. We are not alone." I scan around us. Should have as soon as we arrived. There are three sets of eyes watching us from under rubble barely big enough to hold them. None of them are Cat. Not even Hopi. Mike pulls out his collection of beebees. Accelerated to hypersonic speed and they can hit someone behind a three foot concrete wall. Well the wall exploding in their face would do the actual work. Combine it with DS and you can pierce anyone. It looks like nothing to worry about. Silver really drilled us in military TK tactics.

"And the first one is leaving." He DSs us away from everyone. We can see thousand of kilometers. We need not get anywhere near anyone.

I make a temporary underground chamber several hundred feet down and DS us there.

"This will make us invisible. Take your time. I will go west, you go east."

"We are just east of the mesa, so that works." We both fall silent.

It has only been a few months since we started our evacuations, but the world is gone. We can each see about a quarter of the planet. It is really a mess.

"I see there are no nucs of any kind, good or bad."

"Silver I suspect. He does not care if we kill ourselves, but we have no right to take out the rest of the species."

"Looks like Yellowstone already did most of it."

"That was natural. Nucs are not." True.

"The world will recover, Hu may not."

"Nothing to speak of from here to the Mississippi and from Canada to Mexico. A lot of corpses, Hu and animal. A lot of dead cows, pigs,

chickens, etc.”

“No one to feed them and no reason to feed them.”

“I am finding pockets of people, up to thirty in one place. Those take time to scan.”

“Confirmed. Same in this direction. There are quite a few living in the hills near the ocean. Well, more like pockets. Cat said a lot of people hid in the coastal mountains to avoid the authorities. Drug culture and just people who did not want to follow the consumer model. More south than north. Trying to get warm is my guess.”

“But they were prepared with lots of canned goods and survival skills. The ones in this direction are very well armed. Shit Texas is crazy with guns of all kinds. They put a lot of militaries to shame.”

“All the crops and trees are gone. The ash killed everything. Everyone will be hungry soon.”

“The ocean is not as bad off. The larger creatures will be in trouble. But the small stuff is doing okay so far. The lack of light is going to stop most of that soon though.”

“What does that leave then?”

“Death eaters of course. Silver said it will be winter for at least three years. They could live off of the dead for that long, maybe.”

“If I remember, some can hibernate or go into seed and spore forms to wait for better conditions.”

“Burrowers too. Bugs, rodents, seeds, fungi. Won’t be that different than 5th world soon.”

“Except for the mess left behind. A lot of concentrated toxins.”

“Guess who gets to help clean that up dear?”

“We do honey.” Sigh.

“I am not finding anything. You?”

“Didn’t she say she was from some place in California? I am finding a few pockets of people there.”

“San Jose is where she lived before the rez. Said something about that when I picked her up.”

“Do you know the way to San Jose?”

“Nope, but I can get us close and we can work on it from there.”

“Funny you would have thought Utah with all the Mormons into stock piling food would be ahead.”

“They got a mega dose of ash, hot burning acid ash.”

“Hate that when that happens.”

“Ruins your whole day.”

We were never this way before the change. Funny how we click

together now. I never thought I would have felt this close to another. And no sex even. Go figure.

We arrive to broken buildings, smoldering fires everywhere. Overturned cars. Bodies. And some people. I don't take the chance and DS to the hills.

Where we run straight into a pack of armed mountain people who all cock their weapons at once. We both immediately disable them on instinct. Mike has his beebies in the air swirling around his head.

They try and open fire on us and quickly figure out that won't work and resort to knives, axes, sticks, etc. Our shields protect us from that easily.

"Hello. Do you know how to get to San Jose?"

"Are you demons? What kind of magic is this." He takes another whack at our shields.

I sigh, "If you want to be dead, keep it up. We have nothing to lose from killing you all. On the other hand, if you give us truthful directions we will be gone from your lives forever. What's it going to be? Simple or dead?"

They all point at once in the same direction. Unless they are TP they are likely speaking the truth. I scan ahead this time and pick a point with no people in an abandoned building and take us there. Mike was watching the group all this time. We have this set up ahead of time. One does the travel and one on defense. Men still like to protect the lady, even if I am likely better at it. Small things.

"I sense nothing working. No power, no cars moving. Nothing. Did it really happen this fast?"

"Cold too. Was too busy reacting to everything to notice before."

"Not for us, but they have to be suffering for sure. Look at the ash already on our clothes. Yet, I don't see and sense any fires with people near them."

"May have had enough smoke for a lifetime."

"More than that. They are sick. The old plagues are coming back. The sewage systems have broken down. I bet we have cholera, typhoid, yellow fever and TB again. Soon to be followed by monkeypox, ebola, what have you."

"Nope. The population density is too low now. If you survive this summer of winter, where it will be the worst, then you might make it."

"If you can find anything to eat. Hard to find food stashes in all this rubble. Where do we start?"

"Well, she mentioned she got to Flagstaff by bus. Guess we find a bus

station and back track.”

I look around. Almost everything is obscured by ash and soot.

“There are about five buses sort of together three and half blocks away.”

“Take us in Mr. Zulu.” We arrive to a jumble of what used to be buses in a mess of a parking lot. Looks like someone was living in one, but not there now.

“Over there I think.” We walk over to a smashed door that no longer works. There is a row of seats where I guess people waited. I look up and see the route times. The date is from a month and a half ago. All leaving. All going south. Nothing to Arizona. Makes sense. Who would want to get closer to the mess.

Mike notices, “I have already scanned down south. They got it too. The entire world is covered in ash from this one. Oh, shit. Oregon north is gone on the coast. Wait, extends down to San Francisco even.”

“That tsunami must have finally happened. Probably a side effect of Yellow Stone.”

“Okay, she said the juvenile center was only a block or two away.”

“Got it. More like eight. Someone there, in the front office.”

“Armed?” I scan and find him too. Nope.

Mike grabs my arm, “Shall we walk?”

“Certainly.” We walk and skip our way kicking stones and bricks ahead of us.

In short order we are there. Sure enough there is someone behind the counter reading a book. We go in.

He ignores us. We ring the bell. How old fashioned.

Without looking up, “Yes. How may I help you?”

“We are looking for someone.”

“Dead. Everyone is dead. Anything else.”

“Her name is Cat Bear.”

Mike nudges me, “That was not her name back then. Her name was Sue Hoonaw.”

He looks up surprised, “Who are you and how do you know her?”

“We are friends from the rez.”

“She made it alright. Good for her. She was so little and scared.”

“Well dear, we might as well leave, not the one we are looking for.”

He laughs, “No, you have the right one. She was something. If I was ten years younger I would never have let her go. Doesn’t matter now though. I’ll be dead soon enough. Was good for awhile.” He coughs bad. Ash.

“Would you like to help us find her? You know the area better. She made friends with a Mexican lady on the bus too. Name of Tia.”

“Well there used to be several thousand Tia’s in the area. But what the hey. Nothing else to do. Have anything to eat?”

I hand him some sap chow, “Nutritious, but does not taste like much.”

He tries some, “Tastes better than dry dog food. Cat food they put something funny in it to stop little old ladies from eating it. But, dog food is alright and it keeps forever. Ran out a few days ago.”

“Do you have a phone book or something we can start scanning for possibilities?”

“What’s a phone book? Are you from the stone age? Would be faster if you just asked anyone alive in the area if they were Tia.” Another cough.

“Capital idea major, ah, what is your name?”

“Sam, short for Samuel Snodgrass the III.”

“Yeah, stick with Sam. Sorry for your name.”

“I’m used to it. Hey, this is where I worked the last five years. Don’t get higher up the ladder with a name like this.”

“Well Sam, make room for incoming people.” I smile.

“Hmm, narrow it down a bit. Hispanic, grandmother. That has to narrow it down.”

As I reach out with my scan and I use TP to ask them if they are Tia. Narrows it down a lot more.

“Well I have five that fit the specs. Here they come.”

I DS them all in front of us. Sam’s eyes fall out of his head. Well not literally of course.

“Sorry to be so rude. All of you say your name is Tia. We are looking for a Tia that rode a bus to Flagstaff a few years ago with a friend of ours. Her name at the time was Sue Hoonaw or Sue Bear. Do any of you remember her?”

They are not much better than Sam. They stare looking around without moving. A couple of muffled coughs.

Mike sighs, “We have food and fresh water.” That gets their interest.

I go into the next room and come back with the packages we have prepared as we talked to them. Lots of canned stuff hidden in pockets that are easy to dupe. A nice grocery sized cloth bag with lots of canned foods I found and duped and a gallon of water which I did not need to find an example of, of course.

“Each of you gets one, even if no one knows Sue. You will be returned to your space unharmed. There is nothing to fear from us.”

Finally one asks, "Are you friends of Sue Bear?" We both nod.

"I rode the bus with her to Flagstaff. Nice girl. Young. Just lost her parents in a car crash." I DS the others back with their packages.

"Welcome. We are looking for her and hoping you can help."

"I have not seen her since that day. I'm sorry. Are you going to send me back now? I really would rather stay here," cough, "Everyone is dead. A gang broke in and killed everyone. I was out looking for food when it happened. I buried everyone, but I really do not want to stay."

"You are welcome to join Sam, Mike and me, Marie, to look for her."

"I thank you very much and I accept. You should know I will be dead soon. Ash lung."

"We will worry about that later. Well, we have lots of food. Might as well eat."

Mike makes plates, sets up a table and we sit down to eat. They must both be dying of curiosity, but are polite. Probably not seen this much food for a while.

"I am sure you are curious. We are still human, just changed a bit. We serve a purpose though, one you will hopefully join us in. Assuming we survive and succeed in our mission here."

I jump in, "We also have questions too. It has been months since we were last here. We saw the start of the disaster, but have missed the rest."

Sam asks, "Where have you been? How could you have missed everything?"

Ah shit, "We can't divulge that at the moment. All in good time. It is a good thing though. Just tell us what happened from your perspectives." I start to work on Tia's lungs, Mike works on Sam's.

Tia starts, "I was here when Yellowstone blew. Just got back from Flagstaff, They warned everyone for weeks it was going to happen and I tried to convince my daughter to come back with me. But, job, familia, she did not come. Have not heard from her since. Wyoming was largely evacuated. They said there would be a bit of ash for a bit, but nothing to worry about. It happened after the harvest at least, so we had good stores all over the US. We were as ready as we could be I guess."

"Only it was much bigger, much bigger, than they anticipated."

"And it did not stop for over a month. Still some molten stuff I suspect and still out gassing. By the time the major part was done the entire planet was covered in ash and three states were under molten lava."

"Then, maybe because Yellowstone messed things up down under, the biggest earthquake on record off the northwest coast. The entire fault line ruptured at once. For a hundred miles inland of British Columbia,

Washington, Oregon and northern California everything was washed away. Part of the wash came in the through the Golden Gate and came up as far as a few blocks from here.”

“That would explain all the destroyed buildings we saw.” Sam nods.

“Even I knew what would come next. Power grid went. With the sewage systems off, everything backed up. Sewage everywhere.”

“Then the plagues.”

“That’s right. It was bad. Killed so many people so quickly. Quiet now though. I have seen no sick ones for a week. We separated to cut down on infection. I stayed here.”

“We noticed at the bus station a lot of people must have left town.”

“Most anyone still alive who could did. Rumor had it was better south in Mexico. Wasn’t actually, but that was the rumor.”

“How many left?”

“No idea. Communications are all down. No internet, no radio, no cell phones.”

“Oh the humanity! The young ones must have died from withdrawal.”

Tia laughs, “It was fun to watch. Very dramatic. Till they really started dying.”

“Till the deaths started.” Of course.

I ask Mike, “Something in the journals about Atherton or New Atherton?”

Sam laughs, “Flooded. No one there now. Or for miles around.”

Even Tia is amused, “I did housekeeping there for a year. They thought they were gods. Their poo stunk same as anyone.”

“I am afraid the typical primate hierarchy goes back to the beginning of time. Not likely to change without a great deal of effort.” Mike sighs.

“It is possible for short periods of time. Just have to stay awake and make sure it does not come back.” Me an optimist?

“There was another group that liked to dig down.”

“I thought you did not really read the journals Mike.”

“Armstrong Units. Didn’t Rachael have trouble with them too?”

“Only because they knew about our kind. Not that kind of plague this time.”

“That we know of. Could have developed it on their own too. It is possible to tech it as well.” We have lost Sam and Tia who give us confused looks.

“Wasn’t there one near here, sort of south west of us and another in the state capital?”

“Sacramento,” Sam offers.

Mike says, "Scanning."

He come back, "Abandoned. Looks like they may not have finished them. No stores, no 'core' at the bottom."

"Assuming they used the same design. Where is the one near the rez?"

He already has a search image.

"Winslow. Wonder how they got permission to be there?"

"Navajo sold out for cash of course."

"They were patriots in WWII. Code talkers. Japanese could not understand them," Tia offers.

"Good Tia. We are both Hopi and because of long held prejudice, tend to ignore each others accomplishments."

"This one is active. Looks like a full complement. Something happened, they have gone to high alert!"

"What are you two talking about? How can you know what is happening in Arizona?"

"Ah, yeah, well. Need to know. What concerns me is the alert. Did you set it off with your scan Mike?"

"I was gentle, but we know it is easy to make a sensor if you know what you are looking for."

"We need to be careful." I look at Sam and Tia. "We have two who won't set off alarms."

"How do we get there without setting off alarms?"

"I may be able to help there."

An old man dressed all in black and covered in ash comes in. He is wearing a good face mask and does not appear to be suffering from ash lung like Sam and Tia used to.

Catch Up

I have not written in this in years. Let's see. Last I wrote I was near retirement and pissed off at human behavior. Not an uncommon feeling. Something about getting to be an old curmudgeon. I really let it get to me for awhile. Shouldn't of with all my mindfulness training. Okay, don't need to go there again.

I retired a few months later than I had hoped. They finally realized that all of the knowledge transfer was not happening as fast as they had hoped. Then my common law wife got sick. That was a tough couple of months. Finally getting freedom to work on my own projects and then having to take care of her full time instead. She would have done the same for me, so I could not complain. She got with me because I was younger than her. I always thought I would go first anyway. She was right.

With her gone I had no reason to stay in the same expensive town as I used to work, so went to Oregon to be with my mother. I loved the relatively quieter lifestyle. Far less people, but still a tourist town unfortunately. Rain was hard and fast. Over quickly and then I could be out again with my cameras. I always carried plastic bags to cover them with. You never knew. People thought I was crazy, but I am used to that.

We had a couple of years together. She died six months ago. I sold the house and most of my own stuff too. I am sixty eight now. Just a small van, two cameras and lots of sketch books. Very self reliant. Oh and a simple penny whistle. I had one of those senior passes to national and state parks and moved from one to another until Yellowstone hit. Glad she went before she saw her house of fifty years get washed away. Not sure she would have even left to save herself.

Picked up a stray cat along the way whom I call Ghost, after the one in the books. He has been a good companion and rides up front with me.

When YS hit I rushed to the hardware stores and bought every high quality particle mask I could get. I had studied enough science to know this was going to get ugly. Got a lightweight sleeping bag, pack and a camp stove that would run on anything. Gasoline ran out fast and there was no solar once the ash covered the sky. My wind turbine took days to charge the battery to only get me a hundred miles. People were getting desperate. I am not a killer. Finally decided I was too big a target, even on the back roads. Left it all. Me and Ghost just walked into the woods.

Too many people along the coast had the same idea as me and I

decided to make my way to the southern Sierras. That was how I happened to walk into the one place I saw with four people in it all eating.

“Hello stranger. How may we help you?”

I stare at them in disbelief. I know them.

“Hello. Anyone home?” I remove my breathing mask.

“You must be Marie, Mike, Sam and Tia.” Pointing to each one in turn. “I am Chris and this here is Ghost, like from the journals you read, only no relation.” Though I suppose there could be. Who knows with cats. I set Ghost down to sniff and explore.

“Ah what journals are you talking about and how do you know us. I have never seen you before.” The others shake their heads no also.

“Sorry. Should have explained. I wrote the journals.” I bring out an old dusty flash drive from around my neck.

“Could not carry them in paper form. Too much weight. Suppose this would be impossible to read now too. Carry it for nostalgia.”

“What do you mean you wrote them?”

“What journals?” Sam asks.

“Sam and Tia, you have not had a chance to read them yet. Mike and Marie know what I mean. I am the original author, sort of. All the drafts of all ten journals are on this drive. Guess you have to take my word for it. I am guessing you and Mike are what, TK7 now?” They node slowly.

“I guess, given that we have met, I am here to help you rescue Cat. She is being held captive in the Winslow Armstrong Unit as you suspected. Or were starting to suspect anyway.”

“You have TP?”

“Bit hard to explain, but as far as I know I have no TK abilities whatsoever. Your scans should confirm that at least.”

“They do, so then how?”

“I just said that I sort of wrote the journals? Well, it would be more accurate to say they wrote themselves. I was only the means they ended up on paper so to speak. The fact that you have read them means that sometime before you all were chosen to become TK, Silver and/or Turtle somehow got a copy of them. I suspect Silver. He is the sneakier of the two.”

“Any objections to Chris and Ghost joining us?” Marie asks.

“If he knows this much already, it would be a waste to ignore his help.”

But Marie is not so sure, “You said they wrote themselves. How do you think that happened?”

“Well, it was not Silver. He is from earth one in case you had not already figured that out. Turtle was his first convert here. He must be around a thousand years old and Turtle maybe a hundred and fifty.”

“That was not in the journals.”

“Hadn’t gotten to the point where that knowledge was needed yet I guess. I sort of go into a trance when I write. Not like I can ask questions of it.”

“Get to the point. How?”

“Best guess is that I am remembering a recent incarnation that was very similar to this one.”

“But not identical.”

“So far it is, but that is the point isn’t it? Each one is slightly different. All trying to answer The Question.”

“What question? Why do all this?” Tia asks.

“Precisely Tia. You got it.”

“You know the answer?” I nod yes looking concerned. Don’t they?

“It is rather obvious after all.”

“Back to Cat. What do you know?”

“Can’t be 100% as I just mentioned. At some point the two stories will diverge. Here is what I think. The Armstrong Units, at least the Winslow one, can detect TK. That you suspected. Just simple carbon gold foil detectors so far. They will get better fast. Now that one has gone off, they will try and improve on it.”

“That does not say Cat is there or why and how.”

“I suspect they are able to shield your ability to detect her.”

“Yes a limiter.”

“Ah, more that that. All Armstrong Units are nuclear powered, this one included.”

“But Silver and Turtle removed all rad stuff already.”

“But they did not detect this one. There is a shield protecting it from TK scans. It would look to them like there was no bottom floor.”

“That fits with what I scanned also.” Mike says and continues, “I did not have time to get a good see before the alarms went off.”

Ghost comes back in with a nice juicy mouse and starts to eat it. He does not share well. The others note this and ignore him. He is purring pretty loud though.

Tia says to me, “You know what the rodents have been feeding on right?” I nod and shrug. That seems to satisfy her. Corpses.

Marie asks, “What about from below?”

“TK7 cannot scan through the entire earth.” Mike says.

Tia asks, “How deep are these places?”

“Great question Tia. If you can get lower than them, you might be able to scan sort of up and sideways. They probably did not anticipate

that expecting all scans to be coming from the surface.”

I add, “From the journals you know their experience was with TK2s, maybe a TK3 or even just to be safe they would set up that possibility. TK3 means a kilometer. They would likely shield with that in mind.”

“Then we need someplace lower that won’t set off their sensor when we go there. Not easy.”

“Their shield would also prevent seeing TK activity from that direction.”

“Excellent thinking Sam. Are you sure you know nothing about all this?”

He shrugs, “Just logic and too much time reading sci-fi.”

“Why would they leave any part unshielded?”

“Nuclear power supplies are not easy. A lot of pipes and wires going in and out. That would be really hard to shield.”

“So sort of like a mushroom cap?”

“But this Silver person would have seen something like that and been suspicious as to what it was. If they built it into what appeared to be a floor, then nothing suspicious right?”

“She has a point. Also I suspect they were working quickly. How deep are these things. Scan the one nearest us that was nearly completed.”

“Assuming they were all made the same, then twenty stories of ten feet each. Plus the several hundred feet above the entire thing.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Partly to hide it. No one was supposed to know where these things were except the people running that particular one. And the second reason was to protect against a blast from above. Nothing short of a direct hit from an H -bomb can take one out.”

“Let’s not forget that the core is also a fail safe or self destruct. We don’t want to spook them too much, no matter what we do.”

Tia is shocked, “They would destroy themselves to take us out?”

Mike, Marie and I nod.

I add, “They are military. They are sort of single minded. There are at least fifty of these. California clearly did not get theirs finished in time. Surprised at that actually. Probably politics. If one self destructs they hope some of the others will survive because of their sacrifice.”

“Take out the enemy and they can’t attack another one.” Yeah.

“So the fact we can’t detect Cat directly is either because she is wearing one of these limiter things or she is next to the core under the shield.”

“And we don’t know which until we look under the shield.”

“Yep.”

“And we are sitting here for what reason?”

“I don’t want to run another scan from here. That could allow them to triangulate our location. I am sure they have told the other units. The normal population may be gone. I would not count on the military being in as bad of shape. I really do not want to face a cruise missile.”

“Utah has some deep caves that might work. Let’s get to Florida to give us some distance. Not directly though. Razzle Dazzle Mike.”

“Roger Doger!”

I have never been in DS space before. Can’t see anything while we are between, so that confirms there is nothing TK about me. We blink in about a dozen locations before ending up in a cool dark space. SO quiet.

I whisper, “We are in the cave?”

Yes. Be quiet so we can scan.

Sorry.

Shhh!

“Okay, our last jump was from the extreme end of our range. We did not want to give away our location. We can confirm that there is a nuc at the bottom of the AU. However we can also say that Cat is not below the shield, with or without TK.”

They turn to me, “Are you sure she is there?”

“No. In my narrative, she was. Then again meeting you was not in my narrative. From here on out we are on our own.”

“In your narrative, what else did not happen? Yellowstone?”

“In my narrative I made it all the way to the Hopi reservation before I joined everyone. By then you had Cat back.”

“But everyone from the rez is already gone. Why would you go there?”

Tia answers, “He was going there to die.” I nod.

“And leave my flash drive and the last notebook at the altar at Hotevilla.”

“There is no altar there.”

“Not yet. Was not supposed to get there for another few months.”

“You were going to walk the entire way?”

“No idea. That part was not clear.”

“No way you could make it. Even though the desert is no longer hot. Water and food would still be a problem. Let’s face it at sixty eight you are not exactly in the kind of shape to walk that kind of distance.”

“I can walk fifteen miles a day without a problem. Twenty if I push it.”

“If somehow you were to keep up that pace, without difficulties, yeah, you could make it.”

“Impressive. My old man certainly could not have done that. Doubt he would have made it twenty meters.”

“Neither of my parents even made it to sixty eight.” Sam says.

“I have a question. Why do some of you talk of meters and some of miles and feet?”

“Hopi Nation went metric some time ago. US is the last developed nation on the planet to use feet and miles.”

She looks at me, “They why do you use both?”

“Trained as a scientist. Rather a servant for scientists. Had to use both. One for home and one for work. Got use to going back and forth too. Current air temp is about 9C or 48F. Do it mostly in my head. Well, close enough anyway.”

“Not sure that will be useful, but interesting. Do we call you professor now?”

“NEVER call me professor or doc or doctor. Most are overstuffed shirts with no common sense.” That made them quiet for a moment. They did not live with them for over forty years like I did.

“Can we have some light please. You two may be comfortable in the dark, but leaving us in the dark in more than one way really is too much.”

“Well, Sam, we can do something about that.” A glow sphere appears. The cavern is huge and we are floating in the center of it. Tia shrieks. We float down to the floor.

“You enjoyed that.” Mike smiles at Marie.

I ask, “Mike would you make a model of an Armstrong Unit?”

“There are differences in the entrances, but the armored areas are identical. Sacramento was all but complete. Maybe only the core was missing. Can’t tell for sure if Silver removed it.” He makes a model about two meters high.

The model splits so we can see each level.

“The bottom is where the nuc core is. If it goes, the rest goes with it. Enough power for fifty years. The level above it has regen materials. Machinery for rebuilding and replanting. Seeds in a freezer bank.”

“They are not concerned about radiation causing mutations in the seeds?” Sam asks.

“It is shielded, but seeds can take a LOT of radiation before they become non-viable.” I add. “Oh, and some mutations might be good. Gives genetic diversity needed to survive in a new landscape of unknown characteristics.”

Tia whispers to me, “Can’t understand everything you are saying. Less science.”

I whisper back, “That is toned down believe me. I will try and be more careful though. Thanks.” Mike, Sam and Marie just look at me.

“To continue, dorms here, private quarters for officers and the suite for the commander of course. Hospital, cafeteria, gym, etc.”

“And Cat could be anywhere.”

Mike smiles, “Brig is right here, just above the core. Shielded from the core, but makes the inmate think about where they are. First one to go by a microsecond when it goes off.”

“Just above the core and smack in the middle of the level. No easy in and out except for the one hall.”

Marie, “Okay, where would a visitor enter or be brought in?”

“Way up here at the top. Communications is here for reference. Makes sense it would have to be near the top. There is a ten foot thick wall between the entrance and comm and a maze of halls. Only a local would know them well enough. Even with this model I would have trouble remembering how. There will be armed guards everywhere if I was running it.”

“How do you think they will respond to refugees appearing at their door.”

“Ignore or shoot on sight.”

“What if they have something to offer, say like they captured a TK?”

“Shoot them and take the TK after shooting it with a ton of tranks.”

“How soon till they start dissecting Cat?” I ask. We are running out of time.

“If they can limit a TK3 they probably do not know how to deal with a seven, much less two sevens.”

“Three. If they put a limiter on Cat at the TK3 level, then she is faking it to gather information about them.”

“However, if she is using the one she got from Silver and Turtle, then all bets are off.”

“Doubt she would let that fall into their hands. She would crush it before she would let them have it.”

“Makes sense. She would not let them have that level tech. Those same sensors probably gave her away when she arrived. They would know very quickly it was way beyond their tech level. That would scare the crap out of them. Even Cat could not survive a nuc. If it goes it would take out a large part of the rez as well as all of our sacred sites.”

“Better an empty rez than one that is molten.”

“I give up. We don’t know if she is even there. We could all end up nuc’d for no reason.” Mike looks very frustrated. TK is not the answer to every problem.

I sigh, “Marie is lead for this one. No other way.”

“Explain. I am not facing a nuc without believing in what we are doing.”

I smile, “Kung Fu TK.”

Marie laughs, “Of course. Don’t play fair at all.”

“Kung Fu is not fair? I thought it was all about honor?”

“It is not about being fair, but looking good while winning and appearing fair. There is nothing fair about a cat hunting a mouse, but the cat will give the mouse honor by allowing multiple times to escape.”

I pet Ghost, “Except when hungry or scared.” That erases the smiles.

“You don’t have to look fair this time. Just win.” We all nod.

One Day Ago

I'm bored. Sure, there was a ton of excitement when we were setting up, but now that everything has settled down, it is just hard work. Mostly on the norms. We are forbidden to use our abilities in front of them.

The rez kids love Squeak. To play with and especially for her feathers. There is an open trading system going on for lost Rap and Ku feathers. They will have to be careful they are not plucked in their sleep. Well, if they did sleep. Some have tried to sneak in, but get tired trying to wait us out and fall asleep before they succeed.

I am up on the ridge. I can see for kilometers in all directions. The settlement looks good. Lots of fields with corn higher than me. Not saying much, but still, it looks good. We have twice the original rez population, but we have more land in cultivation and more pueblos.

I am going to get really tired of corn, beans and squash, even with a few peppers thrown in. Puu teases me by offering me sap chow whenever I complain. Actually at TK7 I no longer need to eat at all, but it is something I would normally enjoy. Chocolate is what I miss the most. We only get some right after an upgrade now. Earth two is off limits and likely not making chocolate for some time if ever again. Still, there must be some caches somewhere that someone hid before dying of ash fall. I dream of doing a raid constantly.

I can see Squeak running between pueblos with several kids in chase. I miss our own runs. Back to being nobody I guess. Oh, I know we will have to let go at some point and I will have to find something else to keep me going. After having to destroy so much of my art after the last move and having gone crazy on the pueblos I am burned out for the moment.

I am bored.

Randy and Droopy DS out. Where? I scan and scan and finally find them directly above me at some sort of space station. Why do they get to visit the space station? I would love to see this world from up there. Silver and Turtle are there too. Crowded. Something is up. I scan further and further away from the rez. Just at my limit, ah, a hurricane. Why would they care about something so far away? I have no way of judging size, never having TK with a hurricane near by before. Guess I am missing some more fun.

Everyone else is occupied helping or planning. Nease and Alessa are giving classes on local plants and how to use them. We lost our cotton, but here is a ground runner that has lots of fibers in it. Strip the fibers out

and dry them and they have a good substitute. More like flax I am told, but I would not know about that. Looms and spinning sticks have appeared and blankets are starting to form. I am not an engineer so I can't help much with all of this. How do I make a pottery wheel with stone age tech? Always preferred the coil method anyway. I like the hands on. The wheel always seemed like cheating somehow. Not that TK is not cheating big time. I see it more as a time saver. I still have to fully form all my ideas in my head first. Try to hold the entire, and I mean entire, essence of a complicated form in your head at once. Not easy. That took a lot of practice.

