



The Guardians of Br'thn

The Adventures of Puu and Cat

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Clean Up

Two gentleman, Hu, walk up to us. I have no idea who they are. They stand next to Silver and Turtle like they are known. New TKs? They seem to be eights. Dressed like cowboys with leather hats and boots, jeans, fancy buckles, the works. They look like Hopi cowboys actually.

Marie looks at them suspiciously too. We are a team. I am really too tired to be bringing in two new ones right now. Hell, I am not even used to all the changes here on New Hope. How did they do this so fast? How did they do it at all? Certainly not part of our training to make dozens of new species totally different from anything we have seen before. Did they get these ideas from worlds that were not suitable?

They gave us the impression this was the result of Green Man and OM, but OM is very slow. We barely heard a few sentences. Certainly not enough time to do all this. One of the fairies alights on my shoulder and looks up me. They are insanely curious. They watch everything. I mean everything. I have taken to using TK so as not to embarrass myself. Yeah, they poo too. Just like birds, everything below them is their toilet. With the Plangi nothing remains within minutes. I am the one who is not with the program if anything.

“Gather around.” Sigh. Now what?

Turtle announces, “Silver and I are leaving to take care of Earth Two. Do not visit without permission.” How do we do that if it is off limits? “Owa and Sylvy have made earth one off limits. Randy and Droopy have decided to tour the galaxy and did not come back with us from the center. They will then help Ron and Mei on Mars One who are doing fine. Khéya and Flor have decided to explore other earths and will report back here at some point randomly. Alessa and Nease are still on Ba Eden. Everyone is fine. That leaves all of you.”

Silver takes over, “Four fem and four males. Make the best of it. Yes, this is another test. Everything is a test, even for us.” They both pop out. Br'thn had left as soon as she dropped us off.

Tia finally says what we are all thinking, “And who the hell are you two?” They laugh hysterically. Nearly doubled over.

Marie, “This is not funny. We are a team. We do not allow in outsiders just because you appear and demand entrance.”

That sets them off again.

They then both sober up at once. Strange. Almost like twins.

“Well, technically we are the oldest in the group and actually have the

most experience. We have every right to demand the right of leadership. But we won't. We can be forgiving and charitable." They both smile.

Finally it sinks in, "Oh shit."

"Puu figured it out. Two points to Puu. The rest of you are far behind."

Cat asks, *Who are they?*

"Smith and Jones." *They were not with us when we came out of slow time. They must have left earlier and grew up.*

I ask, "So how old are you then?"

"Discounting the slow time, where no one ages, we are about three hundred years old."

"Beats us Puu."

Sam asks, "Why? Why didn't we all leave at the same time?"

They shrug, "The ways of Silver and Turtle are mysterious. We have no idea. We did help a lot with the final stages of integrating the Hu into the local evolving ecology."

They look at each other, "I guess this means we have to orient you so you don't step on someone by accident. For what it is worth, we really like seeing you moving again. Watching the ring of statues got very boring."

Jones finishes, "It was so very lonely with only Silver and Turtle for company. We miss our sisters and friends." Now it is us who double over giggling and laughing. They do the sad puppy dog really well.

"I have not eaten in a thousand years," Squeak finally states the obvious. How come she was not included as one of the eight? I guess technically she is the only non grownup at the moment. She will be lonely. First thing is to teach her not to eat anyone. I see her eyeing all the little ones around us. In Hu form it would be harder, but still possible.

We are actually not that hungry having eaten only a few hours ago minus the slow time. Does slow time make you hungry?

Smith and Jones whip up one of their creations from ages past. Cowboy chili. Never thought I would miss it. It is good. Squeak gobbles hers down. Not lady like. Need to work on that.

Smith tells us, "Basically nothing here is edible any longer. They wanted it that way so regular Hu could never take over again. A bit paranoid, but we did not suffer the final stages of the Lucinites so we can't judge. It was clear they suffered a lot. They have also asked us to stick around as guardians on top of this."

"How was the galactic center?" That's right, they missed that too.

"Regional Center. It was big. Lots of strange creatures. Puu took off to

the library first thing of course. She missed most of it.” I shrug and smile. It was fascinating. If you wanted to read anything you needed to find a native reader willing to exchange TP with you. There were very few Hu volumes except our journals which no doubt Silver and Turtle put there. Therefore no takers on the exchange. It was still fun to see how each species solved the problem of permanency. Mostly variations on ‘thn metal sheets, cubes with five dimension arrays and beyond. Maybe once we have been around for a few million years or do something spectacular. Surprised they did not pester Silver. They seemed to avoid him actually. Was he still under quarantine for the Far Out incident? Not that they could do anything to him.

“Sentients were polite, but that is all. We are only TK8s and appeared to be nobodies there. Most were nines and had a baby ‘thn following them about.”

“We are ‘thn mating material now. That should have gotten some attention. At least from the older ‘thn.”

“I heard they only look us over on our first visit. We only have to worry if they show up here trying to convince us. Besides, they are used to seeing one at a time, not eight.” Like with Sauron.

“Hmm, considering the social skills of ‘thn, that should be interesting.” Br’tbn did not spend any quality time with any of us. Technically she is old enough to mate, being sentient, but still was pretty small. How do ‘thn grow? Well, maybe in a few million years I will worry about it. Helping to take care of Squeak is more than enough for now. Seems like a lot will happen, in a few million years. I guess I could wait it out in slow time. One minute per thousand years, yeah, that could work.

“Smith and Jones are now the oldest and presumably the most experienced. Does not seem fair somehow.” They used to be the babies compared to me. Now I am the youngest again. Well, except for Squeak.

“Give us a break. We did not do much but baby sit the new forms that Green Man, OM, Silver and Turtle helped develop. LOTS of data keeping and reports. Endless” They both sigh and roll their eyes.

Squeak is suspicious of the two and sniffs them, but in Hu form it is not as useful to her. They look her over too.

“You have become a fine young lady Squeak. Well done.” She is taken back by this and is not sure how to react and hides behind Cat and I.

“Is she fully ah, functional?”

“Stop it. You have absolutely no right to ask that question. Besides you are eights now and know damn well the answer. She is off limits to

any pranks too.” Cat is protective at least. Marie, Tia and I stand behind her to reinforce the statement.

They back off holding up their hands, “Just teasing. No offense intended.”

Some kind of fem creature flies by with enormous tits. They notice my seeing this and I blush. They laugh. Was that their doing? I will kill them.

Marie is fuming and likely to take them on if they are not careful. She has combined Kung Fu with TK to be truly formidable. You really do not want to mess with her. Very fast too. I swear that Silver taught her fast time methods.

“Ow!” They are both holding the back of their heads. Marie’s hands are in the air with a smile on her face.

“Marie, I wonder what thousand year old beer tastes like?” Mike asks.

Jones looks at them shocked, “That exploded years and years ago. Even ‘thn metal does not have infinite strength. Took half a mountain with it. Why the hell didn’t you clean that up before you left?”

“Anyone hurt? We were not exactly told anything about what was going on or when we would be back.”

“Of course not. It was in the middle of nowhere. Alcohol has no effect on us, why do it?”

They look at each other, “We like the taste?”

“To be fair you two, it can get boring at times being TK, just waiting for things.”

“Boy do we know that one. At least while the Lucinites were still around there was some excitement. Something for us to do. You got to spend a thousand years in slow time. We only got to spend seven hundred. They brought us out early to let us grow up and catch up. That should have only taken ten years max.”

Tia, whose impatience has been building comes in, “Okay enough whining all you. Let’s get to work. Do you two have our assignments at least?” The look at each other and then back at us shrugging.

“Shit another test.”

“Puu, mind your language young lady.” I give Jones a dirty look.

“The only young lady here is Squeak and she can swear better than anyone here. Remember Rap is full of swear words.” I sign a few at them to reinforce. Squeak sees this and actually growls at them and that sets everyone laughing again.

New and Improved

It is getting dark, not that it matters to any of us. However there is more of a show from the locals. Any number of them appear to be bio-luminescent.

“Could you guys have gotten any more sexist!” They raise their hands like none of this was their fault.

“We just helped keep it going. There is an explanation for everything. Really.”

“Their tits are glowing! Not their tails, but their tits. Oh come on.”

“They had to work from the mammals, crustaceans and with what was available locally.”

“Even I know crustaceans are relatives of insects. Insect butts glow. They don’t have boobs.” Sam and Mike have backed out of the circle to watch what happens. Chickens. Ha-ha very amusing.

“Hey, really. We did not do it.” We are all glaring at them.

Jones, “Puu, Marie, Cat, you know us. We were lousy at biology. It was not us. No way we would know how to do any of this, even with TK. Turtle said in a meeting with Green Man he actually said, ‘let’s have some fun!’”

Smith, “It only affects you anyway. They don’t know this is funny. This is the life they know and work with. Look at your own forms. As the old joke says, ‘Who puts a recreational area next to a hazardous waste dump?’ We are not designed with the best layout either.” He does have a point.

“It really would be better if we worked together to work it out. Smith and I can introduce you to all the different forms. New ones keep happening by the way, especially at the smaller size levels. Something was said about tropic levels.”

I sigh, “Trophic levels.” Cat and I were good at biology, though for different reasons. She saw everything as a potential art models. I was curious about how it all fit together. She is better at anatomy, me at ecology.

“This is not our home any more. We have moved further south. The Fifths decided this to get away from the Lucinites. Oh, apparently, they were part and parcel to these changes too. Something about drawing on European mythology. The Hopi versions were not really practical. A man with a coyote head does not work. In fact it is amazing how well it did map with the stories. Almost like it actually happened this way on one of the other incarnations or another earth in our own. Everything you see

here now is really at the fringe and does not reflect the true diversity.”

Cat and I have our mouths open. These are the longest sentences we have ever heard out of either one of them.

“What? I was not clear?” We just shake our heads.

We DS to near the equator. It looks more like a village anyway. The trees here are HUGE. That is different. Homes are made in holes in the ground, holes in trees, nests in trees, nests in the grass. It seems they live almost everywhere it is possible to. Oh, even on, near and under the water. Okay.

Sam finally says something, “They pushed this at hyper speed. A million fold faster than normal evolution.”

Jones, “That’s because they did not have to invent it from scratch. They had Hu, Crust, Ba, Ku, Ceph, Di and Rap DNA to work from and Green Man was a trained biologist working at a university before retiring.”

“And we are supposed to believe he memorized all those journal articles before his change?” Even I know how it works.

“Oh, no, Silver and Turtle maintained a library they could access.”

Marie is pissed, “Just how much have they not told us? I feel like I am flying blind.” And being heavily manipulated.

Smith sighs, “Silver has been around for two thousand years now. And he remembers his past incarnations, is a TK10+ and access to Br’thn with a sixty five million year head start. How much to you think they need? We are babies by comparison. Give them a break. We will learn. Be patient everyone.”