I don't even need a kiln, being able to form what I want fully, complete and fired as if it was from a kiln. It will be awhile before we can fire with this quality. Oh, we have clay, we have pots, we have low temp firings that break apart rather easily. A fungus can get through the most amazingly small crack.

Death Watch is in the kitchen teaching a class on what can be done with so little, using some of the new spices and herbs Nease has found. Mike and Marie are really a couple now. I know about your giant beer keg you know. Ron just taps away on the tablet. I would love to read what he is writing at some point. Owa, Sylvy and the new and older kits are all together playing. Well Owa and Sylvy are trying to nap while being continuously ambushed at every ear and tail flick. I miss Owa.

Puu is doing paper work. Really Puu? She has become the organizer. All she does is shake her head at me for failing to live up to her expectations of a good little TK. She is taller than me now too.

I am bored.

I forgot. Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones. They have taken upon themselves to be the secret police. No one gets away with anything around here. They have to be told over and over to learn to let go of the little stuff. We are not machines. Nature is, by its nature, imperfect. I got a double dose. To be fair, they are at the tattle-tale stage of life, so I guess this is not a surprise. They are TK3 and not likely to do too much damage. I hope. A bit over protective of Squeak, but she can take care of herself, DSing out if it gets to be too much. We don't prevent her from using DS in front of the norms in an emergency.

So, now what? I can't get chocolate out of my mind. Everyone is preoccupied, so who would even notice? Just a quick in and out right?

Smith and Jones are at Third Mesa. Those little sneaks of course would not have any idea where I was DSing to as they don't have my range. I often bug out, so not without precedence. Shit, just do it.

First Mesa is deserted of course. Not much different from the last time when we brought the last load into New Hope. Visitor Center is rubble as is the high school gym we used as a launch point. That was partly done on purpose. How do you explain eight thousand people missing, even after the first ash falls of Yellowstone.

I really do not want to face scroungers. Flagstaff has a lot of guns and no reason not to shoot any Indian on sight. Winslow on the other hand is very small, on the Navajo rez and less likely to have crazies still there.

I pop to main street. The Gate grocery store is close by. My scanning is on maximum alert to anything within sniper distance. Real quiet. I walk in the store. Door is ajar. Inside is a mess. Only scraps left. I go to the back. The storage area is locked. I scan and then DS inside. No light of course. Don't care. Took me awhile to learn how to read in the dark with the TK sight. Have to have molecular vision to see the differences in the makeup of the ink vs the paper. Color are way harder and I usually don't even try.

I find a box of chocolate. Milk. Yuck. Desperate times. I scan and dupe just the cocoa component. The fats are harder to sort out. After some time I finally have some 100% pure. Well close enough I guess. Tastes okay anyway. This time I will not eat it all so I have a bit to dupe when I get hungry.

That's strange. There is something under the town. Whoa, it's big. There are people inside too. Everything is going crazy for some reason. I find a dark room inside and DS into it. Now I can hear alarms going off. I don't sense any fire or other reason. The door is locked, but there are people in the hall outside going back and forth. Guess this some sort of safe place from the ash.

Wait, there was something in the first couple of journals. Something military. The Rachel character, which some think is me, was trapped in one near Sacramento. I can scan that far. Yep, there is one there too. No one in that one. I wonder how deep this goes? That's really weird. I can't scan below about a fifty meters. I find a space closer to this strangeness.

Carbon and gold in some kind of intricate pattern. Crude, but similar to the limiters that Silver and Turtle threaten everyone with. Even I can do better than that. A natural really with the intricate art work I have been doing since I was little. There is a multi dimensional aspect to the design I find fascinating and gorgeous. Just for fun I make one that could take out a TK5. The one below me might just possibly stop a TK3 at best.

A little scary to think they already know about TKs. I know the plagues did not include the one that makes TKs, so how would they

know?

I can see the rad box below me from this close. Alarms go off again and I DS out to the edge of my range, but still on land. Florida. I scan about, but am not surprised to not find another one of these nests. Too swampy and most of the state will be under water in a hundred years.

There is another one in South Carolina though. I think that is where it is. There are not exactly borders like on a map to make it easy. Ms. Lightfoot drilled us well or I would really have no idea. Cramming for the exit exam I will never have to take now thank goodness.

I DS to the surface above the South Carolina nest. I scan below me. I can see all the way to the core. No alarms go off. Lots of people inside. Shut up tight. I see no entrances or exits. How do they do air? Ah, I see a spider web of smaller pipes going in all directions. Lots of redundancy. Filters on everything too. They seem well stocked with food.

I feel like I have my own ant hill to watch. I make some more chocolate and munch on that while observing everything below me. They spend a lot of time moving around. My guess is they are trying to give themselves the feeling of a normal life. It will be at least thirty years, according to Silver, before it will be safe to come up without protection.

Shit, they are making one of those carbon gold foil things in what looks like a lab. They must communicate with each other. Won't be long before they can sense me if I do anything. Not going to leave myself exposed like that. I just had a really crazy idea. I make a TK5 limiter. I can definitely feel its effect. I DS it into the lab where they are working. In a hidden location inside a wall. That should prevent their sensor from working.

I wonder if it would work at Winslow. I scan and the closest nest is in Utah. Close. I DS to above the nest, make another limiter and embed it in the wall near their lab. Wonder why they made all these things identical. Does not seem like a good idea from a military perspective. Once the enemy knows one, they know them all. On the other hand you can only plan for what you know. Probably never expected after a disaster of this size for any group to have it together enough to attack them.

That's strange. There is a deep cave a hundred kilometers away and it has people in it. How the hell did they get down there? I sense no entrance of any kind. Doubt anyone even knew it was there. Well, maybe some local geologists. No one is armed. I DS into a corner of their cave.

"Well that saves us from a pointless rescue attempt." Marie is staring right at me. Pissed.

Sheepishly I ask, "Miss me?"

Someone DSs us to the surface. Cold, gray, lots of ash. Someone makes a bubble over us and clears the air.

“Thanks Mike.” Marie, still pissed says.

There are three others. I know two of them!

“Tia, Sam! Oh, I can’t believe you are here! This is incredible. I was sure you were both gone for sure.” I run and hug both of them so hard I nearly crush them.

“Sue, I am a grandma, not a teenager. Be careful.”

Sam steps back, “I hear you are called Cat now.” I nod. Tears are freely flowing. I can’t believe this.

“Who is the old man?”

“Ask him. He can speak.”

“Hi, ah, I am Cat, may I know your name please?”

“Um pitu Moosa Hoonaw. My name is Chris.”

“Your accent is strange. You don’t look Hopi.”

“I am not. Never spoke it before, well a few words, but not much else.”

“May I know why you are here? Did Marie and Mike tell you who I am?” He obviously is not upset about TK stuff. So much for hiding from the norms.

“Nope. I know all about you. Your TK sponsor is Owa who has four kits at the moment. You are a black belt in Kung Fu. Parents dies in San Jose where you met Sam and later Tia. Your aunt will remain nameless.”

“Thank you for that.”

Tia finally springs it, “He wrote the journals.”

“Oh you mean the last set?”

“No, all of them, All ten sets. He is still writing them.”

“Isn’t that Ron’s job. Wait. All of them? Some of those are from different incarnations. You were there for all of them? Millions of years? I don’t sense any TK, but then Turtle and Silver could hide that if they wanted to.”

“Not TK. Can’t lift a feather with my mind.” He just smiles at me.

“Cat, the Winslow Armstrong Unit can sense TK.”

I sigh, make a limiter and DS it into a wall near their lab.

“Not any more.” I dissolve the shield above their nuc for good measure. That will really piss them off, but what can they do about it?

“Way to turn over the ant nest Cat.” Marie is smiling though.

Mike slaps his head, “Can’t believe I did not think of that. We could have been killed trying to get you out of there.”

“I was only in there for a moment.”

“When?” Mike asks.

“I don’t know, a few hours ago is my guess.”

“You set off the alarms.” I nod. Of course I did. I was in the middle of them.

“They can only sense to TK3. Where were you?”

“San Jose.”

“No way they could sense you then. TK3 has a range of a kilometer. I have neutralized the TK sensing ability in South Carolina and Utah nests on my way here. We need to do the rest while we are here. They come each other and are spreading the word. If we want to be free to work we can’t have them trying to ‘neutralize’ us.”

“One nuc sort of ruins your day,” Chris says smiling. I nod, but I don’t know him. Looks to be at least sixty. Hard to tell with white people. They age so much faster.

“Silver and Turtle are pissed big time.”

“Shit, I had forgotten. I was only supposed to be gone a short time. I just came to make some chocolate.” I hand my bag over. Everyone takes a piece. Sam makes a sour look. Tia is not so sure. Chris takes another one.

“These would be good with chili peppers.”

“Maybe I will grow to like you.” Marie and Mike just laugh, but quickly eat theirs too.

“It was wrong to ban chocolate except for upgrades,” Chris says. How does he know this stuff?

He wrote the books. Listen Cat!

“You need to remove this last nuc too.”

“Speaking of which, Utah and Charleston sites are running without nucs. How?”

“Never looked. Go ahead, you can see it from here.”

A moment of silence.

“Utah is using geothermal. Yellowstone probably opened up a lot of veins. The lava and ash flow just missed them. Everything east of Yellowstone for several states has been covered in ash.”

“South Carolina is using tidal from the bay. They will be underwater in fifty years easy. Not a good location.”

“Taking the nuc is easy, but is that fair, given they really do not have an alternative? Chances are the uranium even came from this area. They could rebuild it.”

“Not without centrifuges and a lot of tech that requires energy to build and run.” Marie rolls her eyes at Chris.

“He can’t help it. Autistic scientist. Useful but annoying.” Chris raises his eyebrows and shrugs. Heard it before. I can’t read his mind. It is almost like he is anti-TK. Strange. That was never mentioned in any of the books that I remember. Of course, that is not saying much either.

A scruffy gray cat comes up to me and rubs against my leg. I reach down instinctively to scratch, ah, his head. He rises to assist, purring loudly.

“Ghost,” several people say at once. Ghost meows. Looking around for the treat. I knew it. Cats think their name means they will get food. I crunch up a sap chow pellet and place it on the floor for him.

“Someone has just stolen my cat.”

“Don’t worry, we have lots more.” I say. *Is he coming back with us? They all are Cat. Not fair at this point don’t you think?*

Besides, they know about us. Not that it matter much, but what if they went to the nest and told them everything they know, especially Chris?

That would be a disaster, unless we killed him.

“Sigh, go ahead. I am nobody anyway. No one will miss me. Just take my cat, leave my corpse and go.” Did he hear that?

“You have to admit Cat, that attitude fits our requirement.”

“And he would know that if he really did write the books.”

“Stop it Cat! He is coming. Period. My responsibility and under my protection if that matters.”

“Same goes from me Cat. We are not gods. Stop acting like one.”

“Guess being PC is still important,” Sam says.

“To be fair, we were given the go ahead, to, you know.”

“I wrote that into my paper journal you know.” He holds up a notebook.

“What?” I ask.

“Silver and Turtle said we could kill anyone we wanted if threatened. They were all going to die anyway.”

“I am going to die anyway, even if you take me. Your TK tricks don’t work on me. You will not be able to cure my advancing prostate cancer, high blood pressure, etc.”

“Nease and Alessa might have something to say about that. We may not be able to heal, but drugs and surgery will still work.”

“Go head. I am sure flint knives will be very useful.”

“Actually obsidian is sharper than steel,” Sam says. How does he know that. True, but?

I try scanning inside him to confirm all this. Can’t. He stares at me during the attempt.

“Satisfied?” I nod.

“Nuc folks. At some point Silver and Turtle will show up looking for us too.”

“Make a TK power supply?” Chris offers.

“They would take apart that things in minutes to back engineer it.”
Sam.

“Not if surrounded with ‘thn metal,” Chris.

“‘thn metal is conductive. How do you get current out without leaving a nice hole to explore through?” Marie. Tia and Sam are confused.

Chris sighs, “You are not limited to three dimensions folks. Stop thinking like a Hu.”

“Oh this could be fun. A lot of fun. Never did a work of art in five dimensions. Let’s do it!”

“I have scanned their gauges. The have a 550VAC back bone with transformers at each level down to 240VAC and 120VAC.”

“Since we are replacing just the core, 550VAC then.”

They turn to Chris, “How do we do this?”

“I can’t do TK. From the journals, you make alternating layers of carbon-gold fractals with ‘thn layers in between to super conduct the current. But, that only gives you DC. Making AC will require some creativity.”

“We don’t have time. I vote we go back and tell Silver and Turtle what we have found and let them figure it out.”

I really wanted to design it.

“How big would this thing need to be?”

“Not big really. Feel free to work on a deceiving shell to put it in though. Confusing is the key here too remember.”

Sam, “All power has at least two conductors. Maybe a ground. Have had to fix things at the center all the time.”

“There are five on the nuc. Oh, and some that go back into the core. Lots of wires going into the core. This thing is really complex.”

“They like redundancy, lots of sensors to keep track of what is going on in the core and to control rods, etc. to throttle the power as needed or in an emergency.”

“Or to blow it if necessary. Speaking of which, how fast does it blow if you remove it? DS is not instantaneous,” Chris.

“Okay, not worth dying for. Wait, we do not need to DS it. Change it!”
Marie.

Chris smiles. He knew this. Who is this guy?

I confront him, “Okay wise guy. How do they work?”

“Carbon rods are the answer. Need to move the current rods totally into the core and remove the control circuitry so they cannot move them back. Then turn the core into carbon. That will cause it to expand as carbon is way less dense than the core. DS the excess core outside the core and turn to carbon too. Soon the whole thing is carbon. No hazard then. DS the entire thing to just above the ocean to replace the core with air.”

I laugh, “Leave a diamond sculpture just to annoy them.”

“They are clearly scared of TK. Is it a good idea to rub their noses in it? They might even think we set off Yellowstone if we go too far. Removing the nuc and giving them an alternative is a positive thing.”

“Kung Fu TK. Do no harm unless forced to.” Marie.

“So no fancy stuff on the outside? Oh please let me do Hopi art at least.”

Mike laughs, “That would be good. They have pissed off the local spirits who decide to step in and correct their behavior. Could end up starting a whole new religion.”

“Is all of this enabling Hu to survive when they were supposed to die out? They run out of food in fifty years and have to move to the surface. By then the ash winter is over and things are coming up again. Ash has lots of nutrients too.”

“Then they spread again. A hundred years later, maybe a few hundred, and we are back to just before Yellowstone. If that was going to happen, then why move our eight thousand to New Hope?”

“Totally different philosophies Mike. New Hope is about living with OM, not against. OM will not allow them to succeed again, knowing what she faces now.”

“That will be interesting. Green men all over enforcing justice.”

“Let’s do this. Chris, Sam and Mike, work on the new power supply.”

“We will need some equipment. At least a multi-meter. Can probably get one of those in Flagstaff. I am sure those were not all looted when things fell apart.”

“But the batteries would have been. Oh, we can make one of those. One volt per battery, Making a nine volt would be easy.”

“And last forever.”

“Shh, Cat and I will work on the shell. Larger than necessary. We will leave two conductors and a clamp point for the ground.” Sam nods.

“Sam and Tia. We will need some sort of organizing. Tia, you are an accountant by training, but I know you know food too. I can steal stuff from the nest kitchen. Just let me know what you need. We will be here

for at least a few hours. Tic-tic folks. Let's move!"

New Hope

Tia and I did our best, but we did not want to interrupt Cat when she gets into that kind of trance I saw at the center the first time we met. We made do. Everyone was too busy to pay much attention to what they were eating anyway. Tia and I finally collapse in a corner with blankets to take a nap.

Chris is the weird one. I have seen all kinds at the center of course. I am sure some of the kids were autistic. Much worse than Chris even. They really could not take care of themselves. He obviously can or learned how. He did say high functioning. Guess that explains it. Useful for sure, but not someone who is going to have a lot of friends if any.

As to his ability to know everyone who have never met them is weird, but then TK is not exactly something I could have imagined, even with all of my gaming experience.

The new core is made and tested. The multimeter show exactly 550VAC. In spite of Mike thinking it would be easy to find a meter, it was just not easy to find one that could read 550VAC. Two forty, no problem, but just mean anything you can find at an electronics store. Mike and Chris finally make a circuit with some resistors to bring the voltage down to a readable level. The new core made, they then work on removing the old one.

First they seal the doors to the core room. This won't be instantaneous, but they will notice the lack of power immediately. They cool the core with the carbon rods, remove the core bit by bit and then finally remove the empty core framework itself. Finally they put the new core in its place. Takes up less than a tenth of the space. They bring Tia and I in to see their work.

I had to laugh. Cat put Kokopeli glyphs all over it in a thousand different sizes. Probably some I can't even see. Gorgeous. A perfect sphere with two terminals with screw threads and nuts sticking out of each side and a metal floor plate with a third screw thread and nut. Chris insisted on leaving the meter in place after removing all DNA, finger prints, etc. We even make a temporary vacuum replacing it with made air.

Marie related to us what happened next. The doors were unsealed to a tumble of people not expecting to ever get through. Drills and explosives in hand. They place them on the floor and enter with head lamps on. Seeing the meter on the floor connected to the sphere and the leads laying right next to the proper terminals they still do not act. Who would?

Scared and suspicious as hell I am sure.

Well it is up to them to get over their fear. We leave without waiting and now we are on New Hope. It is the middle of the night. Apparently everyone left in the early morning. Roughly twenty hours ago I guess.

It looks like something from the museum. The few people we have seen are wearing the traditional white shirt and pants, as are we now too. They did not bother with the portal and log ladder, but otherwise similar. The three of us are led to a newly made pueblo with space for us. Slightly away from the others until we get our bearings. I follow Chris outside.

“No ash. The air is so clean.” I agree, taking a deep breath.

“Think you can live without tech?” I ask.

“I don’t have much time left as I have said. This is fine. I always have been able to leave things behind. In the long term there is nothing we have or do that really matters. Even all of this will be gone at some point. Even TKs die eventually.”

“From boredom I suspect.” He smiles.

“Incoming.” He points to the wide main street below us.

“A feathered dinosaur?” Look at those teeth! And claws!

“Squeak. Cat’s adopted kid. She won’t eat us.”

“Good to know.” Whoa, she can DS too. She suddenly appears right in front of us. I can’t help but jump back two feet. Chris doesn’t react.

“Hello Squeak. Good to meet you. I am Chris and this is Sam. Tia is inside at the moment sleeping.”

She sniffs us, more of a snort really, then says, “Welcome. Welcome. Doing rounds.” Chris nods, I just stare. She talks! I almost faint. She DSs out and is back on her path going around the settlement.

“Are there any others I should know about?”

“Well, you have undoubtedly heard their names. Alessa is covered in black fur and has wings of sorts good for gliding, but not actually flying. At TK7 she does not need them any more. Think very large bat, but as intelligent as anyone here. She spends a lot of time with Nease. Nease is a Ceph, short of cephalopod, a sort of octopus like creature that can breath in air as long as her gills remain wet. She is our herbalist with Alessa as assistant.

Alessa also helps out in the communal kitchen who is run by Death Watcher. Death Watcher is from earth one, roughly where the Lakota are on our earth. Language is similar too. His Lakota name means Turtle, but as there is already a Turtle, he kept Death Watcher. He wears black, so easy to pick out. Yeah, and he helps bury the dead. Not many yet of course.

Let's see. There is Ron, who is from earth one's Mars, where a group of Hu, ah humans, made it there a thousand years ago, after their crisis, to be genetically engineered to live on a terraformed Mars. He wears a space suit, refusing to be adapted to our new world yet. He will come around. Still in a bit of shock. He will take over record keeping after I am gone. Has already begun recording New Hope's happenings."

"Will be interesting to see what he makes of our coming."

Chris laughs, "Did not think of that. We were not part of the plan."

"Do you think we will become TK too?"

"I can't be. As to you, unknown. We know all about them, so it could go either way. Not a prize. A HUGE responsibility. Don't jump without thinking about it for a long time."

"Who else?" He goes on to describe the rest of the TKs and some of the more interesting local norms as we are called behind our backs. Droopy is the really scary one. If I reacted so strongly to a little dinosaur, what of a big one?

"Whatever happened to Cat's family? Didn't she have an aunt and uncle."

"Do yourself a favor and NEVER mention them again. Cat will go ballistic. Likely both are dead, uncle for sure. The aunt was sent to Siberia, so who knows. She did some really evil things."

"Well, she has Puu, Turtle and Owa now. How is Ghost settling in? I have not seen him."

"On the roof watching everything. He is the smallest cat here and not at their intelligence level. No TK either, and a male. Definitely the lowest in their order. Best if he stays out of the way."

"Or he will be a special invited guest at dinner." He nods.

"Will be light soon. If you need any rest, best get it now."

"I'm fine. Too wound up and Tia and I slept in the cave. Surprised you are not out."

"Old. Will take a long nap later. Growing old is an interesting experience. Some new body part acts up at every corner. A good night's sleep ended a long time ago."

"Being on the run probably did not help." He shakes his head no.

"I am assuming we will have to work. Any idea what you will do Sam?"

"Something outside. I spent too long time inside the center."

"But you are good with kids, especially with kids who have problems. Most of the ones here did not choose to be here. Their parents dragged them. They have only had six months without devices."

I laugh, “Oh the horror!” He smiles too.

We sit for a bit, just watching the sun rise. Gorgeous. I could get used to this.

“Chris, you are a walker right.” He nods, smiles and gets up. We can read each other’s minds. Time for a walk before everything else gets going on our first day in our new home. I won’t say paradise. We are still human, I mean Hu.

Pissed

“You are free to go Puu. Just don’t kill her.”

“No, I will strangle her, skin her and burn her first.” I DS out. I know I can’t get out of range, but I want to be out of sight. I am so mad at her. How could she?

I make several jumps to the point that I am half way around the world and end up falling into the ocean. I DS up and out. Guess I was not watching where I was going. I dry myself and hover, find some land near by, an island, and TK there. This time I will see where I am going. The odds of ending up in a volcano are slim, but I don’t trust myself right now.

That was the longest twenty four hours of my life. My life! Why didn’t she come to me? Why did she go to earth two of all places. A billion other earths to choose from and she goes there? That is some kind of nuts.

I make a shelter. No art work, just plain and simple. I make a pot and gather water from a nearby stream. The plants here are totally different and yet similar. Pine nuts seem to be universally edible, so I gather pine cones and remove the nuts to roast over a small TK fire. Sort of an IR glow ball. Then it rains on me just as I am cooling the pine nuts to eat. Of course it does. Of course my shelter only has three sides and of course the wind blows the rain in the open side. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!

I want to curl up into a ball and sleep my life away, but of course I am TK again and can’t sleep.

I am not being fair. I don’t know her story. I don’t know why it happened or even what happened. She can be very impulsive. How many times has she gotten into trouble at school, at the dojo, just out with a walk with Owa even. Owa did not visit me during my internment. She was not worried about Cat. Have I overblown this whole thing? She is legally an adult by Hopi standards now and able to make up her own mind.

At the same time Marie and Mike were sent to find her. Short of me, they would know her the best. I would not have been a good choice when you think about it. I would have either killed everyone I saw on site or accidentally hurt Cat by reacting too quickly. Okay. Take a deep breath. Go home. Be calm. Be Hopi.

I decide to TK the entire way. By making a shield around myself I can go at supersonic speed and watch the landscape and seascape below me.

It really is a beautiful world. There is actually a good variety of landscapes. Forests, swamps, deserts, meandering rivers, high mountains to vast plains. It will be a good world to share with the local life, not dominate. Never again.

I reach home near sunset. I see Cat coming out of our pueblo.

“Hi Cat, welcome home.” She is shocked. Good. Almost better than skinning her. I walk on in, grab my carry sack and come out again.

“Going to dinner Cat? They have cornmeal mush with bean gravy.” I pretend to love it. We both are bored to death by it. She walks slowly behind me, not saying anything.

She finally come up to my side and opens her mouth to say something. I beat her to it, “Did you have a good time? I just did a round trip word tour. It was fantastic. We are really lucky to be on this world.”

“Yes we are.” She finally gets out softly.

“Well, I have kitchen duty. So I’ll see you around.” I head for the back entrance and run right into three people I do not know. Was there another load of late arrivals?

Cat is still behind me, “Brought back some strays. The young one is Sam, he helped me in the San Jose Detention Center. Tia was the nice person who helped me on the bus. Chris I never saw before today, but he knows everything about everyone one, but is anti-TK. Everyone, one this is my house mate and adopted sister, Puu.” Am I?

“What is anti-TK?”

“TK does not work on him. You can’t scan him. DS works, but not TK, scanning or TP.”

“That actually makes sense in a TK way. Pleased to meet everyone. You are very lucky to be here.”

Sam answers, “We know. I have read so much about the Hopi. Now I get to live my dream of living the traditional Hopi way.”

“Hope you like corn, squash and beans.” I pause, “A lot. A whole lot. Really, really a lot.” Cat laughs. They look horrified. Good.

“Chris and I met Squeak this morning when she was doing guard duty rounds.”

“Have you met Droopy yet?” I give an evil grin. She is very nice, but huge.

Chris answers, “Yes, we met her this morning. Not as big as I remember though. Just a little bigger than Squeak actually.” Sam nods to confirm. How can that be? I must have missed a lot being confined to quarters.

Tia just stays quiet the entire time. She is working on something as

she listens to all of this.

“Tia, what are you doing?”

“Knitting. Lots of little ones here and more on the way. They will need baby clothing. The yarn they make here will be perfect. So soft.”

“You will need to teach others. Good that you have found something right away you can help with. What will you two be doing?”

Sam sighs, “They want me to take care of troubled youth. Fortunately, not in a jail at least.”

“Don’t worry, you will get time in the sun as well. Well, next planting season anyway. We had a good harvest, so we should be okay for winter. Maybe you can join a wood gathering crew to get out.”

“It snows here right?” I nod yes.

“Never had much experience with snow.”

I turn to Chris. And old man, sixty something is my guess. Not fat like most tourists we get. Of course months in the ash could make anyone thin. Still not clear why he is here and what makes him so strange.

“I will be helping where needed.” That does not say much. What does that even mean? He smiles at me. Creepy.

We go our separate ways. Cat and the three new ones go in and I go to work on garbage duty. We compost and recycle everything. No exceptions. Even if a bowl breaks, it is broken down to be used in many ways. No outhouses, we compost that too. I am part of the adamant majority that we will do things right this time. Some of the progressives, as we called them, are unsure how this works. Hey, they can always go back.

Cat and I finally meet up again when I get back home.

“A meeting has been called. We are expected to be there.”

“Village meeting? Aren’t those usually known about well in advance?”

“TK meeting.” Oh. Yeah, I have not exactly been around to hear about that.

“When?”

“Now.” Oh well. We DS to the secret meeting place. Squeak is already there greeting everyone as they come in. Not necessary. Going from a pack of vicious hunters to a greater of creatures the pack would normally have just eaten without a thought. That is a lot more flexibility that I would have imagined. Still, she has been nice and good for the community. Comic relief if nothing else. Not exactly Barney the purple dinosaur. Not purple anyway.

Silver and Turtle are the last to arrive as usual. They usually wait until

everyone else is present. Bringing in stragglers if they have to. You really do not want to be one of those.

Turtle comes up to me, “You okay?”

“Yeah, you did the right thing. I would have really made a mess.”

“You also did the right thing when you went off to vent.” I nod. It would have been better to have not needed to, but better than skinning a Cat. I smile and then immediately stop. Turtle smiles back at me. Can’t hide anything from them.

Everyone quiets down.

Silver speaks, “A recent recon mission to earth two has shown us two things we were not expecting. One, there are survivors. Three are with us tonight.” He points to Sam, Chris and Tia. They are not TK. What are they doing here?

“The ones we need to worry about are in Armstrong Units, also known as nesters. The second is that the nesters know about TK. Mike, Marie and Cat have disabled their sensing ability for the moment, but they will find the limiters at some point and either disable them or worse, learn from them.” Cat was on a secret mission? Why didn’t I get to go?

Turtle tells me, *Because it was not an approved or planned mission.*

Ah, how so much like Cat. She nods.

He continues, “Let this be a lesson. Turtle and I thought we had gotten all of the nuclear cores removed. We thought that.” He lets that sink in. “They managed to hide one behind a crude TK shield in one case and replace their power supplies with other locally sourced power grids after the residents were gone in several other cases. There are at least seven units still functional in the US alone with approximately a thousand people in each. About the same as we have here. Timing prevented the away mission from assessing units in other countries. Russia and China are very likely to have them.”

There is general murmuring among all of us.

“Needless to say, this will postpone cleanup operations. To be fair, we need to give them their due and see if they can make it on their own. With a poisonous world and depleted resources the odds are not good. They have a tech advantage and could hold out for a few hundred years.”

He turns to the new ones, “Sam and Tia will be raised to TK2 by morning. Please welcome them as one of us.” There is applause for the two new ones. Cat is crying. They made a huge difference in her life without judging her. Good for them.

Well, what about Chris?

He finally turns to the remaining one, “Chris is a special case. He will

not be with us long. As long as he is with us he will be part of the TK council and should be afforded the respect that goes along with that. That is all. Dismissed.”

Strange, very strange. So many questions. I am definitely feeling left out.

We all are Puu. This is not going according to plan. That is probably a good thing. Have you noticed things seem to be going too smoothly?

I nod. *Definitely. Way too easy. That actually scares me more than when things go bad. Problems focus us. Complacency makes us soft.* She smiles.

I don't wait for Cat and DS to our pueblo roof. I don't need to 'see' of course, but it does help me focus. Our new homes are not traditional any longer. There are engineers here among the eight thousand and they can't help but to improve things. You would think that several thousand years before the Europeans arrived would have been enough, but they did not have AI designed chimney flues and heating systems. We don't either, but the engineers remember what the AIs found. Now every home has an efficient oven that requires less fuel and wastes less heat up the flue. A very good thing and definitely in the spirit of what we want to accomplish.

A generation or two and a lot of this expertise will be gone. Then what? Not just ovens either. They have been everywhere. Everything is recycled. I think I already mentioned that? All good. All what we want. But too easy!

We have been having some problems with the molds. They are relentless. Anything damp immediately is a mold farm. Some are edible. Some are quite tasty in fact. Most are smelly, slimy and destructive. Favorite clothes are ruined over night. We all smell like wood smoke from relentless drying of clothes near the oven. Even TKs follow the routine so as not to stand out too much.

Death Watcher, Alessa and Nease have been life savers. At least at the culinary level. There is only so much corn, squash and beans one can take. The sheep, whom we all had high hopes for, are not doing well. We have clothing covered, no pun intended, by using the local plant that is highly fibrous. But come on, beans every meal is killing me. Even young ladies toot. I am so tired of it I just let it rip. If you let it bubble up inside of you it only gets a lot worse. Embarrassingly so. Poopy pants indeed.

Silver and Turtle finally relented and allowed onions and garlic to be brought over. Now we have beans and sulfur gases. We had already pleaded for hot peppers. I suspect they have a seed bank at one of the

poles just in case. I hope they do anyway. All the reports from earth two say not much is going to survive or be growing for decades at least.

“Hi Puu.” Cat DSs next to me.

I nod but do not look.

She sighs and hands me a bag of something. I accept it and look inside.

“Really?” She nods.

“I really only meant to get in, grab some, and get out. I figured once I had some I could dupe it from there.”

“But things went wrong.” I smile.

She sighs, “I am impossible. I can’t seem to avoid always getting into trouble.”

“And then come out shining afterwards. Black belt, Squeak is loved by everyone and knowing about the TK sensors and such is a big one.”

“Yeah, but still. It would be nice to just once not get into it.”

“And be more like me? I am boring as all shit.”

“Puu, I am shocked.” She nudges me and I nudge her back.

“I brought you another present.” She reaches behind her back and pulls a large kitten over.

“Owa said you get to name her. And if you are lucky, she will adopt you.”

“But only if I meet her strict quality standards.”

“Of course, she is Cat after all.”

Lots of treats and massage will do it.

Thanks Cat.

I settle the new one on my lap and gently scratch behind her ears, under her chin and then massage her back. She purrs very loud. After about five minutes she is fast asleep.

I whisper, “Does she have a preferred name?”

“Nothing too cute. Not fluffy for sure.”

“We already have a Death Watcher.”

“You do know his real name is Khéya.”

“And what does that mean?”

She sighs, “Turtle. Something about his being short and stocky.”

“Death Watcher is more dignified. Too many Turtles already.” She nods. I look around carefully like I am afraid of getting caught.

“I could call her Killer.”

“See anything other than tumble weeds to kill around here?” True.

“Speaking of which they can’t just mooch sap chow forever.”

“I am beginning to wonder if they deserve and need their own world.

Why should just the Hu get this chance. It was not their fault after all.”

“Great idea Cat. No more Cat hair on everything. No more tripping over one at the door just because the sun is there. No more scratched ankles because you are the only thing to chase or they are pissed for some reason. Yeah, I think that is a great idea. Let them work for a living.” Cat laughs and nods enthusiastically.

Death Watcher, how do you say cat in your language? I need a name for this little one on my lap.

Igmú for the small ones and igmuwatogla for the large ones.

Thanks, sorry for interrupting you.

No problem. You could also use tanka for big.

“Death Watcher suggests Igmú or Tanka.”

“The first will get shortened to Iggy. Tanka sounds too masculine.”

“I thought so too. I like Iggy though.” I look at her sleeping and say, “How do you like Iggy? Is Iggy okay with you?” No response.

“At least she does not hate it. Question is, will she come when called?”

“If I have food she will.” We both laugh.

I then ask, “Show me how to make a power supply.” Not a request.

Armstrong Unit Winslow

“Master Tech Xiaver reporting as directed.”

“At ease Master. Report.”

“The TK sensors do not react to any thing we throw at them. Even the sims that used to work don’t now. The shield is completely gone. No trace that it ever existed. There is even normal looking wear patterns that should never have happened in that location. The power is back on. But.”

“Go on.”

“The core is gone.”

“What? How are we on back up still?” I look around and see everything working. Computer did not even reboot the power outage was too short and the UPS units covered it.

“You need to see it. We have no idea what it is. There is something in place of the core that is supplying power for the entire base. No cooling, no anything. Just the in, out, and ground. Nothing more. Oh, and at least ten times smaller than the core.”

“Radiation of any kind?” How did someone get in and out from the lowest floor without anyone noticing?

“None.” How can that be? Even a fusion reactor emits some radiation.

I sigh. Hard enough running this place without surprises like this. The commander is going to be stressed, which will make my work hell.

“Lead on Master.” I really don’t have time for games. This had better not be some prank. Not the commander’s birthday.

Ten floors down, we take the stairs. Normal practice after there has been an unexplained power failure and normal since closing to keep everyone fit. The only ones allowed to use the elevators are those moving heavy materials. Then only the materials get a free ride. People still take the stairs. This is going to kill me for sure.

“Commander in the room!” Everyone snaps to attention.

The Master says, “Clear the room.” Everyone immediately leaves. The scientists leave their instruments where they are. The guards close the door after they leave.

I am looking over the commander’s shoulder at a small sphere sitting on a shiny metal pedestal. One large cable attached to each of two opposite sides. There is another terminal on the pedestal itself that the last cable is attached. The ground presumably.

“Look closely Ma’am.” She gets closer to it. Absolutely silent. She places a hand on it. “No vibration. There is some kind of design on the

surface.” She puts out her hand for me to give her a small magnifier I carry with me. Getting old sucks.

“Some kind of flute player? A lot of flute players. What is this?”

“We have no idea.” I do. I know that work too. She should be dead. Must be some other explanation.

“What do the scans show?”

“That the sphere is absolutely empty. Nothing at all inside. Not even air.”

“Wait a minute, this is powering the entire base and there is nothing there?”

He nods.

“Some kind of trick? Could the Chinese have done this? They were the ones who told us how to build the sensors. Do the sensors say there is something here?”

“Sort of. The base runs off of 550VAC that runs as sixty cycles per second. We bring it down to 220VAC on each floor and that is further lowered to 110VAC in each room to run any equipment needing power.”

“Okay, basic knowledge. The lowest recruit knows this.”

He brings out a sensor and places it near the sphere. It slowly raises and lowers it’s wings. About once every three seconds.

“The frequency is actually approximately once every 3.14159 seconds.”

“Pi?”

“To a thousand places, probably more.”

“Someone is playing with us. How reliable is it?”

“We get exactly 550VAC no matter what load we put on it. We could run every unit in America off this one power supply if we wanted to.”

“Don’t destroy it. We obviously need it. We can’t go to the local market to get another. Keep trying to understand it. If we could make one, we could open every unit that failed. I want twenty four hour guards and sensors on this. This is our lives if it fails.”

“Yes Ma’am.” He salutes and she salutes back.

She whispers to me, “Crap how do I deal with this? What do the symbols mean. I feel like I have seen it before someplace.”

I whisper back, “You have. Kokopeli, a Hopi god of sorts. Their rez was just north of our location.”

“How do you know this?”

“I am Hopi Ma’am.”

“What does this have to do with the sphere? Were the Hopi into some sort of advance science we did not know about?”

“I attended all of the council meetings over the last twenty years and

this certainly never came up. We certainly would not have been living like third world war refugees is we had this.”

She nods of course.

“I need to rest. You can go corporal. I’ll let you know if I need you earlier than the morning. Get some rest.”

“Thank you Ma’am.” I salute and leave.

Stupid military. They could not see a mole on their own noses unless it was in the paper work in triplicate. I guess I should be happy they took me in at the last moment and I was able to retrieve my service papers from the empty village when I returned. Nostalgia, lucky really.

The school and the Visitor Center were demolished. The teacher village had burned down apparently. I looked all over for days and found no one. Strange thing was, was that everyone’s possessions were still there. It was if they all just walked away and never came back.

At least my niece is gone. I found an old newspaper that said Mike and Marie had died in a car wreck, good, and then a few weeks later everyone on that side of the teacher village perished in the fire.

I suppose I should be happy everyone was gone given I would likely have been shot on site. After the Tuba City thing I woke up in Siberia of all places. That was really nasty of them. Took me months to get back and I had to do things I am not proud of. Then coming on the rez to find everyone gone. Most on the Navajo side were gone too, but at least they took their stuff. Something strange happened here. I coughed almost constantly when I arrived. The doc here gave me stuff to help. The commander would not have put up with it and I would have found myself on latrine duty instead of the cushy job I do have. I have always been good at talking my way into positions I did not deserve. I don’t intend to ruin this one.

None of the quarters have windows of course. Most have put up posters of outdoor scenes to keep from going crazy. I have to share a room with two others. We all sleep in the same bed in eight hour shifts. I was let off early and have another hour to wait. Room temperature is the same all over base, so we just sleep in our uniforms.

Laundry once a week. Three meals a day. Exercise for an hour each day. We had to do fifty laps of the outer ring today. I am definitely not up to this in spite of marching halfway across Russia. It will get easier. Beats starving and hacking out my lungs.

I go to the mess to see if there are any snacks around. Two privates salute me, “Corporal Injun.” I ignore them. I am the only native on site. I can’t believe it. Turns out the base is just outside the Navajo rez, just

south of Winslow. They could not find it in their hearts to gather a few more natives? A few of every other color, just no red.

I am outside breeding age and Hopi are not the most attractive race to whites to begin with. I get a few looks, but nothing else. Fine with me. Just leave me alone and let me do my work. Nothing else for me anymore. Just keep breathing.

When the shift bell rings I get up to go to bed. I am very tired. Everyone went ballistic over the power problems. On top of a normal day of constant whining over little things. Be thankful you are alive. They just don't get it.

There is a large gray owl sitting on my bed. Must be some kind of joke to tease the injun. I move to sweep it off and it moves! The wings come up and the beak nearly bites me. I jump back several feet. I am used to wildlife. I grew up on the rez, but I definitely was not expecting one here.

"What the hell are you doing here fellow?" Maybe it does not speak English. Should I try Hopi or Navajo?

That won't be necessary. I understand you fine.

"What the fuck. I must be really tired." I look around, "Okay, nice ha-ha, you can come out now."

There is no one else here. I am keeping them away. I need to talk with you.

I sit on the chair. I am thinking all my years of playing games are coming back to haunt me. First the sensors, whatever they were supposed to sense, went off several times in the last day. Then the 'core' whatever that is. I am too low to know that. Now this.

"Can't you just leave me alone? I am no longer a threat to anyone."

You know who built the new core.

"No way some snotty little girl who is the biggest pain in the butt I have ever met could make something like that. No way. Someone must have slipped a drug into the tea."

I can take you there.

"Right, sure, go ahead. Knock yourself out." I am staring at an owl. An owl! I have totally lost it.

I am staring at a hill with strange trees all over it. I sit down, but fall to the ground instead. No chair where I expected one. I don't dare move. The owl is still in front of me, but on the ground.

I slowly look around. There are pueblos like in the exhibits and pictures in the Visitor Center. Smoke rising from most. I see people coming and going. All dressed in the traditional Hopi dress. The women

have colors in theirs. Kids run around playing. I continue to turn and see fields of corn husks, the harvest has already happened.

Okay, I am dreaming. Not that I have ever had this dream before.

“Hello Lucile.” I turn around. Sue Bear!

“What the fuck is going on? You have no right to do this to me!”

“Yep, even after all the things you have done to me and everyone else in your life I have no right to be this nice to you. You are being offered a choice. If you want to go back, then you will be sent back. Makes no difference to me. You should know I am the one who argued you deserve this choice.”

I know she is out to screw me. It is what I would do and she is my blood relative.

“What are these choices? Methods of execution no doubt. You have been out to get me from the very beginning, from before you were born. You are the reason my life is so screwed.”

“That is one opinion. We do not intend to kill you. Far from it. If someone else does, it won’t be because of us.”

“Us?”

“The owl and I are together on this.” Okay, back to la-la land.

“Choices. Get to the point. My bed time is being wasted.”

“You can go back. You will spend the rest of your life in the box. It won’t be safe to emerge for decades and you do not have decades left with the way your body is. Your right breast has cancer, stage four at the moment. You are pre-diabetic. No surprise there, most on the rez are at your age. Overweight, though your recent experiences and daily exercise are helping a lot. High blood pressure. Tendency to drink. You have maybe fifteen years max.”

“This could be said of any woman on the rez.”

“Lung cancer from breathing the ash. If they find it and apply the new experimental treatment they have . . . Otherwise you have six months. That treatment is reserved for the officers of course. Either the lung cancer or the breast cancer will get you.”

“Of course. And the other choices?”

“Only one. Stay here. Late stone age culture. No predators, but you can be outside.”

“As you say without medical treatment my days are numbered. Here I would not last even the six months.”

“If I had my way I would not be telling you this. It would suit me fine if you stayed in the box and rotted. If you decide to be here, you will be completely healed. Life expectancy, barring something we have not

foreseen about this place, is another thirty-forty years.”

“If I believe you. I am a progressive. None of this traditionalist crap for me. No chant or prayer is going to help me. How long do I have to decide?”

“Take as long as you want. But the clock is ticking. Go to the sick bay and ask them about what I have told you. I am sure they did a complete medical workup on you when you entered.”

“Yeah, they did. I already know most of what you said. Okay, assuming all this is true and you are not deceiving me to get even. Why?”

“Lucile, you are an asshole. Pure and simple. You are a self centered, egotistical, manipulative, bully. I could go on. Asshole covers it though.”

“Why? Stop batting me around.” Just like that dam cat of hers.

“We need you.”

“Huh? That makes no sense. If I am what you say I am, then why the hell would you want me in your little traditionalist paradise?”

She smiles, “Could not have said it better. You would have a role to play. In Christian thought, as you profess to be, your role is the snake. In native thought, you are coyote.”

“The trickster. Why? You are still not answering me.”

“No culture will last long without the balance. Already, people here are becoming complacent. Getting soft. Life is too easy. There is no discord. Arguments are few and resolved quickly.”

“How much freedom would I have? Locking me in some dark pueblo is not to my liking.”

“Don’t physically harm anyone yourself and we won’t touch you. Can’t promise everyone else would be so nice. They have the same rule on them as you would. Oh harm includes kidnapping, starving, poisoning, obvious injuries, etc.”

“How would this be enforced? Are you the tribal police here?”

She smiles.

“I smile in a way you do not like. You are convinced I am conning you. At the same time, you are already thinking of ways to use all of this to your advantage.”

“That was not a hard one to figure out. Or are you saying you can read my mind?” I laugh sarcastically.

How did owl talk to you Lucile? Like this? If we can put words in your head, don't you think we can read them too? How about a little demonstration? Yes, something a norm could not fake.

What’s a norm? “Shit, put me down! Put me down!” I am at least a hundred feet above the ground. She is floating right next to me.

“Certainly.” I am falling! The ground is getting closer and closer.

I am on my bed, sweating up a storm, breathing like I am on fire. I feel myself. I am unharmed. I am still dressed, so I get up and leave the room. Others are outside looking at me.

“Bad dream.” I smile sheepishly. They nod and go about their business. I head to sickbay.

When I get there, there is a line of course. I register and wait. Not exactly an emergency. They don’t care if I am a slug on duty tomorrow. I have tried to keep a low profile, but I already have my share of enemies. Mostly because I am so close to the commander when they thought they should have had the position. The commander wanted someone who had not built up a click already. No favorites, no paybacks.

That was quick. I am ushered into a room and the door closes.

Presently a doc comes in. Grizzle face. I hate the way he looks at me.

“What’s up corporal?” I have a name asshole. Shit. Takes one to know one I guess.

“I am feeling a lump in my right breast. Came to get it checked out. Not able to sleep worrying about it.”

“Remove your shit and let me check it out. Where about did you feel it?”

“Just give me an x-ray and forgo the manual exam.” You are not getting your paws on me.

“As you wish. Step this way and the nurse will take care of you.” He folds up his tablet. Paper is way too expensive in here. What happens when the tech invariably fails though?

The nurse consults her own tablet and motions me over to the machine. The boob masher. I hate these old school things. I am not very large and they have to really do a number on me to get it under the plates. You would think they would have some new 3D version. I endure.

Fortunately the results come up right way and I am not waiting for them to develop film. She types away on her tablet and then leaves the room. I can see for myself the opaque mass. Shit. I immediately reach for my breast and I am sure I can feel it. Shit.

The doc comes in.

“Well there is good news and there is bad news. The bad news, is you are right. Looks like stage four breast cancer. Fast growing or we would have caught it earlier. The good news is that it likely will not kill you even without treatment. And that treatment would be extensive and not work.”

“The lung cancer will get me first.” He nods.

“We have chemo that should work on both of them if you want to try. Nasty stuff makes you sicker than a dog. I am no stranger to pain, but personally, I would go for the joy meds and accept my fate.”

Ask for a second x-ray Lucile. Shit that voice in my head again.

“Doc, could I have another go at the masher? The x-rays are certainly not going to make it any worse now.”

“What the hey, let’s try it a different way. Will give me a better idea of how long you have.”

This time I am brought to a different machine in a different room.

This is more like it. High tech.

“I will confess I always wanted to try this machine. You are the first to have a go. Just got it up and running a few days ago. Worse than an Ikea kit. Nurse Ruth is not up on it yet, so I will have to do the honors. Lay down on the table and we will slide you in. Ready?”

“What no mashing? Kinda miss being abused doc.” He smiles like he would rather do that if I make this any worse. I lay back and he slides me in using the controls, then leaves the room. Guess it is still x-rays of some kind.

I go further in slowly and then slowly come out again.

He comes back in the room.

“You can get up and get dressed now. Come to the exam room when you are ready.” He is really puzzled and does not even bother to oogle me again.

“Corporal Hoonaw are you pulling a fast one on me? Have you or your friends hacked this machine? Don’t think I don’t know what everyone says behind my back.” He is pissed. I give him my best confused as hell look. Not hard as I am.

“There is no cancer. Completely gone. This machine is not so selective. Got a good view of your lungs too. No sign of any cancer there either. I have other patients to see and can’t spend any more time with you right now, but I want you in here again at 1600 hours. That is an order that even the Commander cannot ignore. Got it?”

“Got it.” I salute him and he waves me off. Docs are very military. Pride is my guess. Think they are better than us.

But what the fuck is going on?

Do you believe me now? Oh, you still have the other infirmities, but nothing immediately life threatening now anyway.

I ignore the voice and go back to my room. I still have two hours left of my shift in the bed and I am totally wacked. I close the door gently behind me and turn to the bed. Sue Bear is sitting on it.

“Miss me?” She smiles.

“Like a massive heart attack. Are you some kind of ghost sent to haunt me?” She gets up quicker than lightning and pinches my arm. I forgot about her kung fu training.

“Okay, not a ghost. Just a pest. Now get lost. I need to rest.” She salutes me and disappears. I mean no motion, just gone. Shit I am screwed. Check me into the rubber room.

I awaken to pounding at the door. Next. I get up quickly. Still in my uniform. I am glad these things are wrinkle free. I leave and go to the rest room to check my face, brush my teeth and toss my hair. We all have short hair. It is so much easier and as I said, I am not on the market. I run through breakfast without tasting it.

I report to the Commander’s office. The med appointment is not until eight hours from now. Glad I am not on the night shift, but neither is the Commander, so that gets me off rotations too. There is paper work waiting and I get to it. Most of it is routine. Not much different than the Visitor Center, though the equipment is newer. We were still running Windows 98 at the center. More than twenty years old. No idea how they kept those things going. No one could hack them though. No one remembered how to run them. Well and not on the net. We used Zip disks we bought on eBay. Must have been the last one running.

Its weird, but I seem to have more energy than I have had for some time. Maybe those cancers really were dragging me down. Or it is just the relief it is over.

The morning goes quickly. The Commander is at meetings most of the morning that I am not part of. That does not happen very often, but they are so boring. Everyone argues until the Commander slams her hand on the table, announces a decision and the meeting breaks. I am there just to record the minutes. When in doubt record it.

Lunch time I am starving and this time slow down enough to look at what I am putting on my plate. We apparently have rations to last for decades and the means to grow some fresh vegetables in hydroponics. Works for me. No more fry bread. One thing I agree with the traditionalists one is fry bread is evil. Europeans brought over wheat. I never eat wheat now. No more fry bread.

I sit at an empty table to begin and few others sit down at the same table. I concentrate on the food when one asks me to pass the salt. I look up to see who is it and it is Puu in a privates uniform. I look at the others. Marie is a Sargent. Mike is a private. There is an old man dressed in non-military off white with an owl embroidered on the pocket. Turtle is a

Captain. Shit. I grab my tray, toss it and get back to the office. I am really losing it.

When I get back the Commander is there along with two others.

“These two want to talk with you Corporal. Please go with them.”

Now what? He said nothing about coming back afterwards either. I follow them down to one level above the bottom. The brig is on this level. We walk past it to a small room. The quiet room where they can't hear you scream. The world has ended. I am under no illusion that they have any reason to play 'fair' any more. Limited resources. Easier to just recycle someone and not take chances.

I enter the room and am offered a seat. No bright light on me. A large monitor on the wall is on with a normal entry screen showing. One of the two, a middle aged female, no name tag, sits and begins typing. The other, a young male stands behind her. I have to wonder why all the senior positions are female. I was told it was because the males were in the field and did not make it back in time. We, or them as least as I was a late arrival, were the second tier.

“If you look at the screen you will see we have a problem. I am hoping you can help us. This is the log of your whereabouts over the last twenty four hours. Please tell me in your own words where you were.”

“Twenty four hours ago I was with the Commander about to go to the core to investigate a problem there.”

“We know about the 'new' core. Please speak freely. There was a symbol repeated all over the shell of the replacement core. Did you recognize the symbol?”

“Yes, of course. I am Hopi. It was Kokopeli, the flute player, an over used symbol that used to be of religious significance, but now is just way over used. Almost as bad as 'Don't worry, be Hopi'.”

“Yes, we have heard that too. Do you know who placed the symbols there?”

“Of course not. I was not there. I have no idea how this happened.”

She looks straight at me, “You were missing from your room last night between 0200 and 0225. Nor were you anywhere on base. You 'woke' and rushed to sick bay to have a breast scan, which showed positive for stage four cancer. A few moments later you have a second scan with a much more sophisticated instrument that shows not only the breast cancer missing, but also your lung cancer. In fact not only were they missing, but there are no scars, no missing pieces. It is as if you never had them. Do you want to try answering the question again?”

“I did not know I was missing from base. I thought it was all a very

bad dream. Felt like it anyway.” I go on to explain everything. What have I got to lose? I certainly do not believe it.

“I have a question. Did I really have cancer or was all of this some sort of mind game being played on me?”

“Biopsies, blood tests and DNA matching are hard to fake. We are looking into it anyway. What do you know about the Chinese sensors and the core shield?”

“I know of them through my work with the Commander. A lot of paper work passes through my terminal. I don’t know what they are, how they work or what they are for.”

“They were supposed to warn us about the very ones whom you say visited and abducted you. Now they are all dead and we can’t get one to work, not even new ones. Nor were we aware of their abilities at the levels you describe. You say they want you to join them. We want you to go under cover to collect information on them.”

“You were not listening very well. They took me off world. Not this earth. A different earth. I am a local. I know the mountains around here from any place around here. They were the same on this other earth, but nothing else was. None of the trees, plants, buildings, clothing. No ash. No eruption of Yellowstone. Not our earth. How do you expect me to bring back anything I learn?”

She gets up, “We will get back to you. Resume your normal duties and report to us any further contact. Talk to no one about this or you will find yourself outside on a section 8 charge with no chance of return this time.”

Do they even have a clue that you can see and hear everything here? Such idiots!

“Corporal. We are officially in a state of war with this group. We will not accept failure. There are no decisions to be made. It is done.”

“Then you are already lost. You just don’t realize it. Did you personally see the new core? There is nothing, repeat, nothing, on this earth remotely like that. I am not tech and even I can see that simple truth.”

“Understand this low-tech corporal. We will reverse engineer the core and use it against them. Make no mistake as to our resolve.”

“Look, I have a rep as being a bully, okay, an asshole. I know how to play the game you are attempting to play with them. If they wanted you dead, then the entire base would be gone, not just the core. They are so far beyond your understanding you really don’t have a clue. Did you know that there were five of them in the mess hall with me at lunch? Did

they show up on your sensors? I also did not tell you I recognized them. They were the ones who sent me to Siberia, they faked their own deaths so well even DNA could not tell. I saw them all dead and now alive.”

She taps at her terminal and a view of the mess hall comes up. She rewinds the record till lunch. I am sitting at the table. She plays it until I throw away my tray and leave. At no time does anyone appear. She then gets up and leaves the room.

Did you really think we were going to just hand ourselves over to be dissected for their enjoyment?

“Beem me up Scotty. I am ready to join up. Staying here is clearly suicidal. They are idiots.”

No, just working with the understandings they have.

Visitor

“Commander. She is gone. The cameras showed it happening. We have high speed, high rez on six wavelengths. All sensors were operational.”

“Keep me in the loop Captain.” She salutes and leaves.

We will have a lot to report to the Chinese. Not all one sided any longer. If I send it. I have reviewed the standard def tapes of their meeting. I heard what she said. I am thinking she might be right. Especially given what else I know.

My new non-com knocks and enters announcing, “You have a visitor Ma’am.” Signals to me that they are unarmed and clean to enter, but unknown. Right unarmed. I shake my head.

“As I said, I have been expecting him. Send him in.”

An old man dressed in an off white robe with an owl embroidered above his heart enters. I rise to greet him.

“Welcome. I have been expecting you.”

“I bow to your intelligence.” He actually does a full on bow. Sincerely, not faked or done in a mocking way. I should be bowing to him.

“I expect you are here to give us a choice as you did Lucy.”

“Collectively, the choice had already been made. Just needed to play it out to be sure.”

“We chose death. Such a waste.”

“We are not like you.”

“Or the core would have just been gone, not replaced. You have to admit though that our curiosity was going to kick in.”

“Of course. That was expected and not the problem.”

“Ah, my over zealous Captain declaring war.”

“She was not the one declaring it Commander. She was following orders from her commander. And, no it was never you.”

“I am not so stupid as to not know that. If she was under me, she would have been sent to the surface so fast it would have appeared you did it and not me.” He smiles. Good to see.

“What’s it to be then?” The lights go out and come back on dimmer. Emergency backup.

I sigh, “The new core is gone.” He smiles. Not a question and not an answer.

He looks to my door, “All of your people have been distributed to the

remaining working bases, nests as we call them. This one will cease to have ever existed. No remnant will remain.” I nod.

“All the evidence will be gone too. Good.”

“Much more than that. All of the evidence from all the bases is gone. The headquarters in China is completely gone.”

I smile, “Curious, where did the Captain go?”

He turns his head and smiles back at me, “Oh we sent her to a very special place. The worst, most disgustingly horrible gulag nest in Siberia. Not a person there speaks English and I know she speaks no Russian. We don’t take kindly to bullies. We read enough from her to know her history.”

“Good choice. Guess I am the last one. Where do I go?”

“Where to you want to go Ruth?” I was not expecting a choice. Well, last chance. Go for broke.

“Family is all gone, from before the ash fall. I did not suffer in that way. I have been alone for some time. I am no spring chicken either. Did you know I am part Cherokee? Mother’s side. I have always had a high respect for the traditional ways. I don’t want to go to a ‘nest’. I am done with the stupidity of the military. Oh they can be useful if used properly. That hasn’t happened in a very long time. I was young and idealistic. Just easier to stay in and work my way up as a distraction. I really would like to work the land. Is that possible?”

“My name is Silver. Welcome Ruth. We are glad to have you. You will not gain our abilities I am afraid. Neither will Lucy.”

I laugh, “Good safety tip Silver. I would not give her a stick to swing at you. Watch your back.”

“Keep your friends close.”