Smith and Jones telling us to be patient? I start giggling and soon everyone is but them. They shake their heads and walk towards the larger structures, which look remarkably like pueblos. Each of us is assigned a space. We ignore them. Cat, Squeak and I stake out one that is not occupied and everyone else does the same in pairs. They are NOT our masters. Best they understand this. They can do what they want with the empty ones. We do not need personal space.

“Gather around. I only want to do this once.” Fat chance.

We take our time just to annoy them. Mike and Marie come in with cold glasses of beer. Cat, Squeak and I have made a bowl of M&Ms, dark of course. Tia and Sam bring in burritos steaming hot. We sit down to eat and drink ignoring them. Finally they give up and join us. I remove the alcohol from Squeak’s beer. A drunk Rap is not a pretty sight. She gets high enough on the chocolate.

The locals are very curious of course and we have to keep shooing

them away. A concept they do not understand. They see it as a game and develop strategies to steal the food anyway. Drunk faeries are hopelessly funny. They bounce off everything confused. Chocolate sends them into hyper speed. They finally, using group effort, make off with an entire burrito. We watch them gathered around munching away on it like it is caviar. Their little tummies are hopelessly distended and they are soon all passed out asleep. They snore! How can something so tiny snore so loud?

Squeak is very curious and has several resting in her hand snoring away. She pokes them, but they just roll over and keep on snoring.

“Probably better if we keep them out of our food from here on out,” I suggest. Coming from me, the rest accept it. Smith and Jones just roll their eyes and clean up everything. The old roles are still there.

We spend the next several months learning all the new life forms.

There is a reason for the glowing tits. It is so the young, who are only safe venturing out at night, can find them in the dark to feed as one would expect nutrients to be transferred. So, not just for appearances. The reason they are so big is because they are so small and to keep warm and grow fast they need to consume a large number of calories.

The smaller forms are less intelligent, but like birds, pack more to the punch than a typical mammal, size for size. From the Ba and the Ku they got the genes for flight. The insects, based on Snap’s gene set, are abundant and the phylum that is adding new members the most. Short life spans and high turnover mean they evolve quickly. Not particularly smart. More like windup toys or simple robots. They can re-program in one generation and so adapt quickly.

The basic setup appears to be each mobile form is associated with at least one immobile form, if you count the slowly moving plant-fungi forms as immobile. Maybe it would be best to think, slower moving and faster moving. The fast symbiot is the protector and advance scout for new possibilities and territories. The can carry seeds and spores to new locations, settle them into the correct soil mix and water them until they get going. The descendants of the planter will take care of the new forms as they grow.

You would think that the grass like forms would have the smallest mobiles, but there appears to be no correlation. Some of the grasses have a companion nearly the size of a rhino and just as protective. Oh, each mobile feeds exclusively off the parent immobile form. Competition is for space and resources. They do not eat each other. Even the fungi are matched to a limited number of plangi and again are helpers.

The dead are fair game for anyone. I guess you can say the whole sys-

tem runs off recycling the dead to the benefit of your group. As you would guess the world is VERY crowded here at least. Not so much back on the mesas. I miss the desert. Yeah, as a kid I complained like everyone else about the summers being too hot and the winters too cold. Now I miss the variation. It is always hot and humid here. You have to keep a TK shield up constantly as the fungi see you as not-new-hope and therefore fair game for recycling. Poor Squeak barely manages.

We visit all of the new niches, the hills, valleys, streams, intertidal, ocean depths. There is life everywhere. Only at the poles have things spread out a bit. There are no deserts to speak of. Oh, sure, some places are dryer, but they have adapted so well that life helps pull moisture from the air and it rains nearly everywhere if a cloud happens to pass over. No Hu to be destructive and cut down all the trees to plant mono-cultures and suck the soil of nutrients. Guess I don't miss the Hu all that much.

That is not to say that things never go wrong. Most of the life is not truly sentient, at least at the self-aware stage anyway. Mutations still happen and sometimes we are called on to settle disputes, or even take out a rogue species if one develops. Smith and Jones have been doing this as part of their duties and are thankful to share it now with more of us. The entire planet is a large area to patrol. But, this is what is so interesting, the world seems to be based more on cooperation than the competition model we grew up with.

Blast from the Past

Things were becoming routine, as I said, until now. Of course it was too good to last. It always is. But this? Come on really? After all we have been through?

Sigh, okay, where to begin.

We were in a new area, north of home base. I am surprised it took so long to check this area out, but then, there were no problems of note, so why bother. Anyway, that was when we met her, again. An impossibility for sure. Beyond imagining really.

Ruth, or rather River Flower as she became, came out to greet us. Sort of. There was no possible way for any of us to know it was her of course. She had changed, same as the rest of the remnants from Earth Two. How the hell she could possibly be alive is my question. It has been over a thousand years since we saw her last and she was dead then.

We were in a clearing of nice large trees, talking and trying to decide what to do next when a tree moved. More like a part of it split off from the rest and came towards us, very slowly.

We were transfixed watching this, slow time being a game we liked to play now. Not the full on OM slow time mind you. That would be cheating, getting one out of chores. We all slowed down to the time of the split off section which gave us the impression of it speeding up of course.

It unfolded into the shape of a person of sorts, two legs, two arms and a pointy head. All of it had bark and having seen it unfold I can now see how it fit into the space it came from. Then it smiled.

“Do you remember me?” It spoke! We nearly fell over. English even.

“You can close your mouths now. I won’t eat you. Puu, Cat, surely you remember? I am River Flower, or I was a long time ago anyway.”

I answer, “How can this be? How can you still be alive?”

Smith and Jones are laughing at us again.

“We have all been changed.”

“That is obvious. Not many people with bark. But she died. We saw this happen over a thousand years ago.”

“Simple, saplings, or clones if that makes any sense. Complete with full memories.”

“Immortality really.”

“I assume the boys have already given you the grand tour.” I nod. *Cat, close your mouth.* She does, then whips out a sketch book and starts. River Flower(n) will cover several pages in a few minutes, whatever that

really is in our slowed down time. I can see the sun visibly moving. Will be dark soon.

“We are part of the eco system now. No separation. Myself, I belong to this tree and she belongs to me. We have many, many children who have moved far and wide. Our time is nearly done, as it is with all things. I am the last of the clones who remember. I have no regrets. How have all of you faired?”

Tia comes in, “We have met the mother of this world, OM for short, One Mind in the long form.”

Sam says, “We have been to the Regional Galactic Center and met all kinds of different beings. Puu spent the entire time in their library of course.” River Flower smiles and nods.

Cat says, “Owa and Sylvy and all the kits have gone back to Earth one and then Earth Two and have declared North America to be their domain. They kicked out all of the stupid monkeys of course.”

Squeak says, “Silver and Turtle are on Earth Two, trying to get them going right this time. Not in North America of course.”

She looks at Squeak, “I am afraid I don’t know you dear. May I ask your name please?”

“I am Squeak!”

“Ah, you have changed too then. Congratulations. Are you happy?”

“I am Squeak. I am. That is enough, no?”

“Yes it is dear. Very smart of you.” The sun is setting. We can all see in the dark of course, but River Flower(n) is slowing down now that the sun is weaker.

We wait a short time, still in the slow state, and the sun comes up again and River Flower awakens to continue.

Mike asks what we have all been thinking, “River, how did all of this happen? I am no scientist, but still it seems like too much change too fast.”

“It was too fast. Silver and Turtle have the necessary training, and of course OM has billions of years, when added to what Green Man contributed we had all the pieces. I added my military training. Essential if we are to survive the attacks likely to happen. We needed to work fast because the other worlds are all near their maximum tech levels. Some sentient from one or more of those worlds will eventually figure out how to get here. We needed to be ready.”

Marie is skeptical, “I have seen the armies of Earth Two. You do not stand a chance. One hydrogen bomb ruins your whole day.”

“Ah, but dear, no offense, but they are unlikely to bring more than a

few through on their first trips. With just a few they cannot sterilize the entire planet can they? And why should they? If they come here, they can go anywhere. Except for mineral wealth, there is nothing of value here. No tech to learn from, we are eighty percent ocean by surface area. Not a great catch. We intend to convince them we are a really bad choice.” She smiles.

“Kung Fu is like that. We strive not to destroy, but to convince the other that continuing to threaten is not worth the cost. I approve.”

River smiles, “Glad you do, but your approval is not necessary. All of us who underwent the change are the approval we needed. OM was the final approval of course.”

Tia asks, “Can we get you anything?”

She shakes her head no, “We are entirely self sufficient.”

Cat still in her sketch book, “We were told we were to play a part.” She does not even look up. Rude Cat.

“The final option. Depends on who shows up. If just tech and norms, we are capable of convincing them to leave. In fact seeing sentients would work against us. We need to stay hidden.”

Marie smiles at this, “I know we can work with that. Distract and confuse.”

“Ghost stories!” Squeak says. She loves ghost stories. Yeah, make the place seem haunted.

“If other TKs show up, then you need to convince them to leave. You have honored your pact not to interfere with their chosen worlds, they need to respect ours.”

“Seems fair. So, what do we do in the meantime?”

Marie scowls, “Practice grasshopper. We need to do war games with each other and with the locals. It is important to be as creative as possible. What kind of tech are they likely to bring in? How many can come through a simple gate? Puu, you read the journals. We have another copy with us. Go over them again for any clues.

Smith and Jones, you know the locals and their weaknesses, design some exercises to try. Once we have a few goes, we will come up with more creative plans. The rest of us need some experience before we can help effectively.”

River has stopped moving or commenting. She looks strange, not that I know this life form well.

“Something is wrong. Back to fast time!”

Cracks appear in the tree and in River. Large branches suddenly fall off and crash to the ground. One of River’s arms does the same. Fungi

appear in the cracks and appear to be covering everything in real time.

“She is gone Puu. Just like that. Said her piece and gone.”

Squeak goes up to River and her tree and touches to investigate.

Comes back as confused as we are. Wonder where her saplings are and which will assume the dominate personality next. Stranger and stranger.

War Games are Boring

“So how do we do this without, an ah, actual enemy to fight? Seems to me that holding your punches might be the wrong kind of training.”

Smith and Jones look really smug about Tia’s question. Rolling their eyes and everything. Give it up guys.

Marie speaks up as expected, “Kung Fu. We practice against each other holding our punches and we practice against inanimate targets no holds barred. It needs to become more than reflex.”

“Bone knowledge!” Cat shouts. Sigh . . . give her a black belt and it all goes to her head.

“Problem. Unlikely our opponents will be Hu. Look around you, we are the only Hu and unless one of us goes . . . ”

“DON’T SAY IT! JINX! JINX!” None of us has gone rogue and no one wants to be the first. We all look suspiciously at each other.

“That would make the perfect opponent all the same.”

“SHUT UP CAT!” She shrugs smiling. *Go back to your art Cat.*

“I don’t think an opponent would be a gang of TK8s.”