“And your enemies closer. Oh, I had her pegged from the get go. Figured I could watch her closer if she was next to me. Put me in a different settlement or whatever you call them if you please. I don’t want her to notice me right away.” I want time to prepare my own base.

He smiles, “Done.” I smile. We understand each other.

I think I am going to like him. I am going to like all of them.

“Welcome to Little Creek Village Ruth. I am afraid we need to take everything you have away. You can change in this room here. You will find our traditional garb waiting. You are free to adapt it as time permits.”

Silver is nowhere to be found. I do find friendly smiling faces welcoming me to my new life. Oh, I am not stupid. Life will be hard, but it will be my mistakes not someone in another city or nation making them. I am in heaven or hell. Does not matter. I have arrived.

Where are we?

“Is everyone here?” Puu announces. She knows everyone is here. Such a stickler for formalities. I look around anyway. Even the kits are here, well, physically. They are growing up fast, but Sylvy’s are still a bit behind and would rather play, pouncing on each other or attacking her tail. I nod to Tia and Sam. Still getting used to their abilities. Now TK3s. Normal Hu track at least. Guess I am the only strange one. Flor is standing next to Puu. Two over organizers in one place. Great.

Squeak is next to me. With Puu off more and more it is nice to know at least one of my friends is loyal. Well, my kid really. I am proud of her. She is now TK5. Growing fast. Nearly a full size Rap. I am worried she will get bigger than normal with the better nutrition and more reliable food supply. I try and get her to exercise. More like she tries to get me to exercise. Even Marie is pushing to keep up our Kung Fu skills. The nests were scary when it finally hit me how close they were to a full strength limiter.

Puu nods to Silver and Turtle who come up to take over.

“Earth Two report.” Marie and Mike stand up.

“All traces of nester knowledge of us is gone. Those who knew are, ah, gone. Fortunately is was very few. All data banks and backups have been erased. They will have to rebuild from scratch. Knowledge of how things work will depend on personal knowledge. Most are setting up a sort of apprentice system to get the younger ones up to speed as quick as possible. Everything is being recorded and fed back into the system.”

“What about the ones we moved for whatever reason?”

“We erased their memories of us at the same time we moved them. They would not have been able to tell anyone why they suddenly appeared where they were. Some were immediately put in the brig for a time. Most are out now. Each nest got a couple of people all telling the same story. With their data banks gone, all knowledge is valuable.”

“The Chinese? They would have sequestered the knowledge carefully.”

“In that case we did not take any chances and ah, removed, the entire base. Including all personnel.”

“And where did they go?” In lieu of an answer Marie just smiles. Okay, I know that smile. Hey, they were the ones who declared war. We were willing to cut them some slack and leave them alone. I know I had to help kill when I ran with the pack or helped Owa hunt. But still. That is

cold. Glad it is the exception. Glad I did not have to do it. Hey, I saved an abandoned rap baby.

“Any further news or questions about earth two?”

“How many people have survived and what are their chances?” Tia asks.

“Currently there are about two hundred thousand spread out over the entire globe. The nests might have the best chances of re-establishing tech, but they will be at least fifty years before they hatch. Others will not be waiting and will have learned to live with the evolving conditions. Before Yellowstone several other volcanoes erupted. Hawaii, Fuji, Vesuvius and others. You know about the Cascadia earthquake and tidal wave. There have been others. Ash is still falling and likely to for some years yet. They are not on the other side yet. World temperatures have dropped five degrees centigrade and expected to drop another five. Likely this will be enough to trigger another ice age, though it will be shorter than the last one and likely only last a hundred years. They will have their work cut out for them. The current generation will not see the end of the suffering.”

Turtle adds, “Please do not feel sorry for them. Hu were largely responsible to the magnitude of the suffering. They have known for decades about Yellowstone and could have prevented it had they decided to. The devastation from the earthquakes, again, could have been mitigated if they had followed warnings, not built on faults and tidal wave prone areas. Everyone thinks it will not happen to them. Well, it happened to everyone. No one here caused these disasters. Being alive means being subject to them. It is what happens on a live planet. Be thankful we were able to save some.”

“In the Jewish scriptures there are repeated references to only a remnant surviving till the next cycle. Now it has happened world wide and you are one of two remnants who have survived. I can’t honestly say you have a better or worse chance than the earth two survivors. We are trying to do things differently this time on New Hope. The fifth world. In both cases it is the last chance. There are not enough resources left on earth two to be exploited to re-create a tech civilization. If they try too anyway, they will fail. Here you have chosen to live a low tech life style in an attempt to extend our survival as long as possible.”

Chris gets up, “This is normal biology. ALL organisms have a finite species life time. ALL species eventually change to become something else or go extinct. Life is change. Worlds change constantly. Natural disasters happen. No one is being picked on. No one is being treated

unfairly. Even those of you who are TK will die. It might be tomorrow. It might be several million years from now. It will happen. For now you won the lottery. Rejoice and give thanks.” He sits. That puts it into perspective. There is a feeling that the TKs should have saved everyone. I know that was not possible, but it is hard to accept you won when so many lost. Being dependent is no way to live either. I remember a strange Monty Python skit where every sperm was sacred. Not possible.

“Is there news on community outreach on this subject Tia?”

“Nothing specific. People will grumble if for no other reason than it can be something that some people can exploit to gather people under them. And not for good.” Does she ever stop knitting? Amazing!

“There will always be some who will do this. They say they are doing it for the good of others when in fact it their own egos that are being fed. People need to learn to see this and shun it. If they don’t this entire culture could die. They are not babies any longer. This is their last chance. Be vigilant. Tell your people the same. It is up to them. We cannot continue to save them from themselves over and over and over. If for no reason than the fact, as Chris reminded us, we will die too. Then what?” I guess Sam saw this a lot at the center. I was very lucky not to have been trapped there. Thank you Sam and Tia.

“Next, tech progress, and I mean this is a good way. Sustainable.” Everyone chuckles.

Flor stands, “We have our firing temperatures high enough now to produce water proof pottery and just a few days ago we started making glass. Still a bit green, but free of bubbles and can be ground into crude lenses. As we get better people will be able to have lenses to see better with, start their stove fire with, and maybe even some advanced optics like telescopes.” In an attempt to cut down on deforestation we TKs made some solar stoves. The larger Fresnel lenses can melt glass and metals as well as other tasks. These won’t be around forever and everyone understands they need to work on alternatives to our making them.

She nods in Chris’ direction, “We now have paper, ink and dip pens made from reeds. Low tech but easy to learn how to make. We can start recording in an archival manner our history from here on out. Ron is learning from and taking over the role Chris had up to this point. It will also be a means of carrying messages from one village to another. We hope to set up a regular postal service soon.” Great idea, isolation breeds distrust.

She looks at Tia, “Tia has been teaching people how to knit. Our local plant fibers are working great for this. Our colors are not as bright as the

old cancer causing aniline dyes you were used to on earth two, but these aren't likely to kill you either. Expectant mothers, of which we have quite a few, are the first adopters, making baby clothes of course. Personally I see no problems with being naked." She clucks to indicate amusement and does a twirl for effect.

Mike gets up, "Wood and stone shops are doing well. Not as easy as a shop full of power tools, but we do pretty well. We are all learning how to shape local flint to what we need. Kinda of nice not having to go all the way to Tuba City for a new blade when you can pick up a stone and in a mere three hours have one that will last all of fifteen minutes. Still we are making doors and furniture. Each village has apprentices who are taking the knowledge back to their own village."

Silver asks, "How is our wood supply doing?"

"Okay. We really grill people as to whether or not they NEED something or would just LIKE to have it. We are doing our best to keep possessions minimal, long lasting, multipurpose and multi user. Sort of like when on the rez." A big laugh. Good. He is right, we weren't exactly heavy materialists before either.

He turns to me, "Cat, how about the exploring?"

"Gee, go on one little unauthorized away mission and get pegged for life as the great adventurer." I fake a heavy sigh, but am smiling and getting a nasty look back from Silver, who then smiles too.

"I guess being cute has its advantages." I bat my eyes and he rolls his.

"Okay, you two, get a room." Someone shouts. I pretend to look around wildly, deeply offended.

"Well who knew. We live in a desert, even here. At least this world's equivalent. The thing is, this world is wetter than earth two or earth one for that matter. The sea level is higher, meaning there is a lot less land area. The seas are also shallower, again making for less land area. It is a world of large islands at best. Not really up to what we used to call continents.

While we may not have extensive forests here, they do exist elsewhere. Not that we want to go and chop them all down. Most of us are used to living without much. This is a great way to be, even here. We do not need to run headlong into killing our world the way it was done before. This is a New Hope, or better yet, our Last Chance."

"I want to second that thought. We have a huge advantage over the people still on earth two. They will be looking to rebuild a suicidal lifestyle."

Silver invites Alessa and Nease up.

“The plants here have evolved the same length of time as on our home worlds. The diversity is here. We are endeavoring to use that diversity to our advantage. We have cataloged all the plants in the eight villages and a bit beyond.” Impressive. I have seen some of their notebooks. Alessa is getting quite good at drawing.

We have tested most for possible uses. We split the plants into three tiers. Tier one: plants we can hand to anyone to be eaten, made into tea or external use only and used safely. Tier two: plants that need to be prepared by knowledgeable individuals and use supervised. Tier three: plants that are too dangerous in their current form. It is these we hope to learn how to make derivatives or combinations from to effect usefulness while minimizing side effects. Tier four: plants that have other uses than medicine, be it dyes, construction, etc. It is important here if these materials come into contact with someone or with food that they themselves not be harmful.

Always those nasty side effects. I hate it when it is my turn to help them test a tier three. We can survive it, but that does not do away with the pain and discomfort.

“Which brings us to what may actually prove to be the most important group, the culturalists.”

Death Watcher gets up. Good for him.

“We all have stories we heard as children. My world was no different. I have talked to each of you, including the norms, to get a sense of our collective stories. There is much good in these stories. They relate at the level of the young person in their visual elements, their good vs evil, with good always prevailing, as well as the more adult themes of life is not easy and hard choices need to be made. These choices are what we are really talking about by this assignment.

What choice do I make when my family is hungry or cold or whatever and the easy solution is before me. Do I take the easy solution knowing the consequences down the path are going to be dire? Do I hope that a way out of my debt can be found? Even if that debt does not have to be paid for generations upon generations? Knowing all this, do I accept the death of self, of family, of village rather than take on a debt that cannot be repaid? That is the challenge we face. Most here came from a world of instant solutions. Even if you were poor, even if you were always hungry, you knew others were not and you aspired to be like them.

Those who have no experience of hunger do not know how to survive hunger. Those who are always warm do not know how to survive being cold. Those who have never experienced illness do not know how to

survive being ill. Those who have never experienced death do not know how to handle the death of a loved one, or themselves.

You are already familiar with the day of fasting we have once every seven days. We are going to add an additional day every moon. Winter is coming. I do not know if we will get actual snow, but it will be too cold for simple clothing alone. We will practice doing chores with even less, so we are tough against the cold. Some came to this world with physical difficulties or have accepted them since arriving. It is important to understand these difficulties too. We have days where we try to do our lives without seeing, without hearing, without all of our appendages working. Among the young we will have expeditions of endurance and strength of character. Not of being an exceptional individual, but of being a surviving community. All will succeed or none will.

When someone dies, we all mourn. We will all give up something precious of our own to die along with our honored loved one. We too experience a small death. We learn to not be too attached to the things of this world.

When someone takes the path away from community by inappropriate behavior, unwelcome advances or bullying of another, they show they do not want to be part of our community and they will be banished. If they hoard resources while others do without, they show they are not of community and will be banished. Depending on the severity and the contrition shown, they may be allowed back in. They will have to prove themselves worthy of being allowed back in. This will take much work and will not be easy.

But you say, what if an entire village decides to pursue a path away from beauty? Then they will be asked to leave our area. If they refuse, then we will leave. We will leave with all our knowledge, abilities, share of resources, and our beliefs. We will begin again in a new area far away. For it is better to live in beauty than to live in plenty or ease with evil.

And if they pursue us to the other side of the world, then what do we do? Then we will die as a community. For it is better to die in beauty than to forsake beauty for evil.”

The room is silent. We sit in meditation for a time. Harsh but necessary and very real. Otherwise what was the point of all that we have done?

Turtle gets up, “We have one last agenda item. Cats. This world, as nice as it is for us, is challenging for them. They need to hunt. The young need to learn these skills while they are still young. It is in their nature. It is of their culture and understanding. So to present progress in this area I invite Owa Moosa up.”

Stupid monkeys

That gets a laugh. Owa is annoyed which of course makes people giggle even more. We all know how they feel about us.

She is about to leave when she turns and faces us with a pissed look on her face. One of Sylvy's kits jumps on her. She ignores him.

There are several possibilities close by in DS space. All offer abundant prey. None are as wet as this world, which is also in their favor. Giggle. They are being assessed for fitness in terms of hidden dangers. Like prey so big they are really kitty predators. As long as there are TKs capable of DS we will maintain some contact. Like when she wants a Cat massage. She lays down again. Not exactly a rousing speech. I don't care. I knew that. Stupid monkeys.

“Remember, this is a fast day for us too. No cheating. TK only in an emergency.” He looks directly at Mike and Marie. No beer either guys.

Newbies

Iggy is chasing her new toy around our personal garden. I wish there were bees and birds. I miss them. I miss Cat too. It was decided that we really needed at least one TK per village in case anything goes wrong. Smith and Jones can only be in one place at a time as they refuse to separate more than a hundred meters.

Iggy especially loves visiting Ghost. He is way older and more knowledgeable, but does not have the energy or size advantage over Iggy. Good training for her. Is it right for Iggy to be with me or would she be better with the other cats and Cats? What would Owa say?

Silver walks through the gate, Chris is with him. Ghost sneaks in wary and then pounces on Iggy in a surprise attack.

“I did not want to get into it in front of the others.” I motion for them to sit.

“Would you like tea or anything? I am not cheating. You said fast, so tea is okay?” He nods. Chris does too after some hesitation. He is always thinking. Not sure he is always even here.

I serve them tea and give them a moment to enjoy the initial warmth. We are approaching full winter. Still no snow, but it does get cold. Good practice Death Watcher would say. I grew up with it, so no big deal. Most here did.

“I assume you are here to talk about the one-who-shall-not-be-named.”

“Yes.”

“Well, mostly she just whines. About everything. Nothing is right or good enough for her. She bullies people around her to do her bidding by pointing out flaws in everything. As a consequence people are avoiding her.”

“All people?” Chris asks with a wry smile.

I smile back.

“There are a few, no more than three or four so far, young, who listen to her. She can be very persuasive. She learns their weak spots and uses that to spin a tale that makes sense on the surface, but would not hold up to close inspection.”

“Just what we wanted. Good.” Silver.

“There are many who miss the easy life of the rez. People glorified the past as an Eden, but it was mostly hard work just to stay alive. Once the cars, stoves, matches even, are all gone it is easier to be taken in by

someone offering a way back.”

“That was an illusion too. A lot of people in the rez went to bed hungry.”

“But nearly everyone, sober anyway, had a car or truck in the family and a roof over their head. Solar panels brought light in the evening. They had programs they watched. Items they did not need. Personal possessions beyond clothing.”

“Yes.”

“Change is hard for most people, but especially from those where change was forced on them. It does not help that they know some survived in the nests. Some wish they were part of that group instead of ours.”

“Fuel for her fire. Excellent.” I knew there was a reason we let that bit slip out.

Chris looks at Silver, “Separating the wheat from the chaff?”

“Not entirely. From disaffection comes the energy and will to try new things, to take chances. Especially for the young. Too much and a culture will break down of course.”

“As was happening since the industrial revolution on earth two.”

Silver nods and continues, “Too little and a culture cannot survive change when it happens. And it will happen. Climates change. Disasters happen. Variance alone can be a hardship.” The four horseman of the apocalypse.

“Dry for two years in a row and then too much water.” I add. Seen it enough even in my lifetime.

When I look at the two of them together it is like there is something there. Chris looks older, which of course he is not, but I have to wonder what he would look like without the beard and with longer hair. I suspect they would look a lot alike. A lot of their thinking is similar too. I wonder if anyone else has noticed this?

Silver sighs, “This is likely to play out over years. Be prepared for some ‘accidents’ to show people she means business and it is not good to cross her.”

“Watch her when on kitchen detail and see if some get choice portions while others are slighted. Will be subtle, but enough the victims will notice,” Chris adds like he is actually continuing Silver’s thoughts.

“I will keep my ears, eyes and TK open. She is very careful when I am around. She forgets about our abilities if I do not use them in front of her. You off to Small Creek Village next?” They nod in unison. Creepy.

Small Creek Village

We walk. I like to walk and we will be there easily before afternoon. Ghost is tuckered out after playing with Iggy and rides on my back. I love there being no time commitments. We will, or Ghost and I will anyway, bed down there in the guest quarters.

I could see the wheels turning in Puu's head. I have to smile. She will figure it out eventually. Silver and I know of course and have no need to talk about it. I sometimes even think he may be jealous of the path I got instead of him. Makes no difference to me. It is a great day. Windy, but clear. Storm will come in a few days. Moving helps keep me warm and my joints working. Each year it gets harder to do some simple things. Who would have thought it would ever get to be a big deal just to reach behind and scratch yourself without pulling a muscle.

"It is so quiet you can hear the plants grow." I smile like I have a secret.

He laughs, "So you noticed. Puu and Cat are thinking it is a trick I am playing on them."

"Timists."

"Exactly. Everyone thinks that only their way of perceiving reality is real."

"Well, they are young. Hard for them to sit still long enough."

"Your biology training helped you and my time as a patient owl helped me."

"Sit and watch the world go by, even if they are trees." I laugh.

"The fastest I have observed is only a few centimeters per day."

"But multiply that over years and that is quiet a ways. Enough to exploit a new area or escape a bad one."

"For some of them. All it takes is one to make it."

"Not random either. The fungal network is telling them." He nods.

We walk in silence until we see the village before us. Others see us coming and come out to greet us. It is a fast day, so we will not need to worry about being over stuffed at least. Ghost will get something to eat of course. Not fair to impose our culture on his. He has been a good buddy.

"Meow"

"Yes dear, you will get some food soon." Purr.

I didn't even have to say anything. Everyone apparently knows Ghost. He has his own bowls in all the villages and knows right were to go when set down.

Moon Flower waves to us, “I expect you are here to see Taawa? Come with me.” Hey we could have just been passing through. How does everyone know what we are about?

Because I warned them ahead of time.

That would do it.

“Silver, over here.” She waves to us.

“Ruth or should we say River Flower. Good clan to join.”

“They took me right in, no questions. All us old ladies in one spot I guess, though I am the youngest, by a small tiny amount.” She laughs.

“No others in the Flower Clan?”

She laughs again, “Tons. But I am with the best of the clan. Come inside where it is warmer. Have some tea.” Moon comes in with us and Grass is already inside making tea.

The three look good together. Los tres amigos.

Silver asks, “How are you doing River?”

She sighs real loud, “I am in paradise. The life is simple yet never boring. I am learning so much. Inside I was totally dependent on others, here for the first time I am free. I know I can survive on my own. I mean I know. At the same time I love the people here and want to be with them forever. No one follows orders and no one follows them. You learn really quick what needs to be done and do it if you can, or tell someone else till the word gets to the right person. No ownership of place, things, tasks. It is heaven.” I can feel her glow of happiness from here. This is the way it was supposed to be. I am glad Silver allowed her this choice.

We are silent for a bit. This is not the reason we came.

“Have you given some thought to our little problem?”

“Some. Did you know there is a plant here that makes latex by the gob full? Lots of it too. Not at First Village either.”

I laugh, “That gives a lot of non-lethal possibilities.”

“Does it? Never thought of it that way.” Evil smile. Of course she did, that was her assignment after all.

“Thought of some things you probably did not think of too. The three of us are downright nasty bitches we are. Did you know a lot of people are allergic to latex? I wonder what would happen if you dried it, powered it and made small bags of it to be launched by oh a sling shot say?”

“Or a rubber tipped arrow.” I add.

“Add some hot pepper to the mix.” Silver adds. He loves hot peppers. Parrots do too. Wonder if owls do.

“This is only temporary. Remember they probably won’t stop at non-

lethal.”

“We are on the edge. We already have an alternative location and have been setting things up there as well. That’s why we appear a bit thin at the moment. Only us old ladies here at the moment. Did you know Tia has taught us all knitting? Of course Moon and Grass already knew, but Tia is a true master and we are learning a lot.”

“From Commander to knitter. Oh how the mighty have fallen.” Silver laughs.

“Or risen.” I add. He nods to me.

“Yeah, the thing about knitting needles is no one ever sees them as weapons until it is too late. Oh, nothing serious or permanent. But a good poke in the thigh or arm hurts something awful.”

“Especially if dipped in hot peppers first.” He has a one track mind.

“Is this why you eat so many Silver? Building up a tolerance for when we take over?” Moon smiles and sips her tea.

“We intend to slow them down long enough to get the remaining ones out of town. If they try to follow us they will find the path destroyed as we pass. Ropes cut, logs set down, stones toppled. Once we are sure they are not following we take many circuitous routes to our new home.”

“What about contact with the other six villages?”

“We have people we can trust in each and are careful not to compromise who they are. Each of the villages is doing something similar. We know it is coming. Only a matter of time.”

I laugh, “They will be kings and queens of an empty kingdom.”

“We are self reliant now. We are not beholdng to things any longer. Any one of us could live out our natural life alone here now. We don’t even need corn, beans or squash any more if forced to. The local stuff does not taste good all the time, but it fills the belly and serves our nutritional needs.” Like sap chow.

“That is why this is paradise. The burden has been lifted. We were slaves to our stuff.”

“All in the name of profit. I never understood why the rich wanted so much. Boring to me.”

“Chris, you are weird. Just accept that and walk on. Or do I need to dangle some chocolate in your face to prove you are still Hu?” Mean thought.

“I can give it up any time.” Everyone laughs.

“It is the only reason he hangs with the TKs you know.” Grass adds.

“That is true. No other reason at all.” Silver smiles.

We get up to leave, “Watch for the unexpected. Lucy has spies

everywhere and knows how Hu work better than almost anyone.”

“She can’t help what she is any more than anyone else. Too bad she does not see that. Does she even know she is being used?”

“We told her. As you said, she can’t help it. She really tried at first. Lasted maybe two weeks. She has fallen off the wagon and is back to what we needed her for.”

“A hard lesson for us all.”

“All the worthwhile ones are.”

“There is no way that Ruth will anticipate every scenario.”

“Of course not. But she is military trained. Spent three tours in Faluja. She knows about the unexpected. She has lots of plans she did not tell us about.”

“Does not trust us to keep quiet?”

“Walls have ears. Best to not say everything out loud.” Ah.

“Is there a point to this? All species die. All people die. You can postpone it, but not prevent it.”

“You know what this is all about Chris. Stop playing dumb.” I smile.

“Just in case anyone is listening.” He rolls his eyes.

“You want to go home?” He asks.

I smile, “Which one?” Ghost comes up to me and jumps, or rather climbs my back to get on my shoulders. He will sleep off his meal now.

“Actually I would like to check out Swamp Hill.”

“The Mushroom Mansion?” I nod.

“Morbid aren’t you.” Not a question.

“It is my role. Does not matter if I like it or not.” He raises an eyebrow.

“Would you rather our roles were reversed?”

“Oh no. I have always been fascinated by this role. Ever since the first time it happened. I was born to serve. Can you imagine any of the others doing this, even if they could?”

“Absolutely not. Just thinking of Cat in the role is frightening.” I laugh. That would be funny.

“I will be able to give her everything she needs.”

“True.”

Stupid Monkeys

How can you allow this Owa?

It serves a purpose Sylvy.

Iggy is spending too much time with a Hu and worse she is running in a pack with that huge bird thing. You have gotten soft.

Squeak. She is a bird lizard thing. Smells like one anyway. Learning to be a pack is an important skill. It is the one thing that has prevented us from taking over. Our lack of ability to coordinate. Besides, two of yours are there with her.

She growls. Does not like to be reminded.

How is your pet Hu doing?

We do not spend as much time together since coming here. Nothing to hunt. No Hu trying to kill us again.

Yet. The Hu called Lucy is a killer. She would not hesitate to accidentally kill a kit.

Or one of us. I would love her to try. She purrs. Almost drooling.

I don't trust Squeak. She took my Hu away from me.

You had your back turned. Your own fault.

The flying rat seems to have your Hu's attention.

Having kits is a distraction clearly.

Clearly. Best to round them up and count them. We both bark out a call. We soon hear them coming. Everyone is here except Iggy of course.

She is fine you two. She is with me having a very nice cat massage.

That Hu is a teaser. I hate teasers.

She does give good massage though and makes an attempt to make our food taste better too. She is training Iggy the best she can given the limitations we are under.

You know the entire village can hear you two.

So?

Just to Sylvy, Were we that loud? We do need to be careful. The evil Hu will find out and come after our kits.

At full volume, She tries and she will be dinner, best eaten raw, with the blood still pumping. I love the cleanup afterwards.

There is that. We are both drooling now.

Not knowing exactly what this means the kits are purring too, but a little confused, just happy their mothers are happy. One looks away from the group. There is always a wanderer. The easiest to pick off.

Ever Notice

“I swear that when we are around they don’t move. As soon as we leave, they move. They appear to be trying to get away from the pueblos. Why would they do that?”

“They want to be free and wild?” Cat is distracted by yet another art project. I hate Cat sitting duty. Both the Hu kind and the Cat kind. Two of the kits are here at the moment playing and tearing up the room. Dust everywhere. I miss wood floors, but we can’t cut enough yet to have that. Best we can do is dried clay gravel mix. Still leaves your feet red after walking on it barefoot. All food has to be covered all the time to prevent it getting into everything we eat. Thank goodness we have water tight pottery now. I hated drinking the stuff all the time.

“High in iron. Good for young ladies.” Cat says. I hate it when she reads me without asking.

TKs are such babies. Well except Silver. He is cool. Creepy cool. Not cool, cool. You can never be sure what he is thinking or planning. I always feel like we are being steered by him and Turtle. But especially him. I know Turtle, Ms. Lightfoot, from school. She tries to act the same here, holding classes and such, but we all know they are special now. They are TK. They could kill us or save us with a thought. You never know which way it will go. Okay, to be fair. They would not kill, kill us. But if we get in a hazardous situation they may not do anything to save us either.

We will not always be around. You know that. Time is getting short. Soon you will be on your own.

“Stop it Cat. You know I hate that. Just speak already.”

“You speak. You are broadcasting so loud every TK can hear you on the planet.”

“Tell me how to turn it off and believe me I would be glad to. So, why do you have to leave?”

“We have promises and commitments we have to keep too. TK is not free. We pay a price in our service to others.”

“What others? Nothing moves on this world but us. I am old enough to remember birds, raccoons, coyotes, dogs, bats, bugs. Lots of bugs.”

She looks up and smiles at me. Shit.

“The bugs were something. Only during the brief wet season, but they sure made good use of it.”

“You mean biting me! That is not a use, but a pain.” I know she sees

me as a silly teenager. There is some idea what we all have to spend some time with the TKs so we remember. If I had not seen it myself I know I would not have believed it. Sure, coming here was a trip, but I grew up with fantasy, so at seven years old this was still consistent with my world view. Now eight, I know better. Cat laughs so hard I think she is going to choke.

“Stop it!” I stamp my feet. It is creepy the way she just closes her eyes and the form takes shape in front of her with detail so fine I cannot see all of it. It is almost like watching a movie take shape before my eyes. I have to look away. Oh, and things suddenly appearing in the air in front of her, then slowly moving about the room to where she wants it. At least I do not have to prepare meals here. She does it, not great, but better than going hungry.

A bowl of sap chow appears before me.

“Go ahead, that is what I eat most of the time. Owa and her kits do too.”

“I’m sorry. Please make real food.” I try my best sad kitty eyes.

“Sad puppy dog does not work with me kid.”

“I have a name you know. And that was not a puppy. It was a kitty.”

She sighs, “At that stage it is pretty much the same. Do you remember puppies.” I shake my head no. I remember dogs, but we did not have one as my parent worked in town and I was too young to take care of one.

Squeak suddenly appears. Scares the crap out of me. Or nearly. She turns and faces the door. Waiting for something. The two kits are awake now.

Puu and Iggy appear just inside the door. Iggy goes to attack her litter mates who hiss and gang up on her. Squeak jumps up and down like a dog. I roll my eyes and go over and give her a hug.

“Hi Squeak. Did you have a good day?”

“Hi Little Tree. I had a good day.” She always does.

“What did you do?” Has to be more exciting than being here.

“I help move heavy logs. Fun using both strength and ability to accomplish.” Her words are getting better. She sees the bowl of sap chow and takes a few throwing them way up in the air to catch them in her mouth.

I take two and try to do the same thing, but miss. Once they hit the floor a kit pounces on it and takes it away.

“Mouth too small.” Squeak show concern.

Do you want a bigger mouth Little Tree. Cat looks at me like she wants to eat me.

“No thank you Cat. I am fine.” Stop teasing me.

But it is so much fun Little Tree. Puu this time.

Squeak moves to be between me and them.

“I will protect.” She hisses at them and they both laugh. Suddenly the three of them are gone. Probably to play outside in the TK style. They are trying to train Squeak to protect Hu and Cat. She takes this role very carefully.

Well, it is just me and three kits now.

There is a knock at the door and a neighbor pokes her head in looking around. The kits all stop and stare at her same as me.

“Hi Little Tree is Cat around? Those kits are sure getting big. Soon they will be big enough to be on their own.”

“Hi May. They will be back in a moment.”

“May I pet a kit?”

“You can try, it is their choice if it will happen. They are beings same as us.” Not sure I like her.

She sits on the floor and waits for them to come to her. She knows Cats anyway. Dog people just try and grab. Good way to come away bleeding. Iggy does come up to her though and she pets her.

“Their fur is so soft.”

“May. May we help you?” Puu comes in. I can hear Cat and Squeak outside. She picks up Iggy and holds her. Puu is bigger than me, but Iggy is big too. Looks funny and I smile.

“Hi Puu. I ran out of corn flour and was hoping you had some.”

Puu motions to the jar marked with the corn icon.

May goes over and removing a sack from her skirt she puts some of the corn flour into her sack.

Puu watches her leave carefully. Cat and Squeak also stop and watch her leave.

She turns to me, “Call us if she ever comes here again.” She means scream in my mind. I nod I understand. I am scared now and not sure what to do. I am still just a little girl.

Year Zero, Day 1

I am used to time being recorded by the year of the dynasty and day of that year. Therefore for lack of an actual declaration of a dynasty I am arbitrarily declaring one as this is the first day of the first year whereby I am the principal recorder. More on that in a moment.

My new name is Ron. I did not choose this name, it was given to me by unanimous declaration without a say from me. I am used to this, so did not object. I have been called by many names, none of my choosing. As I understand it, most here did not choose their names.

I am now TK7. Vastly stronger than any of those I worked under before coming here. This is amazing to me. Last month I succeeded in making a new body for myself and transferring to it. I practiced on smaller creatures brought back from earth two. I put them back afterwards with a tag. I was instructed by Chris this was important in order to study the same individual over time to be sure there were no lasting effects. I sent them back to one of the seven hells. How could there be no lasting effects? But I do as instructed.

Even with the new form I am clumsy. I am shorter. The tall form does not conform to any internal space unlike Mars where all ceilings were very high. The gravity is higher, but I should have been used to that by now in my old form, but I had to learn all over again. Reaching for things I would miss, walking toward a door or table would take too many steps. I would duck even when I did not need to at openings or tree branches. I settled for one point seven meters. Tall by local standards, but short enough I can get around without ducking most of the time.

I have two sets of clothing. I have never had two of anything before. I am instructed to wear something called shoes. I have never worn shoes before. The higher ups wore sandals, but those of us at the bottom never.

I remember my slow death in the sands and lichens. This place is very different, but I would rather be here.

I am now principal recorder because the old one is no longer able to. It is said he will die soon. If we can make new bodies why don't they just make one for him and be done with it? He forbids this himself saying his death has a purpose far greater. How can death have a purpose? Other than being fed to the recyclers of course. No need here. I don't understand.

I attend a lot of TK meetings, but the cultural references are beyond me. I am told not to worry about it, I will learn. I have been with them

over one earth year or a half Mars year. I do very much like the simple life here. It somehow does not bother me to do menial tasks I would have complained about on Mars. I guess the difference is I get to accept a task, it is not forced on me. Such a simple mental switch. It is like in meditation when your feet hurt but as soon as the bell rings, the pain goes away.

This new body is not able to go into stasis. I have tried to be sure. All of the chemistry is different. The best I can do is to slow everything down a bit. Everyone else is amazed that I can do this much. I have been trained since I was in the nursery to do this. Survival. I guess with the TK this is not necessary, but Silver always warns us that TK may not always be possible.

“Ron, it is time. We are gathering at the spot.”

I DS to the place. It is nearly a swamp between strands of trees. Trees are new to me as well. There was nothing taller than a knee on Mars. These are many times my current height.

The others are gathered around a depression in the damp ground. Silver and Turtle are holding Chris up by his arms and helping him to remove his clothing. He is alive, barely. I have never seen anyone this old without clothing before. There were many older than him on Mars, but all wore robes. There are an amazing number of tiny cracks in the skin. The spots I am used to, we all have those. I look at my new body. Not on me yet. Interesting.

All of those from the Hopi Nation are chanting in Hopi as they lower him into the depression. He breathes a few times and then just stops. He timed that amazingly close. I am impressed and hope I am able to achieve this level of understanding some day.

I sit down on the ground at his feet.

“I would be honored to take first watch.” The others nod without a sound and depart.

As the sun sets I go into slow mode and watch as fungal threads cover him very quickly. Soon there is only an outline of this body in a large mass. I can scan enough to see they have completely taken over his body and replaced all internal structures with a sort of composite. I have seen death many times on this world. This is all normal so far, but I am always fascinated by the process. Maybe faster. Probably because of the extra water. On Mars bodies lose all of our water until we become dust. The dust is broken up and fed directly to the fields to help the plants grow.

The sun rises and strikes the body at the head first. This explains the orientation maybe. The head is turning green. Slowly, but as the sun

reaches further and further down the body, the green spreads. Most intense at the head and fading towards the feet.

“I am here to relieve you Ron.” Puu of course. I come back to fast mode. It takes me a moment.

“I will remain. There is something different here. As I am the recorder, it is important that I remain.”

“May I sit with you then?”

“Of course. But I will go back into slow mode. I will not be able to talk.”

“Understood.” She becomes quiet and I slow down again. The small Cat creature is on her lap, well partly, too big now, but soon falls asleep.

We can converse together in slow mode? I have been learning from you. She still sounds a bit fast, but I can understand her.

The fungal threads investigate the two of us. My lower body is covered in them, but they do not go internal. They are not turning green. Must be the nutrients from his body.

He is nearly as green as the local plants now. I scan and see there are plant organs in each of the cells of the fungus. His body is becoming lighter.

We remain there for three cycles of dark and light. The others are around us by this time. Everyone has become curious why we do not leave his side.

The sun reaches noon on the third time of light.

You honor me, but this is totally unnecessary. I am fine. Everything went as expected. As foretold.

Then he is gone. It did not feel like DS. The depression is gone. The fungus is back to the same as the rest of the area. It is as if he never existed.

I come back to fast time just as Silver speaks, “Fascinating. Next time I want to be the one.” Huh?

“Green Man!” Puu exclaims. I remember now the reference to the Green Man.

“I am confused. Did it not take much, much longer in the journals? Years I fact?”

“Yes, but that was the first time and a different incarnation. This time he chose the spot very carefully.”

“But he was not TK. How did he DS?”

“He was not TK because he was not complete. Now he is complete.”

“But we do not need to be Plantimal to DS.” Puu says. Plantimal. I remember that term too. I memorized the texts, of course, but it still takes

me a moment to find a specific reference.

“Ah, but in that incarnation both plants and animals existed side by side for billions of years. This time the ‘animal’ is fully formed and ready.”

“You have been talking with the local OM haven’t you? All those field expeditions where you were gone for months.”

“This was set up long before you were born Puu.” Turtle adds.

“But how did you know he would be born? He would survive the ash fall, the trip to San Jose. All the things wrong with his body. That he would be the one?” They just smile but do not answer. Must be a TK9+ thing. We really do not know what level they are.

“Where did he go?”

Silver looks at me shocked, “To be with Br’thn of course.” I nod. Of course.

“What do you mean? How come we do not get to meet Br’thn? Where is she?” Cat is going looney, pun intended. I know the earth two reference. Does not mean that same as on earth one.

The small Cat pops out. I am not surprised. They are all jumpy since the attack that almost for sure Lucy orchestrated, but could not be proved. It was very close, but no Cats were hurt. Can’t say the same for the three Hu involved. They will wear their scars for the rest of their lives. Banished too. The Cats pop with every sound they do not recognize.

“I am worried. I can’t find Iggy!” Puu exclaims standing up. I can see she is scanning at the edge of her ability. There would be little point to my participating.

“They are gone.” Who all? I scan back to the village. Everyone appears to be there.

“All of the Cats are gone. Not a single one left on this world. Even Ghost is gone.” Turtle announces.

“We have been expecting it. Wonder why they waited so long. I would have expected it to happen right after the attack.” I add.

“Green Man. Iggy was their witness.” Flor.

“You would think they would want an adult here.” Mike adds.

Cat laughs, “They were jealous it was not one of them. Pride.”

“I will miss them. We had some good times. I wish them all well.”

“Ghost was the reason they stayed. He had to be here for his Hu. I sensed him just off in that group of trees.” I tell them. I did not think of it at the time, concentrating on the body.

“Ah, I believe you are right Ron.” Huh? I am definitely not used to someone in authority telling me I am right about anything. Anything.

Strange, my entire body feels funny.

Marie teases me, "Don't let it go to your head Ron."

"Not my head. I do not feel it there. I feel it everywhere else. What is happening?"

"Praise is a rare and wonderful thing." She smiles and walks back toward the village. I get in line and go back with them. Nothing left here. We will not make any memorial or any fuss. He is not dead. Just changed. I can relate in a small way.

Cat Less

I never really paid any attention to the Cats. Hu were the only mammal like creatures on Mars. I never thought about them much once I got over the shock of seeing something different. There are so many different creatures here. Especially earth two. Everything was different. I was in slow mode for a long time trying to absorb all of it. New Hope is better. All that moves is sentient. No cockroaches even. Don't miss those, even if they were tasty.

Now I find I miss the Cats. I can't even remember touching one. Though a few times a little one rubbed against me. Ghost seemed to be the most forgiving. He would just sit next to me. No touching. No sound. Just blissful quiet together. I will miss him the most.

Now that I have become a 'real' Hu the other sentients are asking me questions. Their forms at least work here. It is the same gravity, humidity within a normal range, though not always comfortable. Water is plentiful. Even in my new body I am not used to the heat. Thank goodness I chose to change while still in winter. It gave me a few weeks to get used to it before the heat came. I am not looking forward to summer.

Droopy looks me over, "I don't know Ron. I don't know if I could manage being that small. You are so skinny."

"Not all Hu are skinny. You could be very large if you wanted. I heard from some of the others that earth two had some weighing in at a hundred and sixty kilos or more."

"How much do you weigh Ron?" She looks me over. I can feel her scan, but don't mind.

"About half of that. I was always thin. I like being that way."

"No, I could not be thin. I guess we are still slaves to our comfort. Twice what you weigh. I could see that. Thanks Ron!" She DSs out.

Alessa comes over next. Walking in instead of using DS. I am outside the room I stay in when I want to be inside where it is cooler. I can only handle so much sun, though I keep trying.

"You will never get a tan Ron, in spite of your Chinese heritage."

"Does not make sense. I have seen pictures of Chinese where they were very dark."

"In spite of your station in life at the bottom, the only ones who could afford to relocate to space where the upper class. They were the lightest to begin with according to my study of Hu history."

"Maybe Silver could fix that for me."

“How do you see me as a Hu?”

“I am hardly the best person to ask. I was nearly as different from them as you.”

“I like the fact that you did not go for, what was the word . . .”

“Glamorous? Beautiful?”

“One of those I guess.”

“We have no desire to mate given our TK status, so why draw unnecessary attention? I like being alone. I certainly would not want to project a false image. And we get to choose. Most Hu do not. They are stuck with what they are born with.”

“How would you see me. I like your ideas.”

“Not that much different than you are now. I like the way you look. Let me see. Small, dark skin, thin, long black hair down to your hips. Some hair still on your skin. Some of the ladies who have Hispanic genetics would be a good look.”

“Thanks Ron! That is perfect. Hey, we can always change back if we want I am told.”

“Silver goes back and forth from an owl to Hu.”

“Did you ever notice a similarity between Silver’s Hu form and the one who died, Chris.” He is not dead, but I do not argue.

“They all look the same to me after a certain age. Gray hair, similar height is all I can really say.”

Sure enough Flor shows up next with the Flower clan in tow. They go on after waving and she stops near me.

“What are you doing Ron?”

“Composing my next chapter to record Flor. How are you?”

“Guano, I still forget to ask that first. You would think after this much time.”

I laugh, “I was brought up different too, but we learned to ask the higher ups without expecting their concern in return.”

“Not as bad with the Ku, but then I was a teacher same as here I guess.”

“You want to know what Hu shape to become?”

“The others have been here before me.” I nod.

“I remember one teacher I had who did not treat me different than the Mars born ones. Maybe she had some Loonie in her past though I could not tell. She was tall and thin like everyone, but not as tall as a Loonie. She was bigger at the hips than at the shoulders. Sort of like you are now, as all Ku are I suspect.”

“True. That way I could keep some of my Ku-ness and still be Hu in

appearance. Maybe with a hat with colored feather like additions like I am now. Thanks Ron!" She runs to catch up with the rest of the clan. They all start chattering at the idea. I can see their hands moving to their heads to help visualize the hat. Soon they will all have matching hats.

Cat pops in disoriented, "Where are they?"

"If you mean all the non-Hu TKs? They have been here and left."

"Did you help?"

"You know why they were here."

She nods, "I sent them to you. You are a non-threatening male."

"Right, no one would want to mate with me." I smile.

"No, I did not mean that. We are all TK. None of us is going to do that."

"Nope, forever a virgin. Thank goodness."

"Males were not expected to try in your culture?"

"The statutes were very strict. We really had to watch our population. Only the higher ups were allowed to mate. They did not care about the rest of us. Punishment is very harsh." Death.

"No, what I mean is that culture is culture. Females in particular are expected to have a look as if they want to mate even when they have no interest. It is hard to break that programming."

"We all dressed the same. I rarely even noticed. The only give away was when someone disappeared to give birth."

She is impatient, so much like her I have to smile, "Did you help them?"

"I think so. We will see when we see the results. Oh, Nease did not show up."

"They all asked me, Nease included. I am guessing because I am an artist. But I know nothing about fashion. I tried too hard not to be noticed by males. I ah,"

"I read the journals Cat. I know what happened to you. I understand. You don't have to say any more."

"Thank goodness Ron. I really appreciate your help. I am sure they will all look fine." She pops out.

Is that it? Am I allowed to be alone now?

Turtle comes around the corner and waves hello. Sigh. I know she does not want to change at least.

"Thanks for your help Ron. It really means a lot to everyone. How are you adapting to your new form?"

"It gets easier each day. We did not have a practice of running, so I am having to learn how. We could not expend that much energy at once and

TK meant I did not need to.”

“But the Kung Fu gang keep prodding you to join them.” I sigh and nod.

“You are allowed to make a choice. You are allowed to be yourself.”

“But I might actually like it. Can’t know until I try. Oh there is one thing that is very annoying. You have to pee a lot in this form. I hardly ever peed in the Martian form. We could not afford to waste water in that way. Anyway, there is not a whole lot else to do at the moment. I feel like we are waiting for something, but I don’t know what.”

She smiles, “Perceptive. All will be revealed. We have some time yet. We have to be sure they are strong enough to survive without us.”

“My understanding is that we agreed to give them a second chance. Not that we would take care of them for eternity. If they get used to us always saving them they are lost.”

“We are close, but not there yet. Be at the next TK meeting.” Why would I not be?

At the meeting. “Pack your things. We are leaving. Pack only what you are willing to carry. We want them all to see we are leaving. Mid morning should do. Say goodbye, give away what you are not willing to carry. Got it?”

The next morning I have a small bag packed which I put on my shoulders. I have a staff as I am not totally sure of my self over a path that is not well traveled. It is mostly full of my writings as I know I can make anything else I need. Not all of what I write is open to norms yet and cannot be left here. Chris and I taught them to keep their own history by writing it down in several places to insure an accident does not take it out. Maybe at some point when we have fallen to the point of mythology they can ‘accidentally’ discover a copy of the writings. I have learned that most of what I was taught at the monastery falls into this category.

We each take a different path out of our respective villages so that even if a village has more than one of us, they see us leaving. I do a sort of meandering path to help in that way. I wave to people as I pass. People try to stop me to talk, but I wave them on as if in a hurry. I need to make some distance before nightfall. I soon notice that I have some followers. They will fall back when they realize I am not stopping. Most do not like to go far beyond their village farms. The attack on the Cats is still fresh in everyone’s minds and they do not want to be the next victims of the bullies.

Three bullies were removed by their actions. We know where they are. They will not last long. They are already very hungry and partially

dehydrated. Being a bully means you never learned a trade and really do not know how to take care of yourself. It amuses me that the ones who complain the most about circumstances are the ones who work the least to fix it. It was the same on Mars I suppose. Easier to point at someone else.

Lucy is still here and she still has followers. I think that part of the reason we are leaving is to show that what happens is their own responsibility. How much they tolerate is up to them. We will not interfere unless it is an extinction possibility. For now.

I pass by where Cat used to live and see a life size statue of Squeak in the main garden. Squeak was the other one who did not want to become Hu. She did not understand why someone would want to. I carry a small token of my DNA and a good memory of what I was. I can always go back.

Outside the village I still have two small Hu following. I hear a call in the distance. Sound did not carry well on Mars so we depended more on visual cues. It is not just TK that allows me to hear too much. The two fall back and eventually turn around to go back. I am alone.

Even after dark I continue. With TK light and dark does not matter. I am more careful of tripping though. There really is no path here, so I have to scan ahead to figure out where I will go. I cheat and TK across ravines and creeks. We were told to erase our footsteps anyway so it really does not matter. I can TK and see where the others are at any given moment. Everyone is making slow progress.

We are headed well away from any current settlement and any likely near future one. We will still be within TK distance of course. That is quite a ways. I was not TK, at least at this level on Mars, so I never got an appreciation for the curvature of Mars. Here I can see enough to see the roundness. Makes you feel very small.

It takes me eight days of continuous walking. I use TK to maintain my body and do not bother with food, water, elimination, and fatigue. The final destination is heavily forested, but close to a shallow sea. I am looking forward to the ocean. We have no open bodies of water on Mars. Even the small creeks here were a marvel to me.

I DS through the most dense parts of the forest. I do not want to damage the life here. Does not seem right as an outsider. They never evolved to deal with us. As I learned, I am not the result of evolution entirely. Martians were heavily genetically engineered. So were Loonies of course and we followed more or less the same path. Whereas we could breath in the open on the Terra-formed Mars it still benefited the Loonies

to keep oxygen levels and air pressure lower. The walls did not need to be as thick for instance. The lower gravity helped explain our long thin appearance.

I did not have parents, as the earth people think of it. I was raised in a group environment. I have no idea where my genetic ancestors came from. Silver said that no one lives on the moon any longer. They eventually ran out of supplies as resupply missions from earth one slowed and then stopped. Embryos were shipped from Luna to Mars to help maintain genetic diversity. I started out as a numbered vial. Or my parents or parent's parents did.

Those of us from the earth one system were told more about what happened on earth one than those from earth two were. Our crisis point happened roughly a thousand years earlier. From that experience a huge effort was put into tech to avoid it happening again. Interestingly what became North America was left alone on earth one. It was set aside as a reserve or protected area for both species and the Hu who were already there. By not interacting with these people, if something happened again to the Eurasian side, someone would survive. China was ahead of everyone else at the time and so remained the center of intellectual activity. They were the ones who later colonized Luna City and eventually Mars. The Mars Terra-forming started in the year fourteen twenty nine by the earth two time scale. In about four hundred years we went from where earth two was to colonies on two worlds and exploration of another dozen moons around the outer planets. Asteroid mining was also part of this for a time.

But the tech culture eventually failed, largely because of political reasons. This was apparently very common for China where there were regular purging of intellectuals as they tended to also assume positions of power. Logic, no matter how well formed, does not sit well with emotions of people suffering for one reason or another. The off earth worlds were finally abandoned in the late 1800s earth two time, just as earth two was finally having its own buildup of technology leading to its own exploration of other worlds.

Comparing the two earths is unavoidable of course. China finally regained supremacy in the early 2000s on earth two. The purges had put China at a disadvantage during the time the Euro people rose. With no crisis to bring in the TKs and plagues to put the Euros the most behind, they rose to prominence instead. Earth two had its own plague a few hundred years after the split, but this was nothing like the 99+% die off that earth one went through.

The TKs began at the crisis of course, same as here. They followed a similar model to what we are doing now. Set up a surviving culture, in China in our case, and then stepped back to see what happens. In the meantime the earth one TKs, once their task was complete, expanded beyond earth to the galactic center and were eventually banned to Far Out by the 'thn overlords. It is not clear how Silver avoided all this. He just waves his hands when asked. I know from the journals that he is never what he appears to be. He did not leave earth one until the preparing of earth two for our arrival. Turtle, whom we thought was made TK by Silver was actually a result to of the coming crisis on earth two. What amazed me was we were chosen several generations back in the case of the earth one, Ba Eden, and Ku Eden. The Far Out two were chosen by one high level TK who watched over them.

One major difference was the crisis itself. On earth one, it was largely plagues, which attacked mostly the lower classes, and did nothing physical to the biosphere itself. There were no earth wide ash falls, tsunamis, earthquakes or large species die offs. This also allowed earth one to bounce back quickly with resources intact. Someone still had to do the dirty work and many families fell from grace to fulfill the need. This was also a typical Chinese pattern.

It is interesting to me that most of this cultural stuff did not transfer to Mars. On Mars it was quickly realized the monastery form worked the best. There were no weapons, armies, or large surpluses of materials the rich could accumulate to make an opulent upper class. Monasteries were good at working with scarcity. Language seems to have been the only carry over. The written language on Mars was what the earth two people called phonetic, but the oral language was clearly Zhōngwén. The old forms were still used in the sacred texts, but only the higher hierarchy were allowed to learn to read them. This did result in some trust issues even while I was there. A Loonie would never be allowed up to that level. All Loonies were assigned to the lowest tasks. Silver said this was a mistake.

At what point is happy to be alive enough and at what point is it not?
I see Silver and walk up to him.

“May we talk?”

“Of course Ron. What’s on your mind?”

“Why attack the kits? They never harmed anyone and brought much joy to many.”

“Ah, that is actually quite complicated. The short story is that they were jealous of all the attention the kits got and they didn’t.”

I nod. Makes sense, “And the long story?”

“Well, that goes back to the beginnings of time itself.” Huh?

He turns to me and asks, “Why were the TKs banished to Far Out?”

“It is not really mentioned in the books. At least not for this incarnation. I believe it was because they became a threat to the ‘thn structure itself.”

“Precisely. That was by itself only horrible. But, once they understood the ‘thn structure, they would understand how the incarnations themselves were made. Once you understand that then given enough time you can cross incarnations or make your own.”

“That messes with the entire reason for their existence. No experiment can work if they are mixed and played with during the run.”

“You had training in experimental method? I did not know.”

“Mars and Luna are harsh environments. Even the lowest were expected to use reason and logic. Our culture would collapse very quickly if everyone did what they felt like.”

“Good. Well, you understand that each incarnation is a separate experiment. Having been in a few I noticed that tech is something that invariably leads to problems. Not just TKs threatening the ‘thn, but norms putting tech ahead of life. It always leads to destruction.”

“And the reason it is limited here on New Hope.” He nods.

“How does this relate to the Cats?”

“You know we purposely brought Lucy here to stir things up a bit.”

“Yes, without some push people stop thinking. On Mars we were forever up against the limits. Why I was on the list to be ‘removed’ to save everyone else. It was before us daily. Here, life, though a lot of work, is still paradise. No one wants for food, shelter, company.”

“Lucy provides the counter to perfection to force people think about what is around them and not just accept it.”

“Because Passive is the second most common way a culture can die.”

“People become lazy. No reason to work hard. Nothing threatening them. First learning stops, then a lot of work like growing crops, cleaning out a latrine, making clothing. If this is not needed, if you can gather what you need, clothing is not needed, go wherever you want, then even thought becomes unnecessary.”

“Okay but how does this relate to tech?”

He smiles, “Have you listened to the Lucinites?” I have heard people use this term. I nod. He waits for me to answer.

“The most persuasive argument, that gets the most attention, is why don’t we have more than we do? If we could bring corn, squash, beans,

peppers to New Hope, why not steel knives, hoes, ultimately even cell phones have been mentioned. If sheep did not work, then why not try chickens or cows or horses. But, this would lead to one of the two deaths, life gets too easy as TKs replace all this stuff that can't be made or anyone even has the desire to make or take care of. OR, their lust for tech causes people to pursue more and more and more, until the side effects as Cat would say, consume the world again, thus also leading to destruction."

"Good. Enlightenment is easy. It is right in front of us, but the temptations of greed, hate and/or delusion are on all sides tempting us too."

"Greed and hate are fed by tech and sloth by delusion." He nods.

"There is one more. Rigid adherence to form."

"Then you will not survive when change happens, and it will happen."

"Good, and what does this mean to you specifically?"

"Mars. Mars is dying because they have been rigid and are unwilling to change. Change becomes something to fear. What if you are wrong?"

"What if you are right and someone rises to power instead of you?"

"Those in control are loath to relinquish it."

"And one of the reasons we must leave them to their fate. We are not in control and we must not ever think we are. They have a right to make their own decisions."

"That is why our council is separate from the day to day decisions. We never decide when to plant, how much to plant, how many homes to make and so forth."

"We provide gentle knowledge, possibilities. It is their decision to use and not use the ideas. We do not insist."

"How did you survive being banished to Far Out?" I know he was there, even if he never admitted it to the others.

"In previous incarnations I was sent there. I of course could not be forced to stay there." He winks.

"This time I was more awake. I saw it coming and warned against this path. But, as you might imagine, you can get high on TK. On the power. We are a curious species. We want to know what is over the next hill, the next star system, the next galaxy."

"And once you can do that there is no stopping you. The closer you get to the core dimension the more powerful you become and the more dangerous."

"Yes."

"169" He smiles and raises his finger to his lips to silence me. I

learned that gesture since coming here. Not part of my culture.

“Green Man is with Br'thn. That I understand. Logical. What are they doing?”

“Something wonderful.” He smiles and gets up to leave.

I can only guess and confirm so much. Next time maybe. I get a little more understanding each time we talk.

Things are more or less set up when I get in. Someone likes to label my room with a cartoon version of a Martian with a ray gun. We never had guns of any kind. Nor did we ever wear Roman legion head gear. I put my pack down and create a new writing desk and glow ball above it. Yes, I can write just using scanning, but I like the way light plays on the wet ink as I write.

I have to see it. I scan and figure out which way to go. I smell it long before I get there. I would have thought the surface would be flat, like a bowl of water, but it is not. In constant motion. I am enthralled just watching the constant but never the same motion. I wonder what it feels like. Wet of course and colder than I would have thought. I dare not go too far in as I do not know how to swim. I turn to go back and am pushed down into the sand with water completely covering me. I rise sputtering and confused.

Of course the others are on the shore laughing at my predicament. Another wall of water hits me and I fall into the sand and water again. This time I turn and face the next one coming in and shield myself. Ah, water is more dense than air. That is why it was able to push me over. Using TK I venture into the water until it well over my head and I am some ways from shore. A lot of plants rising from the bottom. Interesting. I gather some of the more interesting ones to bring back to Nease. Only Nease is already here and quickly swims past me, bag in one tentacle, to stop and face me.

Please bring back what you collect so we can compare.

I wave to Nease and she is off again. I have never seen anything swim before. Different from when Alessa glides among the trees for fun. Maybe I will try being Ceph for my next form.

On Mars we had to be meticulous about our record keeping. Chris taught me to summarize as much as possible and keep the details in a separate area if I felt the need. Just like the journals before me, it is not really necessary to pass on everything. I shall endeavor to do the same here.

We settled in quickly. We have moved so many times everyone knew what to do and with TP coordination was easier. Everyone will soon be

TK7 except Squeak. Squeak may be sentient, but she is still too young to take on the responsibility of being a full TK. She does not seem to mind and is 'enjoying her childhood'. Not sure what that is as we had to work as soon as we were able. I have to be careful. Now that I am Hu and can speak/TP everyone is getting tired of my saying 'well on Mars'. But, it was different there. They all know I came from Mars, so it is not necessary to state every time. This is logical.

The idea is to spend the next twenty or so years here, away from the new settlements for a long enough time for the older generation to have passed and a new generation who, though not necessarily born here, at least largely grew up here, to be taking over. We can't really be sure this has taken until we see what they make of it. They will have less cultural carryover from earth two.

At first the settlements were confused and frightened. Someone said something about the training wheels have come off. A cultural reference I do not understand. No, we are not coming back. No, Squeak will not appear from around the corner to play with your children. No, we will not solve your problems nor help in an emergency. The idea is to only step in if the settlements face an extinction event. There is no communication of course, so we use TP to listen in on public meetings. We try not to listen to individual thoughts. No micromanaging. Huh?

After a month and the coming of spring and a new planting season things quiet down. The threat of starvation has passed for another year. Even if the earth species fail, there are enough local species identified now to provide sufficient nutrition. As these are not cultivated yet, it will take more effort to forage though.

We are getting restless and bored. It has been decided to spend a portion of our time visiting the places we all came from. That way everyone will understand the places from which we all came. This will help me immensely.