“They would have to be at least a six to make it here.”

“Meaning a TK explorer. Hardly a threat. Just curious.”

“You are assuming an explorer would not be looking for new place to put their ever expanding population.”

“I could see that one. My guess is something much smaller, not necessary high consciousness. A mold or virus, an invasive plant perhaps.”

“How would it get here?” Everyone looks at Cat immediately.

“Hey. I don’t mean to do things like that.”

“Intent does not matter Cat. They could easily hitchhike on anyone going between worlds.” True.

Marie smiles, “All good. I have started a ‘malicious invader’ somewhere on New Earth. I know how to defeat it. Your task, should you choose to accept it, is to find the invader and neutralize it.” Oh, that is an evil smile.

Smith and Jones pop out. The game is a foot.

“Teams people. Knowing Marie this thing is going to have some tricks we won’t like. Have back up.” Meaning itches, pain, stomach, sneezing, what have you.

Sam and Tia pop out. I look towards Squeak. She nods and we pop out. That leaves Cat and Mike to fend for themselves. I really did not want to be paired with Cat again. I would end up doing all the work while

she got stuck on an art project. At least with Squeak I had a rap's instincts on my side.

"Please Puu, make Squeak rap. Rap is better for hunting."

"Really, with all your TK talents, you still think that?" She nods.

"Okay, give me a few minutes to make you a rap body again. Hmm, adult this time. Might take a bit to get used to the larger size."

"Larger is better." *If you want to be the alpha female. Don't get any ideas Squeak. Eight is always bigger than five.*

I am very careful with Squeak. If I blew this the entire group would be all over me. Once the transfer is done I put her Hu form into stasis to make it easier to transfer back later. I make an underground vault and place her Hu form in there. No entrance except to a TK with DS capability.

I elect to remain Hu. She needs to see it does not matter what form you are in.

We run! she announces and takes off at full speed. So much for adapting to the larger form. She is jumping over branches effortlessly. I sigh and go after her, using mostly TK to keep up. Of course, we have no idea where on this world the problem is. I can sense everyone else has more or less spread out. We each have favorite places and we need to monitor the entire world. We have gotten somewhat lax of late. It is incredibly boring here most of the time. Cat is hopeless as you might expect. It rarely takes her more than five minutes to find some art project to get attached to and be gone to reality.

It does not take long to reach the shallow eastern sea. Squeak turns right and moves south. We run for hours and the sun sets to our right over the tree tops. I can sense lots of native and earth adapted life forms. All seems good. It is as it is supposed to be. Hard to imagine that in a little over a thousand years all this came about. It is almost like this world was waiting for the last piece to its puzzle and is now complete. Of course there was a lot of knowledge and help from Silver and Turtle, but still, it must have been waiting, ready to go. Sorry, Om played a large part too.

I have to wonder how long the two of them knew of this world and were waiting for our Hu world to reach the right place for the transfer. Do we always self destruct? Are Hu always doomed by their own stupidity? Will this world reach the same end? Or, hopefully, because of combining with the locals, that end will not happen. Or not. Marie taught us all life is change. All things come to an end. Heck, the sun will go red dwarf at some point. All of us will end at some point. We know now it is really not an end and we will live again in a different incarnation, whether Hu or

some other form. We have already been in an infinite number of life times.

I really do not want to be a teenager again. Anything but that! Actually was not that long ago subjectively. Still it feels like some distant dark time a long, long time ago. If you are reading this testament now, you likely read our earlier volume. You know what I went through. Raised on the Rez. Cat, then called Susan, arriving and all the trouble she got into. She was really good at getting herself into situations. Then the change. The bus and everything that happened after that. Beyond imagining.

Here I am chasing a life form from another earth that looks like an ancient velociraptor, but with a much larger head, on yet another world that is totally different than either of our birth worlds. And she is one of my best friends.

I watched her grow up, change, learn, become a wonderful sentient being.

Stop! She yells with TP.

I scan. I sense lots of crab derivatives in the shallow sea and an equal number of creatures in the forest. Squeak is about a hundred meters ahead of me frozen in place. She is not even breathing hard. Good, she is using TK to extend her endurance. She loves to run, but is not stupid about it. Even if we cannot be killed easily, we do still feel pain from a bite or break. Never mind we can heal almost instantly.

She moves and starts running again. No TP telling me what she sensed.

Hey, I am here too. What did you see? We are a team after all.

Something is not right. It feels wrong. Something is different.

What? I don't sense anything. And I am trying. TK8 can scan the entire planet after all.

She takes off at a fast run. Here we go again. No one can say they don't get enough exercise when with Squeak. We can run in the dark as easily as the day, so it does not take long to be a few hundred kilometers away from home base. The inland sea has been on our left most of the way. The sea smells so good. Hard to imagine I did without it growing up on the rez. Come to think of it Squeak was no where near the ocean where she came from either. I can still remember the first time we took her to see waves! Like all things the novelty wears off. Hard to surprise her now.

I almost run into her as she is bent over sniffing the ground.

"What?" She ignores me. Well we are a team, I should be scanning too. I don't trust Marie. Her idea of games often end up painful. When

you can see it coming it is not a challenge. The unknown. Now that is the real challenge. How do you do under pressure? Are you quick enough?

Squeak suddenly starts chasing something, scattering leaves and making a real mess. What? I don't see anything out of the normal.

Ah, out of the normal. Best place to hide is in plain sight. So, what is normal but not? All sorts of animals and plantimals. Plangi of course. So many hybrids were formed when we were in slow time. Too many for even me to learn them all, and the process is continuing. Though it may have slowed some as all the ecological niches are filled. Just fine tuning now is my guess. At least until some change occurs to set everything in motion again. I can't imagine how our previous earth worked with tens of millions of species. All seems like band-aids on band-aids on band-aids and so on.

Shit. I really don't want to morph to rap form. Shouldn't TK extra senses be enough?

Squeak, what is it? When in doubt, ask.

Something wrong, is all she answers. This is not helping. She is sniffing the ground a lot. I scan the ground. Lots of stuff left by lots of creatures. Having molecular vision is not helping if you are looking at a soup and don't know what to look for. Something different.

I scan a kilometer away in a similar environment. Looks the same. I am sure of it.

Wait, there is something different. Sort of like a Crusty variant. There are thousands of those. Only recently gotten to be land based. Our form of insects, though obviously very different. They would have to change their physiology a lot. Granted there were some land crabs on earth, not that different. No, this is different. Definitely different and only here, not at the other location. Now I can look for this scent around me. I scan. Scattered. Like something was here and was searching for something. It stops about ten meters out. Okay, how did it get here and how did it leave. The scent is faint. The source is definitely gone. I think I would have noticed something macroscopic. Flying? Just don't bring back mosquitoes. Especially not with claws. Ugh, the old style were bad enough.

Squeak takes off again. At least I know what she is looking for now. I scan ahead and try to find what she is going for, before she gets there.

Nearly a half kilometer ahead. Not hopping. Flying then. Ground is disturbed here. Some leaves are missing from plants. Part of a plantimal on the ground. Sharp cut at the edges. Oh, here is the other half. Interesting. Like it needed to look inside, but then lost interest and then tossed the dead bits. Seems to be confused by animals with chlorophyll. More

plant bits missing.

“Oh, it definitely likes this bush.” I touch the damage. Most of the leaves are missing.

Over here, Squeak calls. I come over.

“I am guessing that is poo, or whatever it does for same.”

Smells similar to bush.

“It is eating it. Looking for food then. Did not like the plantimal. Never heard of a bug turning down protein though.”

Not bug. Not crust. Something new.

“I got that too. Is this what we are looking for? Is this what Marie set us up to find?”

Not from New Hope. Nothing I know makes these scents. Ewu!

Squeak is going to taste the poo!

“Squeak, scan it, don’t taste it! Could be poisonous.” At least disgusting.

Scan not same. Taste better. Not for me. I shake my head. Not that there are likely any poisons we could not handle.

Mike and Cat

“Why here?” I ask Cat.

“This whole exercise is bogus. If we are going to play the game it might as well serve more than one interest. I like this place. It is where we came through from Earth 2. The tropics are too crowded. Too much going on at once.”

“Chaotic,” I offer.

“Exactly. Here I can think. Not the desert of Earth 2, but less than the tropics by a long shot.”

“Might as well look around. I don’t remember it looking like this. Everything seems different.”

“We were out of the equation for a thousand years. Even without all the frantic controlled changes, one would expect some change normally. Europe went through a mini ice age at one point even. Puu explained to me how the movement of the earth is not uniform and we do move around the Milky Way as well. Changes in volcanic activity, droughts and floods. Lots of stuff changes.”

“Wow, Cat, when did you become so academic. Come a long way from the scared little girl freezing outside the bus station.”

She pauses, then laughs, “Yeah, I guess we have. It all seems like a dream now. No one’s dreams could have imagined all this. Our abilities, a different world.”

“Worlds, don’t forget Squeak and the Rap world, not to mention the Regional Galactic Center. That was a real trip. I have come from a sheep farmer and go-fer for everyone in the tribe, to all this.” I wave my hands around. Abandoned overgrown homes, fields that once held crops now covered in local life. Without TK I probably could not even find local land marks.

“Hey, you guys, stop that!” Cat is shooing off some of the pixies that have gotten too curious.

“Use the TK Cat. We need shields even here. Remember we are not to affect the local life.” I smile and she sticks out her tongue at me, to make both of us laugh.

“The hole is still there from where your first brewery blew up.” She comments.

“Ah, the good old days.”

“Yuck, never developed a taste for beer. Especially that noxious stuff the two of you made. Ghastly.”

I shrug, "An acquired taste."

"I thought we removed all the 'thn metal. Seems like there is an awful lot of it near your hole."

"We did not have much time to clean up. We thought if we made the outer case of 'thn metal it would hold till we got back."

"Well, it didn't and now it is a total mess. Good for some art work I guess. Saves me the trouble of having to make the nasty stuff."

"You can make it any time you want. Why bother?"

"Not native, we really should not leave any of it around. At least if I make art out of it and then bury it deep it is unlikely to cause any problems."

"Why bury it? I thought art was to be appreciated not buried."

"Appreciation is not important to me at all. I am done worrying about what others think. I just need to do it. It calls to me worse than any addiction."

"You aren't going rogue on me are you?" I fake concern.

"Funny, very funny. No, this keeps me from going rogue. Doesn't it ever bother you that we always seem to be kept out of the loop. I never know what is going on, 'everything is a test' does not cut it with me."

"Yeah, that is kinda rude. We are not kids, well, maybe we are by their standards, but still, even kids are told something just to keep them quiet, if nothing else." Cat is already zoned out, large pieces of 'thn metal are forming around her. No point in talking now. She won't hear an atom bomb going off from this point until she comes out of it.

I scan what she has already done. Strange. I have never seen this in her work before. Wonder where she got that from. Looks intricate enough to almost be functional as in serving a purpose other than looking pretty.