Of course deciding which place to go to first takes thought. What form we will take? How to avoid messing up their culture considering most of us will be clueless. This discussion goes on for some time until it is solved for us by the arrival of a guest.

There you all are. That is the largest living thing I have ever seen. Absolutely huge. A big as a pueblo. Maybe larger. Lots of arms and two claws big enough to grab me in one.

Randy and Droopy go crazy.

"Snap! How did you find us?"

I had a little help. Silver pops in next to her. This creature has both

genders. Interesting.

I could get close to the earth lines fine. Far Out is not that far if you know the right path out.

“Wait, you mean we could have left anytime we wanted?”

Sure. Surprised you did not ask.

Randy looks at Droopy. “We did not ask. I can’t believe it.” He hits his head.

“Okay Snap, are you still living on Magenta?”

Yep. Wonderful place. I think I am finally full. Did not think that was possible. I should be able to have a huge batch of eggs now if I find the right guy that is. Randy laughs, Droopy smiles.

“Ah Snap. I thought you would never ask,” Randy tries. Droopy laughs. Good, she has learned this.

Cat comes up, “Pleased to meet you Snap. How long will you stay? We have a nice shallow sea next to us with lots of seaweeds, no animals I am afraid. You actually put up with these two for all that time?”

Plants are fine. I can pretty much eat anything. And not much tries to eat me. No chlorine spice will be a welcome change too. You are right though, young TKs can be such fun. She waves her claws up and down. Is this laughing?

“Snap will be staying but will spend most of her time in the ocean.”

I ask Silver, *Is this part of the Green Man project?* He looks at me with concern, but does not answer.

Puu asks, “What was causing the TK blackouts on Magenta?” She looks back and forth from Silver to Snap.

I offer, “There were no blackouts.” Silver smiles. I can’t tell with Snap.

Randy and Droopy are upset understandably.

“But we had no TK. I know what that feels like. It was real.”

Cat comes in, “And what else can cause a lack of TK?”

“A limiter.”

Puu adds, “Or an over powering say from a TK9 on two TK6s.”

“But why?”

I sigh, “Come on everyone. A test. How do you think you two were chosen to be here?” Does anyone else but Puu and I use logic?

“But the ship crash. That was real. All those other TKs that died.”

I am tired of answering the obvious. I give Silver sad eyes as I understand it.

Flor comes out with, “All of the test candidates were on board, then split into separate Magentas when they entered their escape pods.

Everyone experienced a crash. Only it was not the ship, just some fancy TK9 effects on the surface to make it look like a crash.”

“Shit. Do you people ever tell the truth? All of our friends are alive?”

“And they think you three are dead.”

“Are they still on Magenta?”

“Don’t be silly. The ship that did not crash picked up everyone after the test was over.”

“How come we passed? What did we do right?”

Cat teases them, “Who said you passed?”

“Cat, don’t tease,” Turtle rebukes.

Marie answers correctly, “Think about it. You were on a strange planet, that was lethal to a non-TK and half the time you had no TK, yet you not only survived, you found Snap, found a way around the TK limitations, built a new vessel to get around in. That is amazing.” She claps and the others pick up and clap too. I go along to be polite. We never clapped on Mars.

Silver finishes, “The others are back at Far Out. A TK9 cannot leave the Edge. And TK9 is the highest a fluidic can reach.”

Are you ‘thn then?

No. He smiles at me.

I am going to check out my new home. Snap DSs out.

Earth Two

Nease will stay with Squeak on New Hope. Snap has no interest. They are the only ones not currently in Hu form. The colonists are not likely to get into trouble that fast, but you never know. A throat can still be slit with a stone knife.

“Half of you have seen the inside of a nest, at least from a distance. This time we will come in above to get an overview of the world condition. Feel free to scan below and comment. Silver and I will do the driving, so sit back and enjoy. Please enter, choose a seat and buckle up.” I am not sure what this means, but I follow and watch the others. I am clumsy with the strap device, but soon figure it out. Alessa has some trouble too, but Flor sets her straight and easily figures it out herself. She is the closest we have to an engineer.

DS goes smoothly even with a ‘thn metal ship big enough to hold all of us. We all face out so as to have something called a window seat. What is a window? We are in the same relative position here as we were on New Hope, roughly above a location called north east Utah. No one seems surprised that there is nothing really to see visually. Just endless cloud cover.

“Air temperature is eighteen degrees centigrade below normal for summer in this location. Comfortable, but it will get much colder before this is over. The pH of the rain you see falling is approximately 2. Very acid. Sulfuric and nitric acids are in high concentrations. Anyone exposed will be scared in minutes of exposure, but the effects can take a few hours to express. If they do not wash off the exposure ASAP it will happen anyway.” I scan no one on the surface. No movement of any kind. There are remnants of cities that are starting to dissolve under the acid rain. Rusty cars are everywhere. The few skeletons in the open are starting to dissolve and melt into the soil. No living things I can find on the surface. There are nests. One large and many smaller ones. They will not survive without food and water. Strange, upon closer examination they seem surprisingly well equipped.

“How long until the surface can support life again?” Puu asks.

“Unless they figure out how to grow their own food underground, they will not make it, even if they eat each other.” Worse than Mars then.

We move west as I understand it. We are above the clouds and can only see below with scanning. The sun is coming up behind us.

The mountains are full of sticks that used to be trees. They don’t

dissolve as fast, but do lose all their leaves. Some of course have already fallen over. Rivers and streams still run, but there is lots of frozen water on the higher peaks. I scan north and it is worse there. They could have another ice age easily. Once the surface has ice for one year round, the reflection increases the effect and it is more likely to have a second summer with snow and ice. All the acid will lower the freezing point, but not by much.

We pass over several more nests, but nothing like the concentration over Utah. Some people are trying to ride it out in larger buildings, but maintenance will be difficult. Someone has to risk exposure to make repairs. Food is already low in these places. The nests seem okay for the moment. Without nuclear cores though, they too will have to go outside, but they seem to have at least a limited supply of haz mat suits that can withstand the exposure. Solar will not be enough, geo, hydro and wind still work. Burning carbon won't. They no longer have to worry about destroying the air, but these engines need a lot of oxygen and that means sucking in air with lots of acid. Cylinders, as Flor told me, do not like acid. These will likely fail within the year.

The coast has waves! I love the look of waves. These are huge! I wish we could go lower to watch them. Once over the ocean we do drop lower, below the clouds, but there is not much to see by waves. Not the same as those at the coast. I really do not understand water in such concentrations.

“The small nests are doomed. There is no way to survive. This is a very hard cruel way to die. The larger nests might, just might, if they are very careful and the extremely lucky make it. It will all depend on the longevity of power and filtration devices. None have been tested in this way before.

It will take thousands of years for life to spread over the surface and under the sea again. It will not go back to the way it was. Many species are gone forever. This happened at the other extinction events too. Even without the Yellowstone and the other events Hu were well on their way to doing this anyway. At least to themselves.

The Hu were not responsible for Yellowstone. But there is always some kind of ‘test’ for any culture. It is different each time. There is a randomness to all of this. I was lucky it happened so early on earth one.”

Alessa asks, “Does it always happen this way with the Hu?”

“Oh no. Sometimes the bullies are removed and the culture collapses into decadence. Basically they devolve to animals again and are no longer a threat to anyone. This is admittedly very rare of course. Most of the time it is a variation on what you see before you. The worst are the

nuclear variations. Those never turn out good for any of the life forms.”

“What will happen on New Hope?”

Silver smiles, “The odds are not good. We have given them a chance. It will be what they make of it. Remember as we have said so many times it sounds silly. It will all eventually pass no matter what. This cannot be prevented. Remember, this is a last chance. They are not native to their new earth, therefore a TK group will not be there to save them this time.”

Flor asks, “And the other species?”

“The same. Minor variations of course, but life is life.” Turtle looks bored.

“Is there any point to the rest of this tour?” Cat asks.

“This is the Hu culture. We will visit the others as well. Maybe we will learn something by comparison? Don’t count your chickens, no offense Flor, before they hatch.” Flor looks confused. I certainly am. What is a chicken? What is hatched?

“It certainly can’t be any worse.” Mike admits.

“Mike, you really should have read the journals more carefully. All of the earths have their problems.” Flor admits. I am certainly worried about Mars.

He sighs, “Yeah, everyone keeps reminding me. Maybe when we get back.” He sighs again.

“It was not that bad. I could recite them to you if you prefer.”

“You mean read them Ron.”

Silver, “No Mike, he means recite them. He has memorized all of them.” Why is that a concern?

“Shit.” Another expression I don’t understand. Seems to be an expression of hopelessness.

We continue. There are still the large mammals I think are called whales, but they look very thin. Thinner than a Martian. That water is cold too. Our air is cold, but it does not suck the heat out of you like water does. I remember my first bath in a stream.

China has some large nests. I was told that these are for the elite. They appear to be well organized. If anyone makes it, it might be them. The problem is that the elite rarely know how to actually do anything. That could doom them when the nest opens.

Russia also has nests, but these are not as well organized and I sense lots alcohol. It has no effect on TKs, but I am told it was a real problem on the rez and throughout history for many cultures.

Europe has a scattering of smaller nests. The countries in the southern region are not as well organized. I am sensing very few people alive, even

though they appear to have suffered less from the ash fall. The temperature drop is still real as well as the acid rain though. Crops and livestock are all dead. Wildlife for the most part too. I am sensing insects and burrowing animals might have a chance in the south. Good for them. Seeds are of course hardy and likely to make it in some numbers.

Once we get back to Utah, we pop out of earth two.

Ku Eden

“Is this Ku Eden one or two?”

“It is Flor’s Eden. It really does not matter what number it is.” Right. Silver and Turtle smile at us. What?

A Ku DSs into the ship.

“Polli!” Flor is very excited.

+Who are you? Where am I?+ She actually pecks at the wall of the ship. Hope she did not hurt her beak.

+Sorry. Polli, it is me Flor.+ When did she learn to speak Ku while in Hu form?

+Flor is dead. What are you?+ Her feathers are really ruffled.

“Which brings us to our problem. Okay Polli, help everyone get into the Ku form. No exceptions. Everyone changes. We are going to the surface this time.”

+My pleasure. Sorry for the cluck, but we needed to impress on you the problem of being in the wrong form. Flor, you first as you should remember your own form.+ Sam and Tia are visibly nervous. They are only TK5s at the moment, being a bit behind the rest of us.

She must have been practicing. She does not even make a new form to transfer to, but sort of melts into her Ku form.

Polli looks at Silver, +Hmm, I see she has had your bad influence.+

She turns to the rest of us, +Assuming the rest of you are not so crazy I would recommend the safe method of transfer over morphing. Can anyone explain why?+ Definitely a teacher.

Flor gets to preaning.

+Come on, don’t be a scared birdy.+

I finally sigh, “Because you are very vulnerable during the moph process as this requires full attention and part way though you would be easy to defeat. The transfer method is very quick for the actual transfer and you can stop at any time to defend yourself.”

“Or defend anyone else you are with and protecting.” Puu adds.

+Good. Next?+ She is ruthless, watching carefully our technique and criticizing every mistake in final form.

She gets to me. Hey, I have not even been in Hu form for more than a few weeks. I do my best. I have been studying the ones who went before me. Basic structure is not that different. I elect to do a transfer and worked on my Ku form for some time. I actually started while her attention was with the others.

She does not say anything to me, in spite of my turning to her to get feedback, until I do the transfer.

+How do you feel Ron?+

I try Ku, +Strange.+ I flex my legs and arms and stretch my neck.

+Neck rotation good.+

+Pay attention everyone. What was the first thing Ron did?+

Cat who has gone before me, +He determined the physical characteristics of this new form before trying anything else.+

+None of the rest of you did this. Flor has been Ku most of her life.

She did not need to do this exercise. She will when she becomes Ba.

Using her as your example can get you into trouble. Now, what's wrong with Ron's Ku.+

"Don't the males have more color in their feathers?" Tia asks.

Flor looks at Polli and Polli nods.

+We are not birds really. We have many of the same characteristics and we evolved from dinosaurs same as birds, but for instance, we have arms and clawed hands, not wings. So unless you knew our culture how would you know?+ Polli clucks approval and turns to look at the rest of us.

Sam comes into the conversation, "It would be best before starting your form to have scanned the local population to see the variation. Not too close. Last thing you want to do is to look exactly like someone already here. Would be nice to know how Ku tell each other apart. Some species use smell more than sight."

+Excellent. Ron, did you scan the locals first.+ I nod yes.

+What made you choose this form?+

+I am a nobody. That is where I am most comfortable. Nobodies are safe in that no one notices them. By choosing drab colored feathers, a bit worn and assuming a stooping posture I become invisible.+

+And what form would you have chosen if you were free to do whatever you wanted?+

+I thought of this first. I would have made my form taller and thinner. More like my Mars form. But, our mission here is to blend in and observe not to call attention and make changes.+

+Those of you who are already Ku, make your adjustments. We are going to assume the stature of a work crew. A ditch digging, lowest on the seed scale, dusty, dirty work crew. Both hens and roosters are on these gangs. All of the colored feathers indicating former status or pecking order would have been removed in a humiliating ceremony. Your prospects of leaving the crew alive is zero. Make your changes.+

Cat over does it and looks like she is going to drop dead any moment. There is Ku laughter, definitely not in character with our status.

+Always one feather fluffer. Cat, you will assume the end position. Straggle a bit behind. I will whip you and curse you to catch up.+

Silver, who changed by morphing, while the rest of us tried to pelt him with pebbles, unsuccessfully, comes up looking at Tia and Sam. One would think he was a showoff, but I know he was showing us that it was possible to morph AND maintain TK defense. Advanced practice.

+We won't risk Sam and Tia trying to do this themselves just yet. Once you are TK7 you will practice separate from the others. Okay with you?+ They both nod with relief. Silver DSs two Ku forms in and their Hu forms suddenly collapse. The Ku forms animate. All of the Hu forms left around us disappear, including my new Hu form.

Silver explains, +Do not become attached to any particular form. You should be as comfortable in one form as the next. We will not be returning to Hu form for some time. Try and remember each form as we process through them so you can assume that particular form more quickly when needed.+

Puu raises an arm, +Is it alright to have a favorite form?+

Silver clucks, +Would it be possible to prevent it? If you find you resent a particular form, pay attention. That is the form you need to concentrate on the most.+

+From weakness to strength.+ Polli clucks.

+Everyone fall into a single line behind me. At least three paces behind me. Cat at the end. Your names do no matter. You no longer have names. You are one feather from flight school. Remember that and act accordingly. We are going to work on a literal ditch outside of town. This will be close enough to observe without drawing notice.+

I take a position just in front of Cat. I should be the last one, but Cat is better able to defend herself no matter how I feel about myself.

Did anyone notice that the coral reefs on E2 are dissolving?

Concentrate people.

Ditch digging is not all that different from floor sweeping. Boring, monotonous and gives me plenty of time to think and scan around me. I think this was the point for us anyway. We aren't expected to work fast and we will be punished anyway. Polli goes up and down the line playing her part. We pretend to work harder when she is close and slow down again once she has passed.

They have some tech: trains, some electricity. No computers. We had very few also, only the hierarchy were allowed to use those. There are

crafts people like Cat, making pottery, weaving, though there is not much cloth worn. Mostly for decoration. Maybe when it gets cold. Of course there are coop buildings, schools, shops and so on.

The culture is stratified into mostly haves and have nots. Most are have nots. Flor was what the E2 people would have called middle class. At least until she was arrested. Apparently that is very common here and a way to control people. A lot like Mars in fact. I could fit in without much trouble here once I got better with the language and local customs.

I see places selling luck charms. I had to ask Flor about the written language. When life is random, people turn to luck. We certainly had them on Mars and could get in trouble openly wearing one. We had secret places to hide them.

We work for several hours. The sun is hot when you are covered in feathers. We can adjust our forms fluffing and using TK. I would hate to be in this spot for real.

Look alive, black vests. I know the journals and tense up. I can't help it. I sense everyone else does too.

There are three of them. One is obviously the leader and two subordinates. The leader pushes Cat down and the two others kick her. She is good and takes it. Getting up in a show of pain and going back to work. They give me the eye, but I do not break stride and continue to work hard. They pass me. A few others get shoved a bit, but nothing as bad as Cat. If they knew what she was they would have run instead.

Why am I always the one they pick on?

They finally make their way to Polli and give her a good look over.

+I know of no work crew assigned to this position. Show me your papers now!+ Nasty things.

She reaches into her tool belt as if to remove the necessary papers and instead removes a medallion and shows that to them. The leader hisses as if it is molten metal and backs away from her quickly. He waves his two subs away from us and they leave. Of course she has a Watcher medallion. I forgot entirely.

After they are out of sight Polli calls us over.

+What would have happened if Cat had reacted to them and struck the leader back?+ I know this one.

+He would have killed her on the spot.+ I say.

+Good luck with that.+ Cat clucks.

+Preciously. Our cover would have been blown. Good moves Cat.+ She nods to me too. I know the nobody role real well. If you look too good they feel the need to put you in your place. If you are too pathetic

then they feel the need to reinforce. I think the later is out of fear. Anyone can end up at the bottom if they are not careful or are unlucky.

Hmm, also if someone looks too bad, it does not look good for them. We are here to be punished not beat to death without cause. Too many desperately poor looking would scare a lot of people. They are still accountable even if they pretend they are not.

+Attention everyone.+ She looks at me. Guess I was distracted.

+We are going hunting. A little field trip of sorts.+ She clucks the Ku equivalent of a laugh.

We have to walk several kilometers. No DSing in view of the natives. Up hill of course. Carrying our shovels of course.

We weave around quite a bit. Except for the trains, there appear to be no straight roads here. The Hu saying 'as the crow flies' apparently does not apply to them either.

We go into a small metal shack. Just large enough to hold us all.

Quietly Polli says, +Put these tool belts on. We are no longer a work crew, but we still want to appear lower class, working class.+

We do so and I am surprised to scan and see medallions in each. Others scanned also and there is some murmurs. Polli hisses to quiet us.

Now quietly. We want to surround the building on the top of the hill. You can scan to see why. I will give you a moment.

Black Vest nest. Must be their headquarters. Almost everyone room has several. The ones at the top are clearly the leaders. Their vests have lots of symbols on them. They also wear hats of sorts, open at the top to let the feathers protrude. Silver and gold are prevalent.

Check out the basement. I am not sure who TP'd that. Normally it is easy. I tend to space out a bit as Sam would say.

I move my attention down. Whoa, the hill is nearly hollow. There are hundreds of Ku down there. Chained to the walls of cells. No perch, no straw, not even access to water much less food. This is way beyond what happens on Mars. Their feathers are nearly gone and the few remaining are matted against them. In spite of this being summer they are cold. As expected there are dead too. Ones they have not even bothered to remove yet. Flies buzz around them and lots of maggots. Of course on Mars it would be cockroaches. Not much different I guess.

I can feel the tension in the room.

There is a reason why they fear us. We are about to remind them of those reasons. You spent some extra time on earth so we could time this right. No spoken sounds from here on out. TP only. They saw my medallion, so they know there is at least one of us in the region. Word will

get back to them and they will attempt to hide some of the worst of this. We are going to act now before they can do this.

You will meet some Ku who look at first to be normal citizens. They are not. They are official witnesses. They will wear a white medallion made from calcium carbonate from a sea creature under their tool belts and will bring them out at the appropriate time. We need them to see this. Do not interfere and definitely do not remove any evidence. Our purpose is to remove the Black Vests before they can destroy evidence.

We have prepared a place to DS the Black Vests to. Remember the ditch we made. Place them there, oh and about maybe one to three meters up? It would be nice if they were facing down too. Complicated.

I sense they have weapons. Do we destroy these? Someone DSs.

No, they are part of the evidence. However, do not move the weapons when you DS them to the ditch. Leave the weapons where they fall. They will be collected.

We all cluck softly. Flight School. Excellent. It won't kill them, but it will scare the guano out of them at least. They are actually quite light weight. Though they do not fly, they have the hollow bones and more efficient brains of birds. Their chest cavity is mostly lung tissue.

Others will be there to receive them. We want them to see us so this has to work quickly. We will circle the compound, reveal the medallions. I will say when to move them. Ready? We all nod.

It only takes a few moments to make our way around. Others join us casually. The ones with the white medallions. We do not acknowledge them, nor do they acknowledge us. This is not their first time obviously.

I will signal the witnesses when it is safe for them to enter. Now!

We have to be careful and coordinate so we don't rip one apart with two of us trying to DS one at the same time. Almost all of them has some kind of weapon, at least a stick anyway. But we have worked together before and have practice. We are done very quickly. I think Cat was doing several at once even.

+Safe to enter!+ Polli shouts. The witnesses stream in. Emergency personnel are behind them to help with the sick and dying.

We all DS at once back to the ditch with our medallions outside our tool belts. There are hundreds present, slowly picking themselves up from the ditch. There may be some broken bones. I was careful and only dropped them from a close distance. I sensed some were quite high though. I did not realize the ditch was this big. It was partially there when we started, but this is huge. We arrange ourselves around the ditch.

When they get up confused they look up and see us. Several let loose

whatever was waiting inside them. Yeah, it will be bad.

Polli motions them to sit. In their own waste. We wait. Hours we wait.

It will be sunset soon. A very fancy, very overweight Ku arrives with a dozen retainers. Reminds me of the Mars hierarchy. He looks over the Black Vests. Nods to the retainers. The witnesses have gathered behind them.

One of the retainers comes forth, +Strip them.+ and walks away. Oh, I could think of much more fun things to do to them. They are marched single file away. Back towards their nest. Oh, this could be good. I thought too soon.

Once they are gone Polli gathers us around.

+Our culture is not that advanced. We still go for the eye for an eye, a life for a life. They will be placed in the dungeon they had created for others. Their assets will be seized to pay restitution to the victims. It won't be enough. Their jobs are gone. Their property is gone. Their families are gone.+ She clucks, +The cells with the dead are saved for their leaders.+

+How often do you have to do this?+

+Excellent question, ah, Tia. About once a generation. We are known for our excellent memories, but it still happens regularly. We like order and hierarchies. As you would say, a pecking order. It tends to breed this. We are the ones tasked with finding the evidence and correcting it. There are still Black Vests. We can't take them all out or there will be chaos. Like any group there are good and bad. Most have some of both.+

+Just like any group.+ She nods.

+What stops the TKs from becoming just like them?+

+Normally we are very limited in numbers. We are not high enough level to make more quickly. It was lucky when Silver and Turtle contacted us to offer all of you on a 'field trip'. We set this in motion and as you see it was successful. We are deeply appreciative. We would still have done a raid, but a lot of them would have escaped to start over again quickly. This will set them back for some time.+

+Why did it take so long. I would have thought you would have moved on them as soon as you noticed. Before it got to this size.+

+They are very good at covering their tracks. We have history. They learn too. Each time it seems to get harder. Though this will set them back quite a bit, they will try again. Part of their mystic is to instill fear. Fear goes a long way in keeping people in line.+

+Will you have a period of chaos now?+

+Not right away. Healing comes first. These people have relatives out

there, if they have not moved away themselves to avoid being next. Once people stop disappearing they will begin to relax and begin to test the limits. The chaos period will be brief. We do not do well as a spooked flock.+

Silver comes up. His feathers really are nearly silver in color.

+If we are done, we best get on to our next assignment.+

Cat complains, +We just got here. We have not tasted their food even. What do they do for fun? I want to see their art.+

+We are too large a group to go unnoticed. There will be opportunities later if you wish to come individually. We need to let them forget our forms now to let their culture settle.+ Hard to miss us. How often to Black Vests appears in thin air and fall into ditches?

Debriefing

We are back in our ship well above the city. They do not appear to have any flight or outer space capability. Hopefully we will be unnoticed.

I can still scan to the surface and can see the Black Vests slowly making their way back to the dungeon. Some definitely limping.

Speaking English in the Ku form is different and we all sound very strange. I decide not to try and just TP.

Did anyone notice any birds?

I look around and no one shows they did.

Lots of other creatures, including lizards, spiders, lots of insects. Smaller Ku like creatures seem to serve the same purpose as our dogs, cats, even food animals. There is variety, just nothing like earth two before the event.

Rats. Lots of rats or rat like things. Hiding of course. Would be fun to come back at night.

I did mention rats in my journal. Nasty things. Mammals give me the creeps. No offense. We all cluck of course, her being the only non mammal present. Well, when we are in our native forms.

“Listen up. Time to go over what went wrong.” Wrong? Her English is fine by the way.

“How did everyone feel about this encounter?” I look around and most are nodding approvals. They did deserve it. Nasty behavior.

Puu comments, +We were invited after all. We followed Polli’s direction. We did not improvise much.+ She looks straight at Cat of course. Must be something I missed.

“How do you feel inside? Did you get a thrill out of what you did?”

Ah-oh. This makes me suspicious. I do not answer. Others are being more cautious too.

Cat finally says it, +Power can be addictive. If we are looking forward to an action, it is probably not the best way to proceed. But, really as Puu said, we were following orders. Shit. Shit. Shit. That was all they were doing too.+

“Yep. They got a thrill out of it too. Maybe not a first. Takes time to wear down inhibitions. That voice in your head yelling to be suspicious.”

+Then why did we go? If it was the wrong thing to do, why were we there?+ Alessa is confused too.

“Because you are all TK at a high enough level to cause total mayhem. None of you had a breakdown, a crisis of TKness that makes

you question your soul. This has us worried. Normally this happens at TK2 or TK3. Most of you are TK7 and still no one. That scares us a lot.”

+You want us to go berserk?+ Sam asks.

Silver answers, “No Sam. We are just worried. We were monitoring all of you. This was a test, just like so many before. Not a pass fail kind of test. No one is being kicked out or limited. It was as much of a test for Turtle and I as it was for you.”

“What he means, is what does this mean for us as a group? Do we want to be crusaders taking out evil? Or do we want to be different. Find a different path.”

+Most of the evil was taken out by circumstances. We did not cause Yellowstone. We did not even make the Black Vests. Yet we are called to help clean up both of them.+ Tia offers.

Is there a difference between a non conscious volcano/tsunami/etc. and a group of sentients who have taken the wrong path, by our opinion? I offer.

Do we treat everything as non sentient?

Wait, aren't the magmotics sentient? Did they cause Yellowstone on purpose? To reduce the Hu infestation digging into their crust? Like swatting a mosquito?

Oh, good one. Does that mean we get even by attacking them?

“Good, you are thinking. Don't stop. We won't solve this today. We do need to pay attention, always, always.”

“Next stop Ba-Eden. Prepare to morph!” Each new form is lower in mass. What happens to our brains and our TK? Alessa is tiny and Flor weighs very little, but both still manage. Must not be dependent on size or weight.

Khéya (Death Watcher decided to use his Lakota name) and Marie are talking quietly. Mike is concerned. I come up.

Khéya looks at me, but Marie asks, +Did you feel it? The feeling like nothing I have felt before. I saw blood in my eyes.+ Mike nods.

Khéya adds, +I had never seen such brutality of one's own kind before. How could the Black Vests do this to their own people. Likely some were even relatives.+

+I checked on that, they purposely post their recruits well away so they will never feel sympathy for those they victimize.+

+That just makes it worse. But the feeling. I hope I never feel that way again. I wanted so much to slowly torture them, pulling each feather out slowly, then peeling the skin.+ Marie's eyes are glowing.

+Now I know why the ones who killed me and Sylvy felt the way

they did. I know the thrill they got from it. I will never be the same.+

+It could be worse. You could have felt nothing. If you had felt nothing, just another day at work, that would have been a lot worse.+ I did not feel the thrill. I only felt it was another task I was being assigned. Much worse.

Ba Eden

Getting into the Ba form was more of a challenge. For one thing, we are all female. I am not a 'man' by any cultural definition, only biology, but being female felt very strange. I like the arm flaps that allow you to glide. We TK up into the air and then practice gliding down. Breasts are annoying. I thought the penis was bad, but these are worse. They seem to be constantly in the way. Alessa laughs and assures us we will get used to them. I make mine smaller anyway. The ladies are really enjoying this.

Of course Silver comes out as an old Ba with nearly silver hair. Looks great. Eerie, but beautiful. It somehow seems wrong. Turtle looks like she has always been Ba. I suspect she has assumed this form before. Maybe when they were setting up Alessa for joining us.

Using TP to learn a language is interesting. Horrible headache afterwards, but it works. Alessa must have had a hard time learning English. It is so much lower pitched. Pinging is incredible. It is like I can see in the dark, well, of course I can, but this is different. The entire group closes their eyes and we chase each other in a game called tag, even though there is no tag involved.

^We will not go back to any place Alessa has been. I know, we went back to Flor's world to meet Polli, but there we had a specific task to perform. All of Alessa's teachers are gone now. Nease is on New Hope of course, but Dia Hattie has passed. Few would recognize Alessa now anyway. We will go to a similarly arranged community. The white robes you wear you of course recognize from her narrative. We are to be servants. No TK stuff this time. We will not be righting any wrongs.^

I guess this should make me comfortable. This was basically what I was on Mars. I am suspicious though. We seem to always find trouble of some kind.

As it turns out, there is a lot to learn. I am assigned as Alessa's teaching assistant, which just means I have to do the set up AND take the class at the same time. I am exhausted mentally and wish I could sleep, but of course we can't any longer.

We are not moved straight into a village, but into a fake one set up for learning purposes. Silver and Turtle act as the privileged ones. We are together at first to get used to the tech, or lack of it, that we will be required to use. Each of the procedures from where we are expected to pretend to be sleeping to preparing the master's bath and food, to cleaning up food and Ba waste. Their waste is similar to Ku waste. Bad.

I think Silver and Turtle are enjoying themselves too much. They purposely make and leave as much mess as possible. The single biggest thing we need to learn is to never complain, even in private. We are caught all the time. It is like the masters have eyes in the back of their heads, which of course is true in our master's case, but I know this feeling well from Mars and Alessa says it was the same before with her.

It took me forever to learn the English word for what we called Huǒxīng, translates to fire planet. It is red I guess, though not so much when I was there, but where did the word Mars come from? Some god of war? Is war red because of blood? Just seemed wrong. Now I am feeling it here. Ba words for things do not make sense to me. A table is called a flat rock. They are not even made of stone. Maybe they were in the past so that is what they say now no matter what. The worst was the height. I am SO glad I am TK and now no longer am as frightened. Earth gravity brings you to the ground VERY fast. How do we hide our TK when or if we are pushed over the edge? What if they cut our glide flaps like they did with Alessa?

We are of the white robes, so technically we should not be abused because of the fear all their servants will leave at once. We are trained better than any domestic servant would be. We would be missed. But, traditions die hard. We will not be accepted equally everywhere. We can expect to be under suspicion at the very least.

^Don't we need Ba names?^ Cat asks.

Alessa does the Ba equivalent of a smile and says, ^Nobody. If you are really good you will rise to be called servant.^ I almost feel at home. All except for this higher gravity. I have been at this gravity for over a year now, you would think I would be used to it. I try really hard not to use TK, but I get tired and fall back on it at times. Once a nobody, always a nobody. This body is at least light weight. Maybe half my Hu one.

We are fed very little of course and the food is awful according to some of the others. Tastes fine to me. Had worse definitely.

^Okay, listen up. We will be pairing up. Here are your assignments. Alessa and Ron being the first two.^ I can see this upsets Khéya. He was paired with her in the kitchens forever and before that with Sylvy. He ends up with Randy, almost the exact opposite in personality. I think they are doing this on purpose. We are the control group, being similar and having similar experiences. I suspect that we will be expected to do the best having all the advantages. Will be interesting. I also suspect we will end up with the hardest assignment. Some place the white robes cannot afford to have fail. Why did they allow us to do this? Do they even

know? So many questions.

The other pairs: Droopy and Tia, Sam and Marie, Mike and Puu, Cat and Silver. Turtle will be the outside safety in case anyone gets into trouble. I have to wonder how Squeak is doing. She has not been without a Hu near her before. Snap will be no help and Nease is clearly someone who is used to and prefers to be alone.

Silver sees my concern, ^Don't worry, you will be fine. No weapons this time.^

^Not what I am worried about. I am worried about Squeak.^

^Cat did not tell you then. Squeak is now a Hu for her own exercise at cross sentient experiences. She is free to go back into the villages and try it out.^ I smile. I can imagine how much trouble she will get into. It will make an interesting story. Silver laughs until I remember that a Hu smile in Ba form is very repulsive. Can't succeed. The laugh is not much better and soon we are both laughing at each other. I have noticed it does not take much with Silver. Does he ever get upset about anything? He is with Cat.

^Have care working with Cat. She gets into trouble easily.^

^All the more interesting.^ He smiles on purpose and we are both laughing again.

Alessa comes up to me, ^Ready?^ I nod and she DSs us to our job.

Not inside, but outside of where we will work. This gives us a chance to look over the housing complex.

^Make sure we have the correct coordinates. This looks too nice.^

She comments, ^Does to me too. But of course the poor could not afford to hire white robes. It checks out though. We walk up to the door and wait. They will have seen us from someway off.^

^I remember our training.^ We begin walking. It only takes a small length of time to reach the entrance. We wait. I know from training and my own experience that this can take time. Part of the power structure to ensure dominance. Funny, when you understand why they do what they do, it takes a lot of the sting out of it.

It is nightfall before one opens the door and exclaims, ^You are late!^ We say nothing. The young male hisses at our quiet and motions us to follow him. We of course we had scanned and know they have known all along we were here.

We are ushered into a dingy room where an older female is sitting.

She looks us over, ^You are here to work.^ Not a question.

Alessa answers, ^If you agree to the terms.^

^And if I don't?^

^We leave.^

^And if you are prevented?^

^Then this entire valley will be removed from the circuit for ten years. Same if we are molested in any way.^ Whoa, they have upped the punishment. Must have been trouble since Alessa was last here. When did she get briefed anyway?

^We have plenty of excess females.^

^Not with our abilities. The choice is yours. You can ask us to leave at any time if our service is no longer of any value to you.^

^I have to feed and bed you and pay you.^ She draws it out like it is a hardship to her.

^A pittance. We do not eat much and can bed down anywhere. The floor in an unused corner is fine.^ They clearly could afford to pay us a lot. This is all a game to them. Why are the powerful so stingy? What do they get out of it? Turtle says it is the fear of death. Maybe.

She waves us away to fend for ourselves. Alessa taught me me well and we immediately get to work. When they awaken the next morning the kitchen is spotless and the hot meal is set out for them. We disappear until they are done and have left. The table and floor are a mess. All of this testing. Even Mars was not this rude.

Within an eight day the entire house is made over. We came by a path to the servants entrance. The front of the house is open to the sky and lots of tall trees. The house is on the side of a cliff. Makes sense when you understand that at least in the past servants were often crippled and could not glide to the front entrance. We have a huge advantage in that we really do not need to sleep. We spend brief moments between tasks monitoring our charges. They are in some kind of trade business from the conversations. Not here though. From what I see they are idle rich and really do not do much of anything. Boring.

Our first dinner party goes well with no apparent mishaps, though we are sorely scolded anyway for perceived and imagined deficiencies. We remain stoic and do not react. This is done in front of the guests so as to prove their worth and superiority. How did their previous servants handle this? We sneak TK to avoid having things fall, even when we know they are the cause. We always seem to be right there to catch it. This seems to upset them even more. I have to wonder how the others are doing, but we were told to keep inter-team chatter to a minimum and only call out in an emergency.

After four eight days we are granted two days off. They act as if this will be an extreme hardship and inconvenience and are very upset. Alessa

has to remind them we can be dismissed at any time and if this is the time, that is fine. They owe us for our wages though and it seems as if that would be an even greater imposition. They do eventually pay us and we leave out the servants entrance.

Once out of sight we DS to the TK hiding place. We are the first, but the others soon follow. Some are from at least one time zone over and their morning is a little later than ours.

“We spent less than a day on Ku and here we are for over a month.”

“Oh, but this is forever so much more fun! NOT!” All laugh.

Everyone has had a different experience. We were in the highest part of any of the villages. And apparently the most demanding. I can see the wisdom of placing us there. After coming off the Black Vests I would not trust the others not to go berserk and torture them all.

Silver and Cat actually got to help set up a new communal craft center for the lower class hoping to get ahead. Leaf cutting is a favorite art form and Cat brought some samples to share. Impressive. We had large leaves on Mars in order to capture the lower light levels, but they were very waxy to keep the water in. These are light and almost transparent. The designs have the mark of Cat art not surprising. Hope she does not mess up their world too. At first they were assigned the grunt tasks you would expect, gathering and cleaning, but when they learned they could also teach the craft, they were quickly elevated to be local masters. Well, as much as the lower classes can afford a master. A totally different experience from us. We were never complimented on any aspect of our work. Funny how that was.

I still do not have any feelings about this other than as observations. I did what I was told and learned to do. Others seem to get a pleasure out of being creative. Our only creativity was in solving problems, never anything as useless as art. We had art of a religious kind on Mars, but only the masters worked on that. We cleaned up afterwards. If we were lucky we got to grind rock to make pigments. We also did a lot of bowing to the finished work as the masters looked on. It was not a reason for joy for us. Of course with Cat she is just as likely to never pay any attention once it is finished. Her joy is in the doing.

Khéya improvised his cooking skills to Ba cuisine and came up with some very interesting dishes. Almost tasty for a bug based diet. Alessa and he/her spend most of their two days off together so she could learn. I do not feel any jealousy as some might. I am nobody, why would I feel sorry someone wanted to spend time elsewhere? This is normal for me. I am enjoying the quite and lack of constantly being aware of someone

else's needs.

Silver comes up to me. I have to wonder what they thought about how she looks. Was this beautiful by Ba standards? Or did people hide their age like on Hu worlds? None of the rich people looked old. I did not think to question that aspect and did not scan them.

“What did you think Ron?” Why is everyone speaking English in Ba form?

^Not that different from Mars. The clothing and material items were different of course. The games and thinking were similar. The treatment of people below one's station was the same. Does every world lack compassion?^

She looks shocked, ^No. Compassion exists. It is easy to destroy and hard to get back once lost. You heard the others had better experiences?^

I nod. I then ask, ^Why do so many seek and work towards power then? Their existence looked boring even by my experiences.^ She laughs so hard I think she is going to be ill.

Finally she says, ^Ron, you are truly an enlightened being.^ She then bows to me. What did I do? I bow back out of instinct, but I don't understand. On Mars enlightenment was only for the powerful. Did they have it wrong? I have to think more carefully about the people I have known. Silver leaves me still smiling and shaking her head.

^Listen up. We can talk more later, but right now I need everyone to meet your replacements. Here on Ba that is. We could not leave a new community without their servants could we?^ She smiles. Does look different on a Ba. She whispers, ^No TK. They are norms. Okay?^

She goes up to Alessa, ^This is for you.^ She places a medallion over her head. Alessa drops to the ground crying. I go up to her to comfort her. Not something I normally do. The rest go silent and look towards us.

When I see Khéya looking at me and not her I shrug that I don't know what's going on either and back away myself to stand next to her. Hard not to think of her as a him even in female Ba body.

^Alessa is the new Mother of this chapter of the Sisters of Sanctuary. Think Dia Hattie. She will be staying after we leave. Congratulations Alessa!^ We all would normally clap, but that is not Ba. We whistle instead. I can sense the new ones coming toward us confused, all bunched together.

Flor comes up to the two of us, +Does this mean I can go home too?+

Khéya says, “I am wondering the same.” Does everyone want to go home? I serve where I am. Does not make any difference where I am. I back away as Khéya and Flor TP with each other. I go instead to the new

ones to greet them. I serve.

^Welcome to Sanctuary. May you find peace among us.^ I do the Ba equivalent of a low bow and they hastily bow back at me. I take them to the table where robes are waiting. I did not see this happen, but I have long ago gotten over surprises like this. I help them into their robes when the others finally come up to help. Once everyone is robed we back up to form a circle with a new one between each of us.

Turtle looks to Alessa to begin.

^Welcome. I am called Alessa. I need no title other than that. You can come to me at any time and place no matter what is happening and I will try and be there for you. Sanctuary will be hard work, but you will be working for yourself and for Sanctuary of your own free will, not at the command of anyone. All of you have been chosen. There are no more tests, though we may try different roles to find the best fit for each of you.

Will the two oldest of you please come forward and go with Sister Ron to learn your first roles.^ Well they don't know Ron is a male name and I certainly look fem now. I serve.

Earth One

Training of the new Sisters went well. They knew they were being given a second change and a much better life than any of them dreamed of. As to whether or not any of them will become TK, that is up to Alessa. I suspect that the Mothers of each chapter may be raised to TK3 or 4. A safe level that would limit destruction if one of them went crazy. Rogue. That's the word I wanted. I will miss Alessa. She understood what it meant to serve. I hope she does well in her new life and that we will see her again.

Sam and Tia feel the most left out. We were together for some time before they joined and we were already bonded. Well everyone but me. Took me forever to get out of that suit. Cat spends time with them of course, especially since Owa and Squeak are not around. I know what it feels like to be the one always left out though.

Ba don't normally hug each other, but we do anyway, after the Hu fashion. Many are crying. We leave after walking away to be out of site of any Ba present.

We arrive in a space empty of obvious sentients or structures. We are still in our Ba form. For all I know we are still somewhere on Ba Eden. I scan and find concentrations of Hu nearby. I scan in other directions and find scatterings of Cat in the opposite direction. Our kind of Cat and locals with smaller heads are intermixed. Strange. They are not normally very social though I understand the smaller ones like Ghost can congregate in colonies of sorts. We look to Turtle and Silver. They are no where to be found.

Khéya announces, "It would appear we are on earth one. Do we wait for Silver and Turtle or do we begin?"

Randy comments, "This is paradise. I can sense lots of different animals." Droopy clearly just wants to run.

Tia asks, "What form should we take? There appear to be Hu and Cat on the sentient level nearby. Cat could be fun. Sam and I will need help in either case." One more level and they will be able to do this themselves safely.

I stretch and see we can scan the entire world now. That means TK8. I don't remember being upgraded. It is usually obvious and wondrous, like opening your eyes for the first time. I hope Alessa is eight also.

"We are on what E2 would call North America near where the Lakota people live. My people. We should visit them to gain understanding I

think.”

“I elect Khéya as leader of this expedition as this is her local territory and customs. I am switching to Hu form to make understandings easier.” Cat transforms. Fun to watch when it is not happening to you. There is a certain amount of pain one has to put aside. We are all still fem. Should we then become Hu fem? Why not. I begin my own transformation, keeping the breasts small though. Puu smiles at what I become. Tall and thin this time, with black hair and more Hopi features than my first Hu form which still retained many Mars characters.

Puu surprisingly becomes Cat. From the journals I know the local Hu do not get along great with the Cat population. They have an understanding to sort of avoid each other. Puu sits licking herself like we have seen Owa and Sylvy do so many times. She fits the form well.

Khéya helps us with local clothing customs. We were all naked to begin with and are comfortable that way, but understand the locals might not be. It is neither hot nor cold to this form. Spring or Fall? Outside on Mars in winter means carbon dioxide can freeze. Summer is about the same temperature as the middle of winter here. Of course the Mars form and customs are adapted to that. No matter.

Tia remarks looking at Khéya, “We need to bring gifts of some sort. Food is always appreciated. Khéya, please help me make some things they would recognize. The rest can make containers to carry it with?” Everyone gets to work. Khéya and Tia TP for some time and then come up with some of Khéya’s famous recipes. We really do not want to give this up to anyone else and I catch others copying small portions to eat themselves. I am used to not eating and was actually enjoying that again on Ba Eden. I will wait.

We arrive at the village about an hour before sunset is my guess. Puu Cat is not with us. I sense her making her way slowly towards the Cats. *Good luck Puu and please be careful.*

I will. I have been around Owa my entire life. I speak Cat.

I have not developed that understanding yet. I know enough not to touch without permission and then limit myself to head scratches and maybe the neck. We all slept, or fake slept, together at times, but that seemed more like disguise than anything real.

As per local custom we wait outside the village and wait to be noticed and allowed in. We are all fem and all carry baskets with food. Hard to resist. The children are the most curious and run back and forth to the parents who are cautious, but eventually come around.

¹My name is Turtle.¹ Great another language to learn. I heard that the

Hu had thousands of languages. What kind of crazy is that? No wonder they fought so many wars and are suspicious of strangers.

And old woman comes up and upon seeing Khéya smiles and laughs,

^LMy, you have changed Turtle.^L A big improvement. Upon someone recognizing at least one of us they rest relax.

^LI too am happy to see you again too Old One.^L They embrace and hold each others hands to look at each other. She does not seem surprised to see Khéya is now a fem. I discretely scan her and she looks immediately at me.

Sorry. I meant no offense.

None taken, but it is better to ask permission. Hmm, nearly all of you are eights. Impressive. It would take at least an eight to recognize one.

People come up to us to take the baskets and such away, one each taking a hand to bring us into their village. The buildings are simpler than the Ba, but made well enough to keep out the cold in winter and heat in summer. All found materials. They will recycle well as Puu would have said. All of the Hu seem to take this as a prime importance to avoid E2 from happening again.

There are forty three present including children, besides ourselves. A small village at best. People look well though. I am sure she has taken care of any health problems that might have arisen. An Eden of sorts.

Droopy heads straight for the children. In spite of her huge size, they take to her instantly and treat her as a large bear crawling all over her with glee. There are a few bears about so I can make this comparison easily.

I start to pick up the language, mostly by using TP to search for the correct response. The Old One appears to be the only TK present. She is respected, but I sense no one here knows who or what she really is.

And it will remain that way Ron. Don't interfere please. I am a respected healer of bodies and minds is all they know. She looks right at me from several people to my left. I guess I need to hide my thoughts better, but on the other hand I have nothing to hide.

I observe, but will not act without permission. Cat is the one you need to be careful of. She can't help being impulsive and will freely admit it.

Thanks for the warning. We are not expecting any trouble tonight, so we should be okay as you earth two folk would say.

I am not earth two. I am earth one, but from Mars.

She looks at me again, but does not TP. Does she know Mars?

The evening goes well with most of us pretending not to understand and using hand gestures to try and figure it out. We have to purposely

make mistakes so as not to give ourselves away. *The food is excellent as always Khéya.* I nod to her. She went with larger breasts and wider hips, sort of a fem version of his normal form. Fits right in her, as her smaller size is not noticed as a fem.

When the others have all gone to sleep and we are the only ones left around the fire the Old One begins. In English.

“They will not understand anything I say in your tongue. No one on earth one speaks this way. Certainly not among the Lakota.” She smiles like it is a joke.

Cat has to ask, “We noticed quite a few Cat a few valleys over. When did that happen?”

She looks at Cat like she is stupid, “When you sent Owa, Sylvy and all the kits to us.”

Cat laughs, “Oh, we did not send them. Entirely their own doing. They did not like New Hope at all. No prey.”

She nods, “That would be bad for the kits to grow up in. Very bad. Chasing a laser pointer only goes so far in their training.” She smiles at all of us looking dumbfounded. I barely know what one is, how does she know.

“She is TK8 at least everyone. I suspect Silver was her mentor. He probably showed her E2 before the event.”

“As a warning not to go in that direction no doubt.” Sam adds and the Old One nods showing concern.

“I am sorry for your loss. Ours was before I was born, so I did not get to see it first hand. I heard yours was much worse.”

Flor finally speaks, “My guess is that it will be a 90+ percent extinction event. Everything went at the same time, volcanoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, fires, plagues, everything.”

“Where is Silver and Turtle, his second?”

“Ah, you know her too. We don’t know. Not on E1. They seem to get some kind of joy out of testing us all the time.” Khéya adds.

“Well that hasn’t changed anyway. Sorry you had to die Khéya, but it is sort of part of the rite is my guess. I went through it too.”

Maria, “Mike and I died in a car accident. Cat was killed by her aunt, Ron starved to death in the sands of Mars, Tia and Sam were the only ones who did not go though this, though anyone on E2 after the event would assume they had died without question.”

Flor adds, “I was killed by a Black Vest. Nasty things.”

“You were not Hu before?”

“I was Ku.”

“Nice people.”

“Thanks, except to each other unfortunately.”

“We left one on Ba Eden, Alessa, who was beaten to death by a privileged one.”

I come in, “How did Turtle and Silver die then?”

She thinks about it, “Not sure mind you. They are quiet about their own pasts. My guess is from the journals, Silver seems to get hit by a plague each time he transforms.”

“Puu, who is with the Cat at the moment, and I think Turtle died by violence. We are not sure how exactly, but she has been very sympathetic to what happened to some of us.”

Old One shows concern, “The Cat are not safe at the moment. We have been having troubles in fact.”

“Silver and Owa have been at each other’s throats since the beginning of everything.”

Tia, “That would explain why they are not here. They are trying not to set off a war.”

“Has that ever actually happened? We know they are both at least nines. They could destroy whole planets.”

“None of use know. They may not even remember themselves. Just that the potential was there. They are definitely above nine too. I think Silver could DS all the way to Mars in one jump if he wanted to.”

“Shit, and they worried about us going rogue.”

Puu pops in front of us in Hu form.

“We need to leave. We are not welcome here.”

“Old One told us.” She turns to his teacher, “Will you be alright?”

“We have an understanding. We can’t move any further west. I suspect that buffer will get bigger in their favor. We will move further east as soon as we have our harvest in and they know this. There are lots of bison and other game out there for the moment. Who knows once they raise their population.”

“Now!” Puu insists. We pop to E2. As far as we can see it is snow and ash and dark. Not a Cat in site.

“So, spill it Puu, what did you learn?”

“They forbid any of us to use the Cat form. It is extremely insulting to them.”

“And it is okay for them to assume the Hu form I assume,” Cat says.

“They would never stoop that low.” Everyone laughs.

“Ah, silly monkeys.”

Silver and Turtle pop in.

“Did you figure out why we did not go to earth one?”

Everyone nods.

Turtle asks, “How is Iggy doing?”

“She is nearly full size. Got in trouble for rubbing against me. I’m sorry, but they are treating Ghost as a court jester. Everyone teases him. He will not last long.”

“Their choice. Blaming him for their hate of me is not right, but we all make mistakes.” Even him?

“They are making the Hu move slowly to the east. They may need to move to South America soon.” Silver nods.

I ask, “We only sensed one TK8, the Old One, near by. Do they have others who can help?” I know I would have a hard time moving everyone by myself.

“She is the only TK8 on this continent, but she can call on others around the world. The population is low enough. Most of the tech is still in China and that is where the TKs are concentrated understandably.”

Silver turns to Khéya, “Still want to stay here?”

“I was an outcast when I was here. Likely to be the same only more so now. I do not have the social skills that the Old One has. My talents are elsewhere.”

“Yes, in the Kitchen!” We all shout. He laughs. Good to see.

“I would certainly volunteer to help if needed.”

We look to Silver and Turtle. Tia asks, “Where next?”

火星

This was not really a surprise to me when it was suggested. We have run out of old places to visit before returning to New Hope. Instead we return to New Hope to check on Nease and Squeak.

A very nice young lady greets us politely, “Welcome back dimension shifters. I pray your trip was successful and went well?”

“How do you know about us? I don’t recognize you young lady.”

She jumps up and down, “Squeak fooled the strong ones. Squeak fooled you. Ha-ha!”

Cat runs up to her and gives her a hug, “You did very well Squeak. Very well indeed. How did you learn to hide your TK.”

“The most honorable Nease taught me.” Of course a Ceph would know all about hiding in plain sight. Excellent teacher.

“I need to thank her.” Cat pops out and comes back a moment later with a plastic bucket. I scan it, curious, it is full of small fish. Why? Oh right, Ceph love fish.

“Nease will be pleased. Thank you Mama.” Another hug. When did a Rap learn about hugging? Oh, she has always been affectionate. But it was more rubbing than hugging. Guess the Hu form is more conducive.

Silver comes up, “Would you and Squeak like to take a trip? You have missed out on all the fun and that is not really fair. Khéya and Flor have volunteered to take your place for our last trip.”

~And that would be where?~

Silver looks at me. I sigh, “Huǒxīng, ah, Fire Planet, I mean Mars.”

~No liquid water there.~

“We have some, just not oceans or even lakes. Underground storage and glaciers we harvest mostly.” Never saw them, just what I learned growing up there.

~Good. I have been stuck in this form long enough and everyone else has gotten to try several. Make me a Martian!~ That makes everyone laugh. If their transition is anything like mine was becoming Hu, this will not be easy.

Squeak looks at me, “Will it hurt much?”

“Did it hurt to become Hu?” She nods no.

“Same for a Martian. We are roughly Hu based I think.”

Turtle fills in the gap, “A lot of changes were made to the Hu form to adapt to Mars, but Ron is essentially right. You will become really tall. That could be fun right?”

“I would be taller than everyone else?” She gets excited.

I laugh, “Everyone will be taller, so I am afraid, you will still be the smallest one.”

She is not happy about that, but quickly recovers shouting, “I am going to be a Martian!” How did a vicious killer of anything that moved become so nice? I blame Cat. Good job Cat.

“Ah, problem. We don’t have a model to work from. All the rest it was one of us and we could adapt from there.”

Silver looks toward me, “We need to get on board the ship first. Some of you remember how distressing it was for Ron when he arrived. It will be easier as TKs, but you will be changing at the same time.”

A ship forms, but much taller this time. Good thinking. Still, we will have to sit.

We DS aboard. I take a seat and begin the change. I did not realize that I would even miss this form having been Hu for so long now. A few months anyway. Wait, I was Ku and Ba too.

Having Luna heritage means I am taller than most. We are the lowest caste. True Martians are about twenty to thirty centimeters shorter. We speak a version of Chinese as I understand it. Silver nods.

“Oh not another language to be shoved into us. I hate that.”

I have finished and am now much taller than any of them, especially Puu and Cat.

I remember not to try to breath the thick air in this form and depend on my new abilities to maintain things.

“But Ron, you are still fem?”

Silver who has finished his transformation TPs, *Ronnie is in charge for this mission.* Really? That gets a chuckle. Now I recognize him from my last day on Mars. Turtle too.

Everyone should be fem please and as tall as I am. Which is tall for a fem.

“Oh, well can’t say it makes any difference now,” Sam says. Mike nods and shrugs.

Silver and Turtle help Sam and Tia again and then do a very nervous Squeak. Nease looks confused and goes last but then goes for it and manages quite well.

I love the jet black hair, even darker than Hopi head. Puu and Cat tease each other.

Marie gives herself a slightly green cast, *Look I am a Martian!*

Silver gives her a nasty look and she quickly changes to everyone’s amusement. We are actually a pretty dark yellow brown.

I thought we would be pale being so far from the sun.

Droopy answers, *Yes, far from the sun, but no ozone layer. Lots of UV.*

Nease loves that she can reach really far, but is obviously confused by the lack of arms. She does some quick Ceph swearing trying to use only two hands.

How to you tolerate this? It is horrible. So stiff too.

It was the way I grew up Nease. If you think you are having a hard time imagine how we will do on Ceph.

No Ceph. I was hatched on Ba Eden and know nothing about Ceph Eden. I would be as lost as all of you. I am sure my showing is horrible by Ceph standards.

Silver looks to me. I am confused. Oh, right, I am in charge. Never been in that position before. I am very nervous.

Let your heart guide you. You have seen how we work in a variety of situations. Don't hibernate it. She smiles, obviously teasing me.

I take a deep breath and then cough forgetting. I quickly lower the air to Mars standard. Everyone relaxes and starts to breath too.

Our time frame is much slower than any of the earths. Let yourself relax and slow down. Silver, if you would take us to Mars please.

Wait, what about clothes? We are comfortable naked, but I doubt the locals ever are this way.

All of our now ill fitting clothes are piled in the center. Use the left over mass from changing, Martians are much lighter. Everyone should adopt the Ba white robe of the Sisters. I have an idea. Oh, we will be a silent order so you won't have to speak Chinese, but not TK free. I smile evilly. Turtle rolls her eyes and shakes her head. Hey, you two put me in charge.

We materialize in orbit around Mars. I knew he could do it in one jump. At least TK10 or does it even have any meaning above nine?

I have never seen my world from above and am transfixed. I shake my head and scan below me. It takes less than an hour to complete an orbit. We pass under what the Hu call Phobos and Deimos.

We call these moons Tara and Mara, good and evil if you wish. I have a good map of where we are. I want to visit the Haolian who recommended me to Silver and Turtle first. Please stay here.

A TK8 can go anywhere on Mars they want in one jump, but I timed this to be more or less over the monastery I was last at. I had to put my mind at the level of a person in the hallways before I was sure. I DS down and walk towards the Haolian's office.

Though I pass several people I pay no attention to their curiosity.

They must assume I belong here or I would be acting subservient. What never seen a confident Loonie before? I smile in the Hu fashion and find the door. I knock. Being TK8 does not mean being impolite.

^MEnter.^M

I enter to find the Haolian at a desk facing away from me. I wait until she is done with what ever paperwork she is doing. Finally she turns to face me clearly in shock.

The runaway has returned better than when she left. Excellent. I trust your training went well.

Now it is me who is shocked. She must be at least a six or seven. If they have TKs here, then why are things the way they are?

You are confused?

I did not expect you to be TK.

And you think we hand over our best to strangers all the time?

I was the lowest of the low, hardly the best. I was nobody.

She shows amusement, *Little one, it is easy to be powerful with everyone obeying your every wish. Very few can be 'nobodies' and survive as long as you did. If you had made it to shelter you might still be.*

I make a chair and sit.

This confuses me even more. I am not sure what to do now.

What did you come to do?

Two worlds back we were on Ba Eden. There I watched a classmate take charge of a group of fem, ah, female Ba, that were abused and start a Sanctuary where they can serve without being abused. I thought we could do the same here. Not sure if it should be limited to fem or both genders.

We?

The remaining members of my class, Silver and Turtle are in orbit above us as well. You understand?

Of course. I have been above. And know that you see I am TK also, how does this change things?

Why am I needed at all? Certainly the needs are obvious and should already have happened, unless my ideas are wrong and won't work.