I could never be a 'thn mate. I can't get the quantum stuff like Puu and apparently Cat can. To each their own I guess.

I scan what is left of the brewery. It really went. That and at least hundreds of years for the ecology to remove all traces of the beer and yeast. The yeast was engineered to not be viable outside the container, so it likely was lost first. The brew itself would have been easy to consume by the locals. The idea of a bunch of drunk pixies is amusing. Party of all parties! Would have liked to have seen that. I do admit the huge tits was really not necessary no matter how small they are and how many young they have to feed. Someone was having fun at our expense.

My life up until Cat arrived, Susan at the time, was pretty boring. Trying to finish high school and helping everyone I could with way too many chores. She sure changed everything. Never would have guessed all the

back story of Turtle and Owl and everyone else as it all came together. I am most thankful for being allowed to be part of all this. Nothing special about me that would have made me choose me to be part of a TK8 team on a new world who knows how from from where I was born.

Days later I finally give up and ask. "What are you doing Cat?" I was not expecting an answer, more just talking to myself really.

"I saw this on a broken piece in the hole and thought it was yours or Marie's work. Not my idea, at least not initially. Just building on it."

"Cat, this design is NOT a local doing. They can't carve 'thn metal and Marie and I certainly did not do it. Show me exactly where you got the first piece please."

She TPs the location. I get closer. She only got a small part of it. Strange, it looks like it was meant to serve some purpose. This was intentional, not random. What can carve and mold 'thn metal? Think Mike, think. I remember something from one of the journals. Not much below a TK6 can work with it. Oh, wait, there is one thing that can.

"Shit Cat, STOP. Melt it down. Change it from 'thn metal right now. I mean it, this is important. STOP!"

She looks at me confused. She gets this way when in the zone. I don't wait for her to wake up and convert all of the 'thn metal in the area to water. It expands of course and causes a flash flood. Were are protected by our shields, but it messes up everything around us.

Time's up! Report in!

I look around and scan carefully. I think I got everything. That was close. Too close. If the portal had been activated we might never have gotten rid of those pests.

Marie

I feel like I am herding cats, not to be confused with Cats. They are smart even if they can be annoying. Can't say I am upset that Owa is with her mate on another earth. Oh, there is always something to be learned from another species, but still. God, imagine how many of them there must be after a thousand years. Bet there are millions. That is not a sight I want to see.

They come back slowly. Never been good about obeying orders or requests. I can't claim to be their leader. The boys, Smith and Jones are technically by virtue of age and length of time on this world. They don't fit the part too well. Mostly they just try to catch us doing something stupid and then wait to rub it in. Annoying.

Of course I can scan and find them anywhere on New Hope and I know what they were doing. No secrets with TKs.

Tia and Sam come in first. I motion for them to take a seat till the others arrive. I can see, though I do not pry, that they are continuing the conversation. Likely still scanning the area they were in. West coast near one of the small bays. Looks pleasant actually. Not exactly what I had in mind for the exercise, but I will let them tell us.

Puu and Squeak come in next looking confused. I motion them to sit and not to talk yet. Puu ignores me and continues to question Squeak with TP at least.

Mike comes in without Cat, immediately looking around for her. Exasperated he pops out again. Ah Cat. Always a pain.

Smith and Jones come in last and not seeing everyone here look disappointed that they were not the last.

"You are the last. Mike was here briefly. Well, you are the last if Cat does not show up."

"Where is Cat then?"

"Mike will find her if she wants to be found. I do not scan her, so she is shielded for some reason." I shrug. Cat panics way too easily.

"We might as well begin. Mike and Cat could take days to get here. Tia and Sam, why don't you go first as you two were the first to arrive."

They look at each other and Sam finally starts, "We decided that maybe we would go back to where it all began, well at least the parallel location. Of course the water levels are several hundred feet higher on New Hope. We came in on the shores of what Earth 2 called Jack's Peak. An island here actually. We could scan where the lab should have been.

No lab or even remnant of course. Still we are creatures of habit.”

Tia jumps in, “We know you set this exercise up Marie and you have read the journals as we did. Why reinvent the wheel as they say.”

They look at each other when they talk. How cute in a nauseous sort of way. We are not Cats, so no feelings of the erotic kind. Best friends I guess. That will change. When you live essentially forever it is very easy to get bored. No matter.

“We did not find anything for certain, just a lot of strange clues.” Which I put there when I was certain where they would look.

Tia, “Formations that nature alone could not explain, but were not complex enough to be from intelligence.”

“None of us know this world all that well, except maybe Smith and Jones and even they don’t know everything as we will see when it is their turn to present. Please go on. Why do you think these ‘formations’ were not natural? There are all kinds of creatures, fungi and such around. These formations were underwater you say. We landlubbers are not all that conversant with the aquatic forms.”

Tia, “I do agree that Snap’s offspring are not that familiar to me, but I did pay attention in class. I know the marks of aquatic forms. I know the plangi and plantimals. No, this was formed by something not of this world.”

The others are smiling.

Sam, sighs, “We know it was you Marie. Oh it led us on a merry chase. We do not blame you. We all know this is an exercise. It worked. We found your buried treasure. We identified it as not New Hope.”

I bow, “Very good. You may sit. That brings us to Puu and Squeak.”

“Squeak found something, but all I found were hints.”

“Go on.”

Squeak, “Something not right. Smell wrong.”

“Evidence of plants being tasted, some they did not like. Trampling, jumping or flying. Disturbance was in patches. No idea of how they got there, likely our size or bigger. Not small.”

“What do you think Squeak?”

“Jumping. Large, very large. Smell like insect, but not one of ours. Chew marks consistent. Looking for food for more of its own kind. Immediate threat likely. Need to return.”

They were on the western shore of our inland sea. I did not set up anything for them. The more experienced the group is, the less I feel I need to do so. Gives the beginners something to find so as not to be discouraged. We need to watch this location.

“Very good. Okay you two, tropics? Really?”

They smile in sync. Creepy the way they do that, though with TP it would not be hard.

Smith shrugs, “Spent too much time in the desert. Visited the second place we set up on Earth 2, translocated to New Hope.”

Tia, “Too wet and humid. I prefer the desert.” Sam shakes his head he agrees. I do too. Everything goes moldy in the tropics.

Jones, “We get bored too. Not boring there. Everything tried to taste us, if not eat us outright. Even with a shield there was a constant racket of things hitting it. Stimulus overload.”

“All we had to do was sit and watch. Zone out, become one with the place.”

Puu roles her eyes and shakes her head. I concur but try not to show any emotion.

“And?”

“We felt the same way as Squeak. Something off. Something different. We did not see any chewed plants, everything is chewed down there. May be there had come and gone before going north and most of the traces were gone by the time we got there.”

“We agree with Squeak and Puu. Something is checking us out.”

Smith, “Could be too much competition. If Squeak and Puu are right. They were in the tropics first, likely closest to their own location on another earth. They suffered the same as we did. Everything trying to eat them. Decided to try a less populated area.”

“Then what? I am sure we have all scanned the areas ourselves now. Nothing out of place. That means they have a way in and out. The question is, will they return or were they discouraged? The locals certainly tried, I’m sure.”

Mike pops in.

“They have a way in and out. All mine and Marie’s fault.”

“Where is Cat?”

“I pissed her off and she bugged out. Sorry, poor choice given what you have been talking about.” Meaning he has been listening at least. Good. Saves time.

We wait for the story. He takes a deep breath.

“You all know how Cat goes into her art fugue.” We nod or sigh.

“She got into the ‘thn metal left over from our brewskies. I did not think anything of it. Figured she would zone out on me and if this kept her busy, so much the better.”

“Well she finally checked in. I had scanned the area and did not find

anything. Surprising how much had not changed and how much has. A thousand years has almost destroyed the structures we made when we came over.”

“Never meant to last forever and we were done with them.”

Mike shakes his head, “Not important. When she showed me what she was working on, modifying the ‘thn metal into cool forms I happened to look closer and noticed she had tweaked her work at the quantum level. I freaked out. She got mad at me and said the whole ruin was messed with in the same way and to not pick on her.”

I am freaked now. I scan the ruin and there is no ‘thn metal present.

“I dissolved all of the ‘thn metal. I recognized the pattern. Cat did not believe me, she never read the journals that carefully, so did not get why I did it. She popped out and I have not seen her since. Not on this world unless she is shielded better than any of us could ever do.”

“What are you talking about?” Tia and Sam ask.

“The way our visitor(s) could have gotten in and out. The gate is closed, maybe they will not return.”

Tia and Sam look like they are going to explode.

Puu finally tells them, “Mike recognized the signature of ‘thants. They live off ‘thn metal and use it to move from one world to the next. They multiply rapidly and can wreck an entire world in a millennium.”

“Most worlds do not have ‘thn metal so how do they work?”

“They are the lowest TK life form that can make ‘thn metal. Not quickly, otherwise they would not take a thousand years to ruin a world. Heck any one of us could do it in a long afternoon.”

“Puu and Squeak did not find ‘thants but something much, much bigger.”

“Simple, a door was made by the ‘thants and the big ones used the gate they made.” Mike.

“Well the gate is gone now. Too bad we did not get a chance to study it first. But I understand why you reacted the way you did Mike. No blame. I likely would have done the same. Too much Kung Fu maybe. Sometimes it is better not to react. Still we need to be vigilant now.”

“The gate is gone. It took the ‘thants a thousand years right in front of Smith and Jones, Silver and Turtle. Yeah, pay attention, but we do not have to go crazy.” I am sure Silver and Turtle knew, just waiting for us to notice or do something.

“It if was just ‘thants you would be right, what worries me is the larger form. If they reverse engineered the gate, then they could come and go whenever they wanted.”

“And we do not know how long ago they were here. If it was a week ago . . .”

Squeak, “Hours. Not weeks. Smell would not last that long.”

Cat on a hot tin roof

Come on people. Stop telling me everything I do is wrong. I am the same level TK as the rest of you. We are equal. You are not the boss of me! I know what Rooi portals are. Please! I am the best one of the lot in making them. I can make them with my eyes closed and tied up in a dungeon. Of course I know the quantum patterns were in the 'thn metal. Of course I know what 'thants are and the danger they present. Of course I would have disabled the construct before they came through. I am not stupid.

At least here I am free from everyone's nagging. This is my special place. I assume everyone else has their own place. This is mine. I am not going to tell you where we are. Not even in my journal. With an expected life span in millions of years, I want to be able to use this hideout again.

I have everything set up. Perishables are in stasis so I can dupe any food or materials of need, okay, mostly art supplies, at a moments notice and in any quantity I so desire. Mostly it is the peace and quiet.

Mine is a low green world, almost a brown. A green world may have brought unexpected visitors. A brown, too boring. Air to breath and a few lichens is not enough for me. Though some lichens can be pretty cool. A lichen world has diversity, they always do. Every niche is filled, just ah, no movement in my time frame. I am afraid if I slowed down to their speed I would be gone so long that I would freak everyone out and someone would come looking.

I have scanned myself countless times. I am sure Silver and Turtle have some way of finding me no matter what, but I can't find anything. Maybe we emit some sort of characteristic TK resonance. Anyway, we are under orders not to bug them, so I assume the same goes the other way and they are too busy to bother with me having a little snit.

I should finish the project I was working on just to spite them, but now I really do not feel like it. Revenge is a dish best served cold and unexpected. Always unexpected. Besides I really don't even want 'thants here. I am the only higher order life form here. Oh, yeah, there are a few mobile creatures of sorts, but slow. Not as slow as the lichens, but no where near insects even. More like sloths of earth one and two, if I remember right. Nothing flying. Just creepers, crawlers, slow swimmers, well really crawlers when on the ocean floor.

This is a low green after all. Can't have high expectations. What do we do. Maybe a diorama of local life in case everything goes belly up and

my art is the only thing remaining to remind future visitors how glorious this world was. Something long lasting, but not something that has TK written all over it. Gold, platinum alloys last a long time. Well, as long as something does not hit them. Soft metals after all. Ceramic? Maybe. They can break of course, but some of the engineered carbon fiber ceramics might work. Of course this would be a dead give away that no local life did the sculpture. Well that is going to be a problem no matter what I make it out of. TK is still out for me though.

I am meticulous and put in an insane amount of detail. Who would have thought that my local sloths were too fast moving. I had to keep grabbing them and putting back to where I want them to pose. They of course were disturbed by this sudden unexplained return to a previous spot, being way outside their time frame. I suspect that in some future sloth society the story of the fast time events would be legends and myths.

Even though, it takes time. Lots of time. More time than I planned on spending, but I am obsessed. I have to do this now. No one will ever see it, but I have to do it. I even get the internal details in minute detail. I would love to see the reaction of whomever finds this. Not a gallery person, I do art because I have to, but still . . .

Squeak Asks Why

“Where is Cat?” Squeak is looking around, and undoubtedly scanning as well.

Marie looks at Mike, “She was with you. I don’t find her on this earth at all.”

Sheepishly Mike answers, “She bugged out. No idea where.”

Marie sighs, “And why did she bug out Mike?”

“Hey, I am not answerable to you. Who made you fearless leader?”

“It is not me you have to answer to, but Squeak.” Squeak looks up to Mike.

“We had a disagreement. We found evidence of ‘thants and she did not want to do anything about it. I dissolved the ‘thn metal pile left over from our beer making. She got pissed and popped out.” He shrugs.

“To be fair to Mike, she does go off easily.” Several sets of eyes roll.

“To be fair to Squeak and Cat, Cat probably knows as much about Rooi portals and ‘thn metal as Silver and Turtle. There is no way she would allow ‘thants to come through.”

“Unless she was so distracted by her latest project to not notice.”

More eyes rolls.

“She could beat you on the mat any day of the week. That does not sounds like someone who is not paying attention.”

“This is not the first time she has done this. She will be back again when she needs something or forgets what the argument was about.”

“Or wants to show off her latest project.”

Squeak, who has been becoming more impatient, “‘thn metal, ‘thants, and now evidence of a larger creature coming through a portal. We need our portal expert here to help more than at any time in the past.”

Good for you Squeak! Excellent logic. I turn to the others to see how they will respond. No one is responding! Guess Cat has rubbed more than a few wrong with her obsessions. I probably have spent the most time with her, but still. Guess I will get to go try and find her.

“I’m going after Cat. You can all work on the visitors we may or may not be getting.”

“The ‘thn metal is all gone from this world. No ‘thn metal, no ‘thant portals.”

“Squeak go too.” She glares at them. We do not need ‘thn metal.

Hmm...

“As will I, as present company does not seem serious. Time for them

to step up and do some work. We have all gotten lazy with nothing more to worry about but a curious diad or fairy.” The rest look offended. My guess is they will kick back as soon as we leave. Marie shakes her head and turns to me and Squeak.

I pop us to our moon base. I want some distance and space to think. Also one of the places she sometimes goes.

“No one home. All of the food has frozen. Looks like the gen went out again. I will go work on it. We may want it to be working the next time someone is here.” Marie takes off walking. Too small a base to DS everywhere. Well except for the experimental areas for dangerous research, but those are many kilometers away and the ONLY way in is by DS after very careful scanning. No surprises.

Squeak takes my hand and says, “Journals. Her room is down this way.” Of course I know where her room is. No surprise to see it overflowing with half finished art projects and scattered supplies. Just like every other place she nests. Wish I had the ability to concentrate that hard. Probably makes the rest jealous too. Cat is definitely different. Not that I am any prize, but she has seen so much even before she came to the rez. Now, with all the rest added too.

Don’t get me wrong. I do not think she is in any danger of going rogue. Pissed off and distant for a time, sure, but nothing dangerous to others. She just can’t do that. She is not a predator, nor is she prey.

I flip through some of her journals. I don’t want to pry. She uses her own style of writing and a font of her own making. I learned it long ago without letting her know I knew it. A mix of Hopi, New Hope and English. Totally different looking letters of course. Some are like rock paintings or petroglyphs. Not a chance that any norm would figure it out.

Most of it is about proposed projects, or her opinion of finished ones. Seems to be all she thinks about. Better than romance or bullies I guess. Marie is right, we have gotten soft. I doubt my journals are much better. I worry about organization or logistics most of the time. I wonder when that happened. I did not use to obsess so much on that did I? Have to talk with Turtle the next time we see her and Silver.

Marie comes in covered in dust. Lunar soil gets into everything. We can’t seem to keep it out.

“Got it going. Someone had flipped the switch. That and moon dust were the only problems. Who was the last one on duty here?” She knows I will know.

“Mike and Tia.” I sigh.

“I should have known. Who was he to judge Cat over the mess we left

and never cleaned up.”

“No one thought they would find us way out here. ‘thn metal does not hurt anything here, so, like so much, it got forgotten about. I think Cat is the only one who uses it for anything, mostly as support for some of her larger more exotic pieces.”

“Can’t say I understand all of her work, but she certainly puts a lot of energy into it.” I nod.

Squeak comes in and sees the mess and carefully backs out to wait for us outside. With her tail she knows she would knock half of it over just turning around. We go out to meet her.

“Squeak find nothing to help.”

“Nothing here either, just art notes.”

“Don’t look at me, she was not in the gen room.”

I smile, Cat may know art, but she avoids tech if she can avoid it. Oh we were all forced to learn a minimum amount. Never know when you might end up on a tech world and have to get out without turning everything upside down. Sort of like Squeak’s tail.

“We should check nearby moons.”

“Surface first though, never like coming through into solid rock. There are three of us, so three different dimension directions.”

“How many over in each direction?”

I offer, “Ten? Given that this is like finding a needle in a hay stack, we are really only hoping to get lucky. If she really does not want to be found, we don’t have a chance.”

“Agreed.” Squeak does not like this discussion.

We do not find her of course. I was not surprised. What was interesting was there were signs that someone, likely Cat had been on most of these other moons. Where did she find the time? We all have chores, that when you think about it, do not take that much time. We often leave her alone stuck on some art project. She could easily skip out when she thinks we have forgotten about her for a bit.

The moons that I observed were each different in their artifacts. I would not have thought Cat was that organized. It looks like she kept her ideas compartmentalized. Instead of separate rooms, she chose separate worlds. Interesting.

Hmm comparing two next to each other there may be other reasons. Incompatible materials. No oxygen means a lot of things do not react unless brought into physical contact. In the shade even things that are liquid on earth would be solid here. What is she up to?

Marie sees something and moves towards it.

“Marie! Don’t touch! Danger!”

She looks at me confused, “It is just a simple sculpture. Scans as just moon rock.” She picks it up and immediately regrets it. Her shield goes down and she starts to suffer from the cold.

I TK the object away from her and her abilities come back.

“What the hell was that?”

I sigh, “She is amused by making TK traps. If you noticed, it was labeled. A petroglyph meaning danger. You know Hopi Marie, we all do. She really does not like people messing with her stuff.”

“I was warned. I admit. But still this seems a bit paranoid. I would not want anyone messing with my stuff either.” Marie says. I nod. Squeak goes up to the object to sniff. She is careful not to touch though. I know these well.

“There are actually several in this room. I should have warned everyone, but in the panic I guess I forgot.”

“How does she do it?” Marie asks. Clearly scanning it.

“She is our expert at the quantum level. She can make a quantum construct out of anything, even a gas. Those are the worst traps. Just breathing it in can immobilize you.”

“That is taking Kung Fu too far I think. Amazing. I thought I knew Cat really well.”

“You did not share a bedroom with her. Never again.”

That Marie understood, “Never again.” Not even another TK, rogue or not will trap her.

“And the boys tease us for goofing off all the time. At least one of us was not goofing off.” I nod.

No. 3786-AB-5a

Drone Report: Long Live the Colony. See appendix for raw data and tables.

Quick Survey, Stage One, Summary: This is the third light/dark cycle and though the world looked promising from non sentient probes, there is much to dissuade use on examination.

Only a few of the autotrophs are edible with unfortunately limited nutrition. Most have toxic compounds giving them a bad taste or need of extensive processing before use.

The heterotrophs are relentless. Even with extensive coatings of repellents the assault is non-stop, during light and dark. They come in all sizes from the size of a small colony house down weighing sixes of times the mass of a drone to the smallest pest lice larvae. From herbivores to strict carnivores. The assault does not appear to be for consumption. May be strictly territorial. Many appear to be capable of tool use, including weapons both physical as well as biochemical. Of course the tech is no match for the colony's mastery, but can be annoying.

That leaves the decomposers. Drones, including this specimen, are meticulous in keeping clean at all times. Yet, the decomposers are also relentless in their attempts to digest whatever comes within contact. Of course they are unsuccessful at penetrating the hardened drone exo. It is likely they would succeed against a standard worker. They do however destroy any and all attempts to bring colony food crops to life. All seeds and cuttings died within fractions of a light/dark cycle.

No indication of a tech culture above simple tool use was found, but the sample size and length of time may be too small to be sure of this conclusion.

There were flickers of psiotic activity, but nothing sustained or conclusive. It can take time for the sensors to adjust to a new biota. This conclusion may be premature.

A total of six sixes of sites from all trophic zones were sampled as indicated in the appendix.

It is not the drone's place to recommend or reject a new colony world. Certainly not from a stage one survey. This drone cannot offer an easy conclusion either. Long Live the Colony.

Better Idea

I stare at my sculpture of the sloth on a low branch. I think it might be time to stop playing. Mike chewed me out good for putting everyone in danger. Here is another art piece done with 'thn metal. Yeah, I wanted something that would not rust or corrode, and strong enough to survive almost anything. Will the 'thants use this as a portal to take over this world next? It would be my fault for leaving this here.