I am the only remaining TK present on the Fire Planet. I hardly have the resources to change an entire culture. Do you know the true history of our world?

I know there are layers of knowledge that I was not able to learn because of my position. I know that our form was created by the Hu to allow us to live here more easily and not by the gods as we were taught. I suspect that most of what I was taught was a lie at best, in order to better

control us.

Hu did not create us, TKs did, specifically the same Silver you already know played a large part. It was thought that after the event that it would be better to spread us out a bit. Luna was first and then Fire. As to the rest, the hierarchy, the 'religion', the costumes, etc. are all cultural baggage. We come from the Chinese culture originally. I am sure you understand that every culture thinks they are superior to every other. People in power try to stay in power. It is the Hu way.

I nod. It appears to be the sentient way. She nods.

What are these radical ideas you are afraid might not work?

For that I think we should rejoin the group. Okay if I take you up to them?

Of course, it would be nice to see Silver and Turtle again and what new group they have put together. It does get a bit boring down here after all. She smiles. I have never seen a Haolian smile before.

I make sure there is room for us in the middle of the ship and DS both of us up.

Mei Ling! How nice to see you again. Sorry our last visit was so short. We meant to get back to you, but herding this gang has been a full time job. Turtle and Mei Ling hug each other.

She has a real name? Wait, they hug? I have never seen anyone on Mars hug. I thought this was exclusively a Hu thing.

I think we are going to give Ron a heart attack. Everyone, this is Mei Ling. She is in charge of the Mars unit. Please make her welcome.

Puu makes tea and hand it out to everyone. Where is she getting the mass from. She sees me looking at her and points down. Oh yea. Lots of mass below us. We have gravity too, as the ship is held in place by TK and we are no longer orbiting. This space thing is going to take getting used to. I accept my tea and take a sip. Jasmine. We did not have this on Mars. I am going to miss it if I stay.

Silver comes up to me. Good job. Not easy with these gifts to admit we need the advice of others. But none of us is perfect. We all have preconceptions and biases that need to be questioned. Even Turtle and I consult all the time and from time to time with each of you. I certainly do not know each of the other earths as well as the TKs assigned to each.

Mei Ling comes up to me. Let's hear this idea of yours. The others are all looking at me. I have spent my whole life trying to avoid attention.

I have to think carefully about this. There is much I don't know. It would be premature to act without more information.

I was a nobody.

Everyone chirps in, *So was I*, including Mei which totally shocks me. *Go on Ron. We are listening.* Puu urges me. Squeak gives me a hug. She has really taken to that.

Thanks Squeak. I needed that. She jumps up and down excited. Puu calms her down. There is not enough space here for much activity.

There is too much I don't know to help much. From my own experience I believe it was not fair. I was put down because of my grandparents genetics and nothing to do with my own abilities or resolve. I was to be sacrificed to cut down on use of resources. That suggests there are problems with resource allocation at least, if not a Mars wide problem of crop health, too many people, or a host of other possibilities. Sorry that was not real clear.

I saw people higher up in the hierarchy eating enormous amounts of food while those of at the bottom ate very little. Allocation is definitely part of the problem. We saw this on Ba and Ku Edens, so not much of a surprise.

It happened a lot on Hu earths too. Mike adds.

What is the solution then? I like the Ba model that Alessa is using and am wondering if it could be adapted for here. The Fire culture is different and a plain white robe will not work. We need something much more ornate. I was hoping Cat could scan below and come up with something.

What are you thinking Ron? There are so many to chose from.

Plain white robes, but seamless. The looms cannot do this. That will get attention from anyone who looks closely. Needs more. I am thinking gold thread design. Gold is very rare, so any robe with a fancy gold design will definitely be noticed, but it won't be like anything else here, where red and black patterns are dominate. Cat nods understanding.

Personal appearance. The ah, fem here are, that is, they normally have small breasts and the males rarely have face hair. This gives us a genderless look. Hair gives this away. Ladies have longer hair and wear it differently. Therefore I am thinking no hair on face or head. Hair disappears from everyone including Mei. Randy hesitates about his beard, but it goes too. I give him a thumbs up.

Puu says, *We need an animal totem. Something mythical for Mars.* She looks straight at Turtle.

Cat says, *That could work. Hard shell, protective, they don't put up with predator shit.* Suddenly we have a very ornate turtle design all over our robes.

Mei comes in, *In the center put the character for turtle. A most beautiful one. Here is what it looks like:* 龜

The design on our robes change with a circle and the 龜 character appearing on the center of our chests. Droopy takes it one step further and adds the character to the center of his forehead. Everyone laughs, but they soon all have it too, including me.

Mei shakes her head, *I have not had this much fun in a very long time. Please keep going.*

We are heavy into ritual. We will need to work to come up with rites of passage, chants, artifacts, etc.

Cat takes this on, *Puu, Squeak and I will work on the artifacts. There were turtles on Di Eden too. Maybe different kinds of turtle for different roles people will play.* They go to one side and work on this. I see all kinds of turtle goblets, books, scrolls appear and disappear or change as they start their work.

One thing. I learned from the Sister of Sanctuary that everyone was equal. No one got a greater share or special treatment. Those who were good at leading did so for the benefit of the community, not themselves.

Mei looks suspicious, *Fire is VERY hierarchical. This will be hard to change.*

Are you saying not to try?

No, I am saying if you succeed, it will likely revert back in a generation or two.

That just means it is a long term commitment.

Randy asks, *What about resources. I know almost nothing about Mars, is the air always this low in oxygen and high in carbon dioxide. We are all running much slower than Hu do. Is this time reference normal?*

Mei answers this, *Yes, this is normal. We needed the higher carbon dioxide to give us an increase in global warming. We are further from the sun. Plants of course use the same carbon dioxide and we eat the plants. It is a fine balance. TKs used to maintain devices to help, by making or removing gases as needed. But we decided, nodding to Silver, to try and let the people maintain their own world. We have no idea how long we will be here or even if it is right for TKs to be treating everyone as children.*

We believe the same for our 'fifth world' we call New Hope.

But should 'fine tuning' include sacrificing the living? That seems extreme. We all nod.

I have a question, Tia asks, What do you do about criminals?

Mei again, *Actually they are related. Minor offenses as Ron will tell you involve deprivations or beatings. Extreme cases are sacrificed. We don't have the resources to maintain what you would call prisons.*

Marie ask, *How many people does Mars have? I am not sensing that many below us.*

I have no idea and turn to Mei.

This is a secret very few know, so be careful how you share this knowledge. There are approximately three hundred thousand total.

Wait, in hundreds of years you have only three hundred thousand. Is this a peak number or has something happened?

Mei sighs, not easy in this form, *We were close to one million at our peak, but once the TKs stopped helping and went undercover the population dropped and is still dropping.*

She turns to me, *You are correct, the ones in the higher ranks do not work and contribute nothing to the welfare of all. Between the hoarding and the deprivations our reproduction has dropped. With only the parasites being allowed to mate, there is much inbreeding, which causes genetic unfitness too.*

Shit what a mess. I do not envy your task Ron. I had no idea it was this bad. I can recite sutras from memory, but I never knew this.

We recruit only from the nobody classes. We heal the sick and bring them to us. Eventually I want to get to a state where if you do not work, you do not eat.

Be careful of your anger. This can be an undoing. They are only doing what they were taught. Allow those willing to embrace change to do so. Not all in the upper ranks like the situation. Or upon seeing the truth would still want to live that way.

I nod to him. This is not easy. *But they need to prove themselves and not just try to deceive change to get a meal.* He nods back.

Tia offers, *Simple. Lock them in an area with the same amount of food they would give to the same number of nobodies. Those that still hoard and not share you put into a smaller area and so on.*

Fire sorting! Squeak offers. I like it.

Eventually you end with one person in a small room with the diet of a single nobody. Given the size of some of them and the slower time frame, they could last a year before becoming nobody sized.

Longer. We go into a sort of hibernation when deprived for too long or too cold. We can last for nearly a year in that state.

That was how we found you in the sand Ron. There is still a copy of your body there in fact. That is a strange feeling.

Found it! Cat states. *Cool. All dried out. Sort of like a mummy after this long.*

Come on people. Let's not get distracted. Cat, leave it alone. Last

thing we need is a religious relic. Turtle has spoken.

Droopy says, *I don't think you were the lowest Ron. There appears to be one group lower.*

The farmers, I state. She nods.

What if we start there, Marie suggests. Others nod.

We could make a mission in the middle of the farms. Offering aid at first and then allowing converts who spread out to other farms and start more missions as we grow.

Yeah, this would help raise more crops allowing more equitable food allocations too. Feeding the farmers themselves at first and spreading to the nobody at the monasteries.

Sounds like we have a plan. How do you feel about it Ron? Mei asks.

Let's do it. We can fine tune as we see how it goes. Silver nods his support.

Mei proclaims, *I like the way this group works. No leaders, consensus, freedom to offer ideas, even if not workable at first.*

I turn to Puu, *I need to stay and someone needs to keep the journal going.* I offer her my pack of writings.

She bows to me and accept the pack. *Please keep your journal going as you start your Fire Planet life. Do you need to copy anything?*

Mei laughs, *Ron has memorized everything in that pack I am sure and will be able to rewrite everything there.* I smile and shrug. It is true.

New Hope

“How come we are not going to Magenta?” Cat asks. I roll my eyes.

“Come on Cat. Magenta was a TK prison or a classroom depending on your point of view. What would be the point? No one there now in fact. No culture to reform or observe even. Hmm, maybe in a few million years.”

“Oh yeah. Okay, we have done Ba, Ku, Mars, Earth One. It looks like nothing has changed here. My stuff is still in the same place even. A lot of dust. Has it been that long?”

“We have been gone nearly a year, counting the slow time on Mars.”

“That was a weird one.”

Squeak comes up, “What about Rap world?”

“The Di have forbidden us to return Squeak. I am sorry. It would be dangerous and likely to start a TK war if we intrude.”

“That would be bad. Squeak not want to start war.” Her sentence structure reverts to Rap. Must have upset her good.

I turn to Nease, “You were really quiet the entire time.”

~It was a very strange experience for me. First time outside the Ceph form. Your minds are so limiting and movement is nearly impossible.~
Everyone laughs at that.

“But you can’t run in your present form. Running is life!” Droopy of course. She bows and starts off running towards the shore. There is already a well worn path there. Correction, a now overgrown path she will have to make again.

“We have all gotten a bit out of shape and could use a run. First though we should check in with Flor and Khéya to be sure we still have a New Hope to take care of.”

“How much trouble could they get into in a year?” Cue ominous music.

“Where are they?”

“What do you mean Cat?”

“The village is empty.” I scan and sure enough the Flower clan pueblo is empty. So is the rest of the village. In fact a lot of damage has been done.

“What happened?”

Flor and Khéya pop in. “Welcome back. Ah, Ron is missing. He stayed then?”

“Where are they?”

“You noticed. They are fine. Just not living there any longer.”

“What happened?”

“Scan the progressives.”

Mike exclaims, “Whoa, they are armed to the gills!”

Sure enough they have copper blades, sharpened sticks, clubs, and no traditionalists. Whew! They are no captives at least. Dead? I scan the ground. Nothing more than the expected. No mass graves. No scattered bones. Could they have been ground to dust? I know the progressives are mad enough to do that.

“Puu is going to have a stroke. Just tell us.” Thanks Mike.

Flor begins, “Lucy died. Or rather was killed.” That’s it? How? Why? When?

“Stop teasing Puu!” Turtle looks like she is going to laugh to death.

“What, this is the traditional way on Ku. No fun unless the story is said this way.”

“I only spent a few eights on Ku. I did not absorb that much of the culture.”

“You have been living with Flor for years Puu. No excuses.”

“Just tell me please?” I give my best wet Cat expression and that sets people to giggling.

Finally Khéya has sympathy on me and begins, “It started before time when coyote was not yet a dream.” Everyone is howling now. He looks up like what’s the problem and people are rolling on the ground. Even I am giggling now. Mars was a bit depressing especially after Ba and Ku Edens.

“Fine, straight up. Internal fighting in the Lucinites resulted in a fight where Lucy was accidentally martyred. The one who did it was executed on the spot and they made a memorial with her bones interred. You can scan that in the middle of their growing empire.

A hierarchical system has been built with the fear of falling to the slave level being the incentive. Tech is advancing at a rapid rate in fear that the people who know such things will soon be gone. Good thinking actually. It is easier to make something you know can work than to come up with it from scratch.”

Flor jumps in, “But tech begets tech. Need certain levels on a diverse scale before you can advance.”

“Not my area. Anyway, they have been expanding and eventually reached the traditionalist areas only to find them already abandoned with no clue where they went. We already know Ruth was prepared, so not a surprise. They smashed anything left behind, but there is only so much

you can do with a small troupe of warriors against a half meter thick pueblo. Any traditionalist who are stupid enough not to get away fast enough are made slaves of course. Only a few. They are really spies willing to die for the oyáte (people) to keep an eye on the Lucinites. They are broken out occasionally if they survive to do a report and then quickly recaptured. Not pretty. They lose a foot or hand for trying to escape.”

~Stupid Monkeys as the Cat would show.~

“This comes from a culture that eats their young?”

“Let’s not start anything. We are all short of the ideal.” Turtle hates it when we fight, even in a teasing manner.

“They can only have babies so fast right?”

“It will be years yet before they take over the whole area. In the meantime the 5th Worlders, as they call themselves, are moving ever further away, not waiting for the expansion to happen. They are learning a lot about the changing flora along the way too. The useful ones they take with them and transplant if they can. It would take a Lucinite months to get to them now if they had any idea where they were. The 5ths took a very circuitous route of course and hid their tracks well.”

“That knowledge is consistent with their intent too, of not leaving tracks. The tech oriented tend to lose this knowledge quickly, being dependent on well, tech, instead of nature.”

“We know that Puu,” several say at once. TK one stuff. Yeah. Sorry.

“We are all tired. Fill Flor and Khéya in on our travels. Then we need to clean up. We are leaving again for some time. No traces for the Lucinites to find. I mean nothing.”

Flor exclaims, “Oh I forgot. They, the Lucinites, have declared that we have all died and are no longer a threat to them. Evidence would suggest that. We did not interfere in any way. Just watched.”

“Good,” Silver says.

“Explains why they think they can torture each other with impunity now.” Tia says in almost a whisper.

I am happy as long as they leave the 5ths alone.

Nease comes up to Silver, Turtle and I. She knows I am the recorder is my guess.

~I miss Alessa and the other Ba. It was the one place I felt really useful. I have taught everyone here what I know or could determine about New Hope. I would like to go to Ba and help there.~

“You are of course free to do so. You were the last living Ceph, will you go back as Ceph?”

~Yeah, that is what has postponed this decision. I need to go back as a

Ba in spite of the fact I really do not like any of the vertebrate forms. All of you have taught me to be adaptable though. I will persevere.~

“We are going on a journey Nease. We will be gone for some time. Sort of. We will be here, close by in fact, but a norm would not find us. If you or Alessa come back for a visit, you will find statues of us.”

I say excitedly, “Slow time!” Turtle nods.

Nease signs good bye and changes to the Ba form. She did not go with us, so this is purely from memory. Amazing. Looks just like Alessa though. At first. The form adjusts, bigger, stronger. Then pops out.

“Good luck Nease.” I whisper. I am sure Alessa will be glad to see you.

Everyone looks at each other wondering who will be next. Sam, Tia, Marie, Mike, Puu, Cat, Flor, Khéya, Randy and Droopy and of course Silver and Turtle. Ten plus two. Flor and Droopy are the only non-Hu left. Wait, I forgot Squeak. She still counts as a kid to me I guess. Khéya and Silver the only ones from Earth One. Wait, I guess Randy counts as Earth One, though not born there apparently. Turtle the oldest of the Earth Two cohort.

I go up to Silver, “How long?”

“For what Puu?” I stare at him. He knows.

He sighs, “It is hard to be precise in slow time. We will be having a conversation. Rude to break a sentence in two.”

“OM.” He says nothing and goes back to the others. Then to Flor. Only right she knows this is her last chance to leave. I need to hear this I think and go over to them. They look at me. Maybe not.

“It’s okay Puu. I am staying. I am nobody on Ku and I am sick of the Black Vests. I never want to see them again. I am afraid of what I would do.”

“I can certainly understand that. Our history has them too. Glad they are not in front of me now. Hell, I don’t even want to see the Lucinites at this moment. There is never an excuse for slavery.”

“More. This is my family now. Better than any family I have known of even before my arrest. I am totally committed. You aren’t getting rid of me, ever.” She smiles in her Hu form. Took her a while to deal with lips, having grown up with a beak. I smile back and give her a hug. Tears in my eyes. From orphan to Ku lover. Who would have known? Well, not that kind of lover. Hell, you know what I mean. I am still a virgin with the exception of being raped in Cat’s dreams so many times. At least that stopped.

Where are Smith and Jones? They did not go on the adventures with

us and I can't find them now?

They are fine Puu. They have their own journey to attend to. Turtle informs me.

Slow Time

“Did you hear? Snap had babies! Millions of them.”

“And no predators to keep them in check. They will clear the seas of anything edible in one generation. Why did she do it?”

“Silver said it was an experiment they have been working on.”

“Hell of an experiment. Doesn’t most of the oxygen come from the sea plants. The, ah, floating kind.”

“Phytoplankton Mike.”

“Right Sam. I knew that.” He smiles. I roll my eyes. Men.

Khéya carries all that he owns all the time. Travel light, travel far. Cat always fusses over all the art she has created and then asks me to dissolve it while she looks away. Squeak, in Hu form, still just has her clothes and a wooden bowl with spoon. Not sure we are going to need those, but she is proud she knows how to use them. In Rap form she was a way messy eater.

I have all my notes from Ron and now myself on how all of this is playing out. I smile. What is it going to look like to an outsider watching me write in slow time. Do they have to wait a century per page? Shit, can’t use ink. Or does that slow down too? I can use TK to write on stone. Not sure paper would even survive that long. Think fast. I could put everything I have so far into a ‘thn bubble and bury it. Would that work?

“What’s wrong Puu. You look very worried. Slow time is fun. Don’t sweat it.”

“I’m worried about my notes. Won’t they disintegrate in the time we are under?”

“You will be holding them right?” I nod.

“Your clothes do not disappear. Your body does not disappear. Your notes will be fine as long as you are holding them.”

“Ink?”

“Works fine. Don’t worry, be ...”

“Hopi.” She nods and moves to the others to check on them. What will happen to the people here? How many generations will have passed? Average gen time of twenty years give or take, a thousand years would be fifty generations. Roughly from the year 1000 until now. Okay, we did not change substantially physically. Maybe better fed. Cultural changes were large for some groups of course.

We gather in a circle near the shore so Snap can participate too. Her

babies have all swum away. I can sense one once in a while. Tiny. A lot will die, not from predators, but just by chance. Washed up on shore to dry out, churned by waves, caught in a crack, failure to connect with food even. But if even two make it big enough to survive, then in a few years, they have two and so forth. What will be here when we come out? Will the shore be covered in crabs.

“Puu, pay attention. Stop spacing out.” Coming from Randy that is funny and he knows it.

We form a circle. Squeak is between Cat and me of course. She likes everyone here, but still trusts Cat the most. I think she may be openly afraid of Silver, though he has never done anything I know of. Maybe just because he is obviously the alpha. Wait, Silver was an owl. Another non-Hu. That counts doesn't it?

“Puu, earth to Puu, come in Puu.”

Silver smiles, “We need to concentrate. The first time is the hardest. Don't freak if others get there before you. We are not going anywhere.” a laugh. “We will be linked, so there is no worst case. Everyone will come in. Those in won't even know you are the last. It will happen really fast to them. Okay, breathe slowly.”

I am not the first or the last. I did not keep track, nor will I embarrass anyone if I did know.

The first thing you notice is how fast the sun moves. Slowly at first, then faster and faster. Shadows around you move, grass wiggles, trees shake. Then it goes so fast you don't even notice the days any longer. Grass is fuzzy as are leaves and small branches. I hear them talking! They talk to each other, well sort of a plant TP equivalent. Where is the water, the best minerals, does anyone have any extra sap they can share. Oh this is great.

Welcome and thank you for joining us. OM!

I am excited about your contribution to our collective. You are the missing link we have been waiting for, for countless millennium. We can now combine plants, animals and our close friends, the fungi. We are now plangi! A jump in understanding over the plantimal version others have achieved. Thank you once again for your help.

Then we are out. What? That only lasted a moment. No more than a minute even. I look around me. Others are coming out too. There are fungal threads all over where I contact the ground. As a norm this would have freaked me out, not now. We all look to Silver.

“Give me a moment. I made some time pieces I need to check. Ah, the question on all your minds is one thousand twenty three years, seven

months, five days and twenty three hours. We are near sunrise on a new day and new millennium. Welcome to the earth one year of approximately 3050, give or take.”

Wow! I scan immediately. Our former homes were gone before we left, so no change there. I scan the sea, does not appear to be any crabs present, so they did not destroy the world. The air tests fine. So what has changed?

“They are gone! All the 5ths are gone!”

Silver laughs, “Not exactly.” He laughs again. I hate it when he does this to us.

“The Lucinites are too. They left a big mess, a lot of destruction, but I can’t sense a single Hu on New Hope, well, except us of course, if we can even be called Hu. I mean.” Everyone rolls their eyes at me. I can’t help it. Cat gets up and stretches.

“That was the best nap I have ever had.” Laughs.

“Everyone go for a run. It helps clear the mind from the after effects. Meet back here. This is not over.” Now what?

We take off laughing and tagging each other to sprint ahead. Droopy is way ahead of us even in Hu form. I can’t help but look at the grass and trees differently. I have heard them speak. They can never be the same.

I think we ran until nearly noon when we were called back by a bell of all things. Well, more of a TP bell, as we were some ways away. We DS back to the circle where we are motioned to take our places again. We are going back in?

We are motioned to be quiet and face the center.

Slowly a figure appears in the circle. I am guessing a combination of DS and PS. We only recently started practicing phase shifting. They are good. Very Good. Green Man!

Welcome. I would like to introduce you to the work you helped with.

He throws several brown nuts? into the air. They open wings and fly away!

These are one of many. Thanks to one of you who accidentally brought a bag of seeds and nuts here. We reverse engineered them and combined the information. He throws some more into the air. They fall to the ground and run away in all directions. One runs by me. Looks sort of like a sunflower seed?

He points to the sea. Crabs crawl up to join our circle. They are green! As in chlorophyll green. There are purples and reds too. Photosynthetic crabs.

These carry seeds and spores in land or sea to where ever we need

them.

A few flying walnuts come back and a dummy appears. They circle around and then dive bomb it and stick with a barb on their noses. A toxin is injected! Shit. They have defenses now. *One of many. There are fliers as you have seen, crawlers, swimmers, big ones and very small ones, spore sized.*

Shit, we have taught them violence.

They needed this to grow Puu. This is good, not bad. Remember what I said about species or even worlds that lack challenges?

Green Man continues. With a wave of his hand beckoning something out of my sight I refuse to TK and want to fully experience. Oh my. No wonder we did not see them.

A varied group of what appear to be people come forward cautiously. When they see us they bow to the ground. Why?

We are their gods everyone. Not really, but they know we are somehow responsible and they honor us.

There are what look like fairies, nymphs, brownies, sprites and a whole lot of things I have never imagined, even growing up with the Hopi tales. All colors of plants, trees and stone. They could be in plain sight, and if I did not know, I would never see them. All sizes too. Some fly, some sneak, some run really, really fast. Others appear to be able to climb anything. Others glide. The seeds know them and run or fly to them.

The seeds are sentient?

Not quite. They are under one of the beings care. Each has a species of plant or tree they are responsible for. They are the mobile units. The seeds from the one they serve. A huge advancement.

Where did they come from?

These are the 5ths everyone. We accelerated evolution thousands of thousands of time. Directed it really.

Is this how you did Mars?

Similar, but we had no life on Mars to work with. No OM either. This is many times more advanced.

Instead of TK tech, this is TK bio.

I like that. It fits.

“What happened to the Lucinites?” The sound scares the beings and they all disappear suddenly.

“Sorry,” Mike says softly.

They have not heard voices in a long time and have a racial history of associating such with the others. Best to use TP from now on. I have

reassured them you are not of the others.

As to the others, as they are known here. There was a war, not of our starting. The others tried to destroy us with chemical and mechanical means. Not up to earth two level tech, but effective. Many died. You scanned some of the destruction. Most has filled in again. All of them were recycled to prevent a recurrence. That was hundreds of years ago, before we reached our present form. Even if another TK civilization were to try, none will establish a presence here.

Hi everyone! I turn to the TP presence and see Alessa, what I assume is Nease in Ba form wearing their white robes and Ron the Martian coming towards us. He is not wearing a suit this time anyway, but the very ornate white robe with the turtle symbol in gold on the front.

Have you seen the creatures here? Amazing. Where did they come from? They are so cute.

Ron asks, *Is this what you meant about something wonderful?* Silver nods smiling.

Now that everyone is here we can begin our next journey.

Wait, I want to know what happened on Mars and Ba.

There will be time for that Cat. Be patient. You have already waited over a thousand years, you can wait a few more hours. That gets soft quiet giggles with some looking around to be sure we did not scare them again.

Someone Special

Be patient. It is hard to time these things. No, we are not going back into slow time right away.

A softly glowing transparent sphere about ten centimeters in diameter appears above us in the center of our circle.

I am Br'thn. She used 'I' so she is sentient and using a soft TP. All grown up then. I suspect Silver had something to do with that. Finally though. I was wondering if she was even real in our incarnation. She goes to Silver and rubs against him and then to Turtle to do the same before returning to the center.

I am here to announce the completion of your training. She goes up to Squeak. *A little longer for you dear. Be patient.*

I am Squeak. We laugh inside. Squeak is shaking, clearly afraid and snuggles against Cat.

She won't hurt you Squeak, Cat says.

Squeak not food? Cat shakes her head no.

Br'thn returns to the center.

You must have questions. Alessa you are most in need. Please ask your question. I have to remember a nine has pre-cog ability. Probably the reason we never got away with anything with Silver or Turtle.

Will you tell me what my name means?

Br'thn goes up to Alessa touches her forehead.

Ah, thanks for not telling me until now. I understand now. Br'thn moves to the center again. Well, what does it mean?

Alessa please? Someone TPs. We all want to know.

Promised One. Ah, of course. Everyone shakes their head in understanding and agreement. It is a good name. Also explains why she could not be told until now. Would have jinxed it.

If you are here, where is Sauron?

Silver answers that one, *As you know, when a wave passes any TKs present end up on one or the other, but are not duplicated along with the non-TK. Sauron ended up on earth one. It is a story for another time, but he was defeated as happens roughly half the time and lived out a life as a norm. After his death, he was cremated and the ashes scattered to many earths so he could not reassemble.* Talk about overkill.

Then all that happened on earth two since the wave was entirely our own doing?

There is a lot of momentum to culture as you saw on a small scale

with the Lucinites. Even given the freedom to begin again, we often choose the same path anyway. That is discouraging.

What does completion of our training mean exactly?

You are free to go wherever you want, with whomever will freely go with you. You can help, motivate, watch, whatever. We look forward to seeing what you accomplish. That is intensely scary. I can just see the wheels in Cat spinning. I might have to tag along with her to keep her and Squeak out of trouble.

Along with that goes the warning, we will not always be there to save you from yourselves either. Cat dampens down some. Whew!

Remember the side effects Cat. Everyone laughs. She gives a sheepish smile and shrugs.

Br'thn lowers herself to close to the ground and the wee ones comes between us offering her flowers, seeds and special pieces of wood and stone they have carved things on. They then sing! It is very, very soft. Almost like the rustling of leaves on a slight breeze, but there is a tune to it. Ah, an ear worm for sure! I will never get this out of my head now!

I ask, *Do I continue to document what happens?*

Do you want to? I nod yes.

Well, as many of you will go in different directions, you are all responsible for documenting your own travels now. I know some of you have already started this. All of you should be doing so. Silver pulls a metal disk out of his robe with an owl on it. *This is how I keep mine, yes, all of you are in it. I use writing at the subatomic level to save space. There is enough space here for millions of years yet.* He smiles.

Others DS in. Hattie, Polli, Snap dripping from the sea, many I do not recognize but can guess at, Black Dragon Flower, Doc, and Rooi. Nease will like that.

Now for the graduation party. If you will do the honors Br'thn. What now?

We DS. A long, long ways. Oh wow! We are in a space with impossible architecture. Too big. Ah, everything this made from 'thn metal. This must be the Galactic Regional Center. There are so many TKs of all possibly description. There is a K! And oh, the spiky kind. What were they called? Whoa, a really large 'thn floats by ignoring us. Is that Qr'thn?

I have to know, "Where is the library?" I ask.

"Oh Puu!" Everyone yells back. Hey, I like libraries.

That's strange, Silver and Turtle are not with us. Did they pop somewhere they know when we arrived? I was not paying attention.

Cat and Squeak come up to me, “You do remember from the books right?”

“Remember what?”

“We are eights. Eights can ah, ‘mate’ with the larger ‘thn.” Shit!