I think it would be good to be proactive instead of always reacting to everything. I need to think on this. Who knows how long the 'thants have been using 'thn metal for their own needs. Probably millions of years, if any similarity to our insects is a guide. Likely they are way better than I am at using it. I already know they can make it, or use found caches. They can change it to form portals for more of them to come through. Eventually they take over a world converting it into a giant colony. Granted this is a guess. None of us has even bothered to trace an invasion back to its source to see for sure. Probably a bad assumption. Instead we just kill them when we find them. Not very TK of us. Even other species at the regional galactic center admitted they do as much. Not just pests on the worlds we inhabit.

Maybe something different this time. Not art, but science. Well, as limited as I am in that direction. I like this world, it is quiet, but not likely to end up high on the sentient list and extremely unlikely to ever spon a TK capable of mating with a 'thn. So, I guess what I am thinking it that it would not be the end of the universe if something went wrong here and the 'thants did take over. I don't intend for that to happen, but if it does, it would not be the end of everything. Well, except, they could then use this world as a jumping off point to another world.

I pop to several worlds over in a variety of directions. None are green worlds. Most are brown, one black. A pretty isolated pocket. Hmm, that could be a problem in and of itself. Will need to make this world very attractive for this to work. No idea how they decide. Must be somehow they can sense 'thn metal. That does not even make sense. If they can sense 'thn metal and this metal can only be made by TKs which are mortal enemies, why come to any world that already has 'thn metal?

Unless TKs are actually rare and that means the only other life form that can make 'thn metal is another colony. There is more than one colony! Probably more than one species. Do they cooperate or compete or both? Is this an entire ecosystem? What does a colony world look like

even?

Can't believe I am the first to ask these questions. Why is that?

Where has the kitty Cat gone?

“They are not back yet?” I ask. Tia shakes her head no.

Maybe I should not have saved her from the detention center. No, I could not have given up what has happened since. What an adventure. From a juvenile hell receptionist to TK8. Whew! Yeah, I did mean hell. I feel like I have lived ten lifetimes, well in the time of twenty lifetimes all said.

I am not an artist, scientist, psychologist, anything special at all. Just an ordinary Sam. I guess someone has to do the grunt work. Cleaning up after the top TKs. Not that I mind. Someone has to do it. Used to doing scut work. This is way more entertaining at least.

“We are not supposed to feed the wildlife.”

Bo and Peep are each perched on one shoulder. You know, those big tit fairy like creatures. They are so obviously over the top they are funny. Add a silly baseball cap, baggy jeans, torn shirt and the look is complete.

“Not like no one else breaks the rules around here.” I hand each a seed I have DSd out of a pocket. Have to keep the pocket closed and use DS as they have both figured out how to get the seeds themselves and that tickles like crazy and looks even worse to an outsider. Yeah, big tits trying to get into my pants. They are both outrageously noisy and messy eating their seed.

I sigh, “What do you need me to do?”

“Look, I am not your mamacita. You figure it out.”

“I am just a stupid male. No real reason to exist.”

“Go rogue and be done with it then.” She points up, “The sun is right up there. Go for it.” Only sure way to commit suicide as a TK8. We do this banter a lot. She knows I am only playing. I have a set of chores and I mosey off to do them. Mostly related to food. Yes, we can make anything we want from anything laying around, but it is not the same as home grown and home made. I do the growing, used to have a veggie garden growing up, and Tia does the cooking. No one complains about her cooking. A, it is fantastic, and B, you do not want to piss her off.

I have several acres under my care. Oh, a few more acres of fruit and nut trees. All of this is under quarantine from the locals. It would not hurt them. Their food is poisonous to Hu, but not the other way around. However, if we feed them, they do not do their chores and the ecology suffers. I pop Bo and Peep to outside. They are both asleep anyway and I just put them back on their respective trees. Doubt they even noticed. Used to it.

They sure sleep a lot. Life is easy is my guess.

We get enough rainfall that the trees pretty much take care of themselves until each species is ready for harvest. Nothing up yet. The apples and apricots are going to be ready soon though. Good to keep an eye on them.

To the vegie patch. Ah, yes, kale is always ready. They all complained about too much kale at first, till Tia humphed, went to work and blew them away. I gather some. We can play with the genes all we want and I have rainbow dino kale going at the moment. We have a seed bank to keep our creations going. Tomatoes are always good. We have a few dozen varieties. Tia does the best pico de gallo. My mouth is already watering. I gather tomatoes, chilies, onions, lime juice, and cilantro. Fresh chips would be great. On the way back I bring a small bag of dried corn with me.

I love making masa, by hand. Yeah, I could make it in seconds with TK, but there is something about good hard work, grinding and working the meal into masa. Add slaked lime to the cooked corn (yeah, I cheated there) and let it all sit to work its magic. The alkali will remove the hard sheath around the corn. This is composted, the rest I will grind using a hard stone mortar. Stone ground is the best.

I take the ground masa and the vegies to Tia. There she sets me to making tortillas while she makes the fresh salsa. Wood fire under a flat stone of course. The combination of even heat and smoke is divine. We won't make the actual chips until others start arriving. Corn oil already set aside for this purpose.

I wave goodbye to Tia for my usual afternoon stroll in the local forest. San Jose had almost no nature left by the time I was rescued and we all left Earth Two forever with the Hopi people. Coming here was strange at first, especially after the thousand year snooze. Sort of like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. Suddenly everything was new and strange. So the walks. I really want to connect to the local life. Bo and Peep immediately land on my shoulder and I hand them each a seed to munch on without really thinking. Yeah, we had an orientation from Smith and Jones and we have been here for a couple of years since then. There are thousands and thousands of species to get to know.

It is much more than individuals of course. There is a gestalt I need to feel before do my part. Growing up I saw politicians and industry repeated promise something and have it backfire and do the opposite. Of course that might have been their intention all along. We suspected as much. Still, the ideas sounded good at the time. The universal catch got

us every time, there is always a side effect. Silver once said you can't turn an ocean liner on a dime. No more dimes to show you. A tiny silver flat cylinder used to exchange for needs. Left over from thousands of years previous.

The best way is to make changes is slowly, but only after thoroughly understanding how all the life interacts. Those are the key. Of course I could never kill a creature or plant without a very good reason, but the individual is not the end. The entire community of intersecting needs and desires has to be taken into account. Here is better than Earth Two of course, because it was designed from the beginning to be more cooperative. You can only eat your own and the dead. Can't cross species unless there is a community action against a rogue player.

In reality, the TKs are not needed except in an emergency or an outsider invasion. We will not be here forever and they need to be self sustaining. I can't live anywhere without understanding the players. Even in San Jose, I knew all the gangs, the enforcement officers, management, etc. A sort of ecosystem. Each wanted something from the other and knew that certain lines could not be crossed without huge consequences. If everyone behaved, then everyone succeeded. The bad players were removed, the innocents were not preyed upon too much and were able to survive, a so on.

I choose a place to sit, near the Bo and Peep's tree so they can do what they need to do while they watch me. I then listen in to the background thoughts of everyone in a ten meter range. That still means thousands of voices at different time frames of course. Being TK allows me to take much more in than a norm, but it can still get overwhelming if I am not careful. Even though each has a plant and or fungi they interact with, there is still an amazing amount of communication between groups. Negotiating territories and resources like space, water, nutrients. If someone dies the cry goes out and creatures who can take advantage of the resource quickly take off to do their work. Like the best symphony orchestra that ever happened, but without a conductor.

Ants are like this. No one, not even the queen who really is just a giant ovary, knows what is going on, but each has a place and role. Working with the little you have in terms of understanding and communication skills, you do your part and it all works. No stress over being hired and fired, not graft or corruption. The entire colony reacts to new challenges with a minimum of trial and error. Remarkable really.

Ah, but there are wars. Really bad ones, with hundreds of thousands of casualties. There was this one place in San Jose where two different

colonies of Argentine ants met. Dead bodies all over, but all in the narrow space where they met. Became a sort of no ant zone. In your work, if you ran into so many of your sisters all lying dead, you knew to get the hell out of there unless you were willing to join them in death in the defense of the colony. Not seeing the 'enemy' you went back to work.

No where near as bad here, not that conflicts never happened, but they were usually quickly resolved according to the rules that had be laid out and imposed. I am guessing Turtle, Silver and Green Man worked this all out. I can't imagine the amount of understandings they must have to do this work. My part seems so insignificant by comparison.

When I get back to base the chips are frying. People are starting to come back to report what they have done and found. I usually don't pay much attention except when called upon. Rare. Tia and I put food in front of each and clean up the messes as needed. Squeak comes in and takes over washing the plates. I think she likes playing with the bubbles. Each TK has their own special plate and cup they designed themselves. A very eclectic group. Everyone one is different. Mine is just a simple plain white plate/bowl combination and a simple white cup. Everything goes back into the cabinet in their own spot. Move something and all hell breaks loose. Everyone has gotten boringly routine in how they do the simplest things.

Perfunctory thanks are given for the meal and everyone takes off again to their own tasks and investigations. Big stink lately about a possible invasion by 'thants, not that I have seen anything but the planted stuff on the coast that Marie set up for us to find. Tia sits down to make a new sweater or something. When in doubt, Tia is knitting. Being TK and awake 24/7 she can crank out an enormous number. I hand a chip to Bo and Peep. They know they have to wait until everyone else is gone because all the noise they make would attract attention. Don't feed the locals. I know others have favorites too. Sort of an unwritten rule to overlook unless someone goes crazy and attracts a flock of followers. Bo and Peep would never allow this and chase off any one who tries.

Tia comes up to me and hands me something.

"What are these?"

She motions across her chest and points at my companions. I stretch the two items out and realize they are bras for Bo and Peep.

"Ha-ha, you know they won't wear them. Very funny." Tia leaves with a big smile giggling under her breath. Yeah, pranks are common. Still I hand them to the two who quickly realize they are not food and drop them on the ground. How would they feed their young with those things

in place?

TKs don't eat together that often. Usually once a day in the late afternoon. After cleanup, as the sun is setting, I set out once again for the forest. Night time is amazing. A lot of creatures have lights of some kind or special calls to announce to mates and partners where they are. I think it is noisier at night or it could be just without light it is easier to pay attention to the sounds and sites. Special time. Beautiful time. I really kick myself for getting to live in paradise. A light rain is falling, nothing like often happens in the early afternoon, but pleasant enough.

Oh, a really rare treat! They are singing as they come around me. Guess I am finally accepted. There are tears in my eyes, which some of them harvest, being salt lovers. I don't mind at all.

What is it?

Sam is off doing his night meditation. With everyone else gone too, it falls to me to do scans to see if everything is going as expected. Others are spread out over New Hope, so I concentrate locally. Something was here that appears to be gone. I know both Puu and Cat can hide from anyone here if they want to, so I have to believe others can as well. It then becomes finding effects and not the individuals themselves. What is out of place?

Sam and I accept we are the misfits in the group. There is no way I would have chosen either one of us to be elevated to TK8 and made part of a world building group. But, here we are. I have always been good at accepting change in my life. So many relatives died while on Earth Two. Now all are gone. Each one required change to mourn their loss and compensate for the lack of contribution to the whole. We learn, we adapt. What was the gringo saying, don't cry over spilled milk? Something like that. I was very lonely when I first joined. I knew Susan, now Cat, on the bus ride to Flagstaff, but that is very little to recommend me. I am happy to be here given the alternative. Of course I would rather the world was whole again and all my friends and family were back.

I make a mental image each night of our area and save that in my mind. Amazing ability to remember the tiniest details. Of course without this ability we could not make a new body when needed, or even more challenging, a new form to occupy. "To whom much is given, much will be required." It is a large responsibility.

Scanning a thousand square kilometers takes time if I am going to be thorough. I am thorough. Of course I have to subtract expected changes. Creatures move, plantimals move more slowly, but they move, plants grow, fungi grow, water moves, rocks fall, everything dies eventually. A lot of normal change each day. Without TK I could not handle one square centimeter much less a thousand square kilometers.

I work out to in, so I do not notice the change right next to me until I am nearly finished. I open my eyes suddenly, very surprised. I know I am not supposed to give my reaction away physically, but it is right next to me. A sphere, light gold in color, is floating on a few centimeters above the picnic table I am sitting on. If that was a dangerous creature, I could have been dead. Yes, I am shielded and yes, I am wearing my gold torque. DSing can be a sudden need and I do not want a dimension parasite sucking my juices. I wear my torque, which I touch now to assure

myself it is still there, just in case. I am proud that I have not actually popped out, but my heart is beating fast.

Nothing is happening. I scan the thing carefully. Do not want to make it mad. No ‘thn metal. Whew, so not ‘thn related. The weakest ‘thn can take out a TK8 easily. It appears to be solid with no apparent means to be floating. No idea what it is. Beyond me.

Attention everyone, something has appeared here that I cannot explain. Please come home.

It will not be immediate. I did not use the code word to indicate an emergency. My TP does not appear to have affected the ball any at least. There are at least five heavy metals present, gold of course, but also platinum, palladium, osmium and vanadium, all in lesser quantities.

Two pop in, a very large black cat and a very large ostrich with a huge head. I blink and then remember, “Khéya! Flor! We did not expect to see you for years and years. Why back so fast?” Khéya comes up to me purring and rubs her head against me. Flor shakes her head, so embarrassing.

Just passing through when we heard you call. Decided it would be fun to check it out. A distraction really. You can't believe how many really boring worlds we have visited.

“Boring? How could seeing so many life forms be boring?”

Flor finally speaks, “Khéya thinks anything not cat related is boring.” I laugh and Khéya gives me the cute kitty look. I laugh again and shake my head too.

“Pobre Gatita.” She humphs and lays down to take a nap. Of course.

“I would love to hear all about your adventures, but first I need help.” I point to the device, “What is this?”

Flor goes up to it. I can feel her scanning. Khéya is scanning it too, only pretending to be asleep. I do not call her out on it. Just smile.

Khéya stops and really does go to sleep. Obviously not a threat to her. We are on our own.

“Tia, I have no idea what this is. Appears solid, but I doubt it, just so well made that the seams do not show even at the molecular level. Who or what made this is a master for sure. Do ‘thn make artifacts?”

“I have never heard of one making anything without a fluidic directing them. Could this be some other kind of solidic life form?”

“Good idea, but except for the floating, I do not see any evidence of quantum effects.” I am no good at the quantum level stuff and do not even try. Technically I am supposed to be able to. I am ‘thn bait, but I know my limitations.

“The others should be here shortly. Care for some tea or something to eat. We have dried corn and squash seeds.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful. Too many years on field rations. Kitty will eat anything that runs from her, but I am more limited. Oh, I taste things, but nothing beats your own favorites.”

I pop in a bowl of mixed seeds and make tea over the small wood fire that is always going. I make tea for myself too. A welcome morning treat. Never was a coffee drinker. Drove my relatives crazy. Hey, I must have some British blood in their somewhere. I puff some of the seeds so they will be edible too.

Flor sees this and puffs the rest, “I love puffed corn!” Should have remembered that.

“You look good Flor. I see you have some new decorations.”

“Nothing important, just collected as we went along. You look good too. You are happy here?”

“More or less. Nothing really exciting and it is fun to watch all the lifeforms interacting. The rest of the group is crazy, but you already knew that. Cat is probably the worst. She got upset with Mike and took off to somewhere we can’t find her. Been gone for months now. If you happen to find her tell her we are worried.”

I admit it, I am intensely interested in the ball. I reach out to touch it. Sam pops in and slaps my hand away. Huh?

“Tia, you know better. What if that thing is one of Cat’s TK traps?”

“No one has seen her in months. She is not here now. Why would one of her traps suddenly appear here?” Don’t like being told I am wrong. Too much history there.

“And you think Cat is the ONLY ONE in the universes that can make one?”

“You are just being very paranoid.” Humph.

Smith and Jones pop in. Of the group they are probably the most reliable now. Funny, knowing them as kids. Punk teenagers with all that implies.

“Who, what’s that?”

“Don’t touch. Sam thinks it is a Cat Trap.”

“Khéya, Flor! Welcome back to the funny farm!” They say in unison. Rolling my eyes, I motion to Sam we had better rustle up some more grub. We head to the kitchen area. Sam has not been to the farm yet, so most of this will be duped. Okay, only the morning. No one expects a feast at sunrise.

Does not take long, eggs, chilies, tortillas, salsa. Fry bread for Khéya.

Why is he in Cat form. Best not to ask. Never heard of a Cat eating pastries either, but to each their own. Must be all the lard used in making them. He will eat some eggs without chilies too, so I serve up a bowl with some. Probably no chilies in North Dakota where he is from originally.

When we return, everyone is laughing. No idea why until I see Khéya and Flor covered in fairies and such. Khéya looks pissed, covering his head, but Flor is happy with the attention.

More of our group have arrived, Mike and Marie are looking at the sphere and shaking their heads at the sight of our visitors.

Finally Puu and Squeak come in obviously exhausted.

“Sorry I am all sweaty, we have been running in the tropics again.”

Mike asks, “Find anything new?”

“Nothing,” Squeak answers. Not happy. I am sure they will figure it out.

Puu glances to the ball and rolls her eyes, sighing. Walks right up to it and touches the top. I want to scream not to touch it. It unfolds into a beautiful flower like sculpture. She then looks carefully down at the inner petals. Sighs again.

“Well what is it?”

“I call them Cat Boxes.” A few snickers and looks to Khéya who is still fighting off locals.

“Cat uses them to send messages. Why didn’t you activate it?”

I look straight at Sam and say, “We thought it might be a Cat Trap.”

“General rule, spheres are safe. Cannot vouch for anything else. I admit they are over the top complex, but that is Cat.”

Sam is growing impatient, “What does it mean?”

“Oh, sorry. Just a note from Cat saying she is fine and not to keep looking for her. Working on a project.”

“She knows were looking for her.”

Marie asks, “Anyway of getting a message to her, given we really need her help with the ‘thants?”

Puu shakes her head no.

Flor asks, “‘thants?”

Marie answers after looking us over, “We have some evidence that they might be trying to enter and possibly colonize this world.”

“Ah, don’t let them. Scourge of the galaxies. Every TK we have talked to kills them on sight. They are not sentient and do not respond to any other method.”

“We have not actually seen any.”

“Some evidence they were starting to make a portal in the remnants of

the Mike and Marie brewery and maybe a larger one sampling plant material at the equator. Which is why Squeak and I were just there. And now will return. Nice seeing you again. Stay as long as you want. Help us?" She and Squeak pop out.

Khéya yawns, Flor answers, "There are no larger ones. Just the ones we all learned about in training. You just need to kill them. Scan and look for 'thn metal. That is their signature. Find that and remove it. It can takes thousands of years to dissuade them permanently unfortunately. Once they peg a world as useful they will keep trying."

Great. I will never complain about kitchen duties again.

Khéya stands and she and Flor pop out. A sudden cloud of critters without a perch fly up. Wonder when they will return.

Khéya & Flor

Larger ones? Where did they get that idea? I have never heard of any larger ones. We have been to several worlds, in the thousand plus we have, seen that had an infestation. We removed them quickly. I don't like killing things. Khéya of course made a game of it. Problem is pouncing is no where near quick enough and in most cases they are able to pop away. Not far, which of course just continued the chase. I ended up taking his toys away most of the time. Wish he would get back to Hu form. This Cat obsession has become annoying. I know he misses Sylvy, but still, it has been a thousand years.

We are only one world over. I am guessing this is the closest mirror to New Hope having duplicated just before Turtle and Silver took over. Most things look familiar. A quick scan confirms there is no 'thn metal present on this world. Always the first step now. I have to wonder why the infestation became so bad in this manifestation? Barely a mention in the journals from the last multiverse. I guess we should be lucky to have the journals. If Silver had not been able to break the code and get the information to us we would have never known.

Boring, time to move on Flor.

Patience my dear. I want to be sure. I know plantimals do not provide much challenge to you. But, really? A TK8 is challenged by any non TK creature? Take a nap then. You are good at that.

And you can't stop clucking. He plops down on a clear patch and starts to snore.

I don't snore.

Right. It is purring. Be grateful, no fairies here at least. Hmm, better watch out for that tree, it appears to be sneaking up on you. Should reach you sometime in the next year. Run kitty, run!

He gives me a dirty look and suddenly licks his paw to then plop back down to sleep.

There are no fairies, pixies, any sort of thing that moves fast except seeds blown by the wind. I recognize the plants as the starting material for the changes on New Hope, but of course we provided the necessary animal genetics. Plants and fungi, both having evolved slow movement mechanisms. Don't be timid Flor, it works for them. I have to remind myself.

It is interesting how little our basic personalities change. A thousand plus years and everyone is recognizable in any physical form they are in

at the moment.

Khéya is right though, this world is pretty boring even by my standards. Still it is good to be someplace safe for a bit. Not that we have to worry about our safety of course, but that does not stop all manner of life forms trying to kill two totally strange creatures showing up out of nowhere. A Cat/Hu and a Ku not even shaped right for worlds that have cats, humans and flightless birds. I guess it does not help that Khéya thinks everything is here for his amusement and it is okay to hunt them. The first thing they see is a giant cat in a pounce position. Oh, he does not kill them. Just a good old scare them nearly to death. I have had to pop so many of them out of his reach, you cannot imagine.

Then one has to think why I stay with him. But we are both intensely curious about what is in the next world. Absolutely fascinating how each ecology works out solutions to keep it all going. Well, not all, there are the occasional brown and black worlds. Are they this way because of failed experiments or because they are further from the life force? I can definitely feel a lessening of the TK force on some of them. But not all.

We have found ruins on black worlds. High tech that ended up destroying their worlds. Definite proof that it can happen and the necessity of having TKs develop to try and prevent it from happening. Cats and Hu both came from a world that could have gone that way and nearly did. Even Ku could reach that state soon enough. The Black Vests have been put down for the moment, but any culture that can make them will do it again in some form. Yes, Ku is definitely in danger from its own destruction.

“Wake up kitty, we need to check on Ku.” I don’t wait for the stretch and pop us to an empty field on Ku. Been too long since we were there last.

Ku Eden

Khéya changes to Hu form at last.

+I thought the Cat form might be too much for a bird world to handle. I will try to behave myself, even if roast Ku would probably taste wonderful.+ He says in Ku. I shake my head and sigh. I am starting to act like a Hu.

+A Ku would blend in better. No one here has likely seen a Hu.+

+What, we are the stuff of legends. Why here? An empty field.+

+This was not an empty field two hundred years ago.+

+Has it been that long? Well, cultures change. That is normal.+

+Then explain this.+ I do a quick dig with my right foot and uncover a Ku thigh bone and a medallion.

We both scan. No words needed. There used to be an entire village here. Several hundred Ku used to live here.

+What was this place?+

I sigh, +This was a Watcher stronghold and training center. They are all dead now. There are layers of bones and medallions, but nothing recent.+

+Judging from the scattering, this was murder, not grave burial. Ku bury their dead with honor if I remember.+

+And dishonored are treated like this.+

+There is a small town a few clicks from here. I am going to do some recon.+ He pops out. He is wearing a black cloak that will hide his form to some extent, but he cannot pass for Ku.

I scan ahead. Seems like a normal town. There is a bigger city twenty three kilometers away. There is a train running towards it with no one in the last car. I pop to a perch. It soon reaches the station and I depart like any other passenger. The problem with popping straight into a city is that people are likely to noticed someone appearing out of nowhere. This way I blend in. Ah, not really. The styles have changed a lot since my last time here. I might have been better with the black cloak. I duck behind a corner and change to a white Watcher cloak and medallion. I want to see what happens.

The reaction is immediate, and not what I expected. I am seen instantly and people run from me like I am some kind of monster. Okay, not expected. The white cloak Watchers were the good clucks, not something to be feared. Strange. I hide again and change to something more resembling what others are wearing.

I listen in on a few conversations as I walk with the crowd, who seems to have gotten over their experience.

+Did you see the evil one?+

+Yeah, but I don't believe it was real. Probably an actor, or a gov pretending to be one to check our reaction.+

+Gone now at least. Scary.+ The other bobs affirmative.

How did we become the evil ones. We reach a corner and there is a large male wearing a red vest with a gold circle. As we pass everyone does a respectful bow to him. I do also, not wanting to appear out of place. He stops me anyway.

+Papers!+ I quickly dupe the papers of someone who looks like me a block away and remove them from my pouch. He takes them roughly and quickly looks over them, watching me the entire time.

+You are one block off course. Two deductions will be posted for failure to follow your prescribed route.+ I bow again as he hands the papers back to me. Wow. When did they become so guano? Not a black vest, but the actions are even worse. Black vests were more secret police, these are in the open bullies. I hate bullies. I get a few meters away and dissolve all of the ink from his notebook. Explain that asshole. I know, a Hu term, but it fits.

I get back to my prescribed block. At this point it does not matter where I am. I find a place to get food and go inside to see how much that has changed. I watch others to see how the process is accomplished. Apparently you have to show your papers to get a small bowl of nondescript mush. I show my papers and again cause a fuss.

+You are over your allotment Gizzke. Denied. Work harder if you want more. Move on.+ No one looks at me. I should feel embarrassed. I am guessing that no one dares react for fear they will be denied next. I scan a bowl to see what it is. Not enough calories to feed a bird half my size. They are being starved to death. Scanning those around me confirms this. Lots of ribs showing. Feathers are rough and faded under their thin cloaks. Likely freezing as well. What happened?

I erase the records on this bully too and increase the ration in everyone's bowls to a full bowl again. There is surprise, but no outward reaction. Just the sound of a lot of birds quickly eating their good fortune. Honest dear, I have no idea what happened, but suddenly there was food in my bowl. Good food too. You should have tasted it. It was wonderful.

I leave the shop.

What have you got Khéya? It is a mess here. Everything is upside down, like the overthrow of the black vests went terribly wrong.

Smaller town, smaller bullies. More laid back, more violence and less talk. Only one I have seen so far. Do yours have a red vest with a gold circle medallion?

Yeah, only lots of them. On every corner and every shop. Severe rationing. Something bad has happened. We need a historian.

Mine are farmers, so probably get slightly more food, but are pushed hard to grow more. Find a university then. There is one twelve blocks from where you are. Meet you on the steps.

I find Khéya easily. Ku now at least, but still wearing a black cloak. Mine is more the boring gray brown of the locals. I switch to black. Likely norms would not be allowed access. I make an overlapping ellipses medallion out of gold, copper and silver for both of us. Papers. I make matching satchels with made up papers in both. Hopefully will not need them.

No one stops us, not even the two red vests at the entrance. I am guessing they are used to VIKs and know better than to push a confrontation. Very top down scary culture they have now. No directory inside. If you have to ask, you don't belong here.

Basement of course, Khéya TPs. Without a cluck we take the stairs down two levels. It is dusty and dirty down here. Guess that is still normal. No one respects history.

One door is open with a dim light spilling into the dark hallway. Even light is being rationed. We enter to see an old female Ku well past egg laying years. I close the door behind me. Not until then does she look up and notice us with beak wide open. Eye glasses that would have been considered antique two hundred years ago fall off her beak. She reacts and tries to retrieve them. Khéya picks them up and hands them to her. Cleaned up and repaired of course. *Thanks* I TP him.

+Who are you?+

I respond, as females are higher perch, or were. No idea now.

+We are hoping to obtain some information if it would be convenient. I realize we do not have an appointment.+ She just stares at us, blinking.

Food. Offer her some food. Khéya suggests.

I make some granola bars and pull them from my cloak pouch, also just made. Something I picked up from the Hu, but taste great to Ku as well. I hand one to her, or rather place it on the desk next to her perch and hand one to Khéya and one left for me. I start eating mine.

She wakes up startled and picks up the bar to sniff it, then taste it. It disappears really quick. I make some more and hand three more to her. They also disappear.

+You two must be really high perch. Why would you have any interest in an old cluck like me? I assure you I have followed all directives and am current on my work check list.+

+We are not here looking for trouble. We are, ah, not what we seem. A convenient disguise to get in the hutch.+ Khéya pulls a Watcher medallion out of his cloak.

She hisses loudly, and motions to put it away.

+That could get us all sent to flight school without a trial.+

+We found it in a mass grave about twenty clicks from here,+ Khéya says. +What can you tell us about it? We could not find anything in ‘official’ records.+

+Of course not. Forbidden knowledge. Is this some kind of test? I am loyal and have done nothing proscribed.+

I look to Khéya and then respond, +We are not from the gov, but distant travelers. Your culture was not what we were expecting and we were hoping someone could tell us what happened.+

+Not gov. How can I be sure of that? I am old, but I still don’t want to end up thrown off a cliff.+

+What we are about to tell you would get us sent to flight school faster than you. We are Watchers.+ We both pull out new shiny Watcher medallions for her to examine. She picks up both of them and examines them carefully, even pulling out a strong magnifier to look for the markings on the back. Markings that a normal eye would not see.

+Show me the other one, the old one.+ Khéya hands her the one we found and she cleans the back and looks at it too. She falls to the ground. We rush to catch her and put her back on her perch.

+Could have cleaned some of the ones you found. Need more proof. Watchers were ah, capable, of certain skills a normal Ku could not do.+ Watchers were TK2s at least.

+Anything in particular? If we do some trick we are prepared for, you would not believe us. Pick something we are not prepared for so you will believe us.+

She does the equivalent of a Ku smile, +We need to talk in a safer place. Let me collect my bag and tools. Take me to the site you found these.+ I return the Ku smile and understand. She is a real historian and can’t resist the urge to see for herself. She futzes for some time. Of course she was not expecting this opportunity.

+You do understand that the site is off limits to all Ku and if we are caught, they will kill us on the spot and our bodies will never be found. There are no direct trains or routes of course.+ Before she is finished we

are there.

+Will be dark soon.+ Khéya offers.

+I am sorry we did not introduce ourselves, I am Flor and this is Khéya.+

She looks around and finally closes her beak, does a deep bow, +I am called the Old One by most, being the last historian in existence. It was my understanding that our entire world is now under the control of the Red Vests, so where are you from really?+

+Then you won't mind if we call you Mattie.+ Her true name.

If you keep shocking her, she is likely to die of a heart attack Flor.

Nope, fixed that when we met.

+This is where we found the medallion.+ Khéya digs up a few bones with his foot.

+I have never actually been here. They really destroyed it. No structures remain. It happened about fifty years ago. I was just a chick at the time and don't remember it clearly. All we had were stories and a few drawings to go from. Thought it was just a myth until you showed me the medallions.+

+How does a culture change so quickly? Watchers were feared by the Black Vests. Who are these Red Vests then?+

+Red Vests came later. Rumor has it that there was some kind of plague that killed them all. The Red Vests arose a few years later and they were the ones to destroy the village here and everywhere else.+

+Something had to come in to replace the power vacuum I guess.+ She signs affirmative.

+And the Black Vest model was all they had or remembered. A few more years and it might have turned out completely differently. Too bad. Could have ended up a White Cloak culture instead.+

+Flor, over here.+ We both go to where Khéya is pulling a large one meter stone cube structure from the ground with TK.

+Guano! 'thn metal. I completely forgot to scan for it.+

+Shows 'signs' of occupation too.+

+We have company Watchers,+ Mattie whispers.

+Annoying,+ I pop them to the other side of the city. Red Vests.

I scan both Khéya and myself. Our gold torques are both intact. I am guessing the 'plague' was dimension parasites. The bones won't tell us as there are no physical changes, entirely TK. We need to be careful. Most Watchers are too low TK to attract their attention. What happened?

Khéya nods and I pop all three of us to a deserted area hundreds of kilometers from any settlements. High noon and hot here. I make a shel-

ter over us, some perches and refreshments.

+We are going to need your help Mattie. How about becoming a Watcher?+

+I am ready. I have been ready my entire life. I can also suggest other good candidates. But I am an old ball of feathers. I won't be with you long enough to complete training even.+

I cluck humor, +Oh, that won't be a problem. We need to have you sleep for a bit to effect the first stage change.+

She nods and assumes a sleep position on a perch with her head tucked under her arm.

+Are you sure Flor? This is a massive change to your home world.+

+I did not start this war with the 'thants, but I will not let them destroy my world.+

+Well then, first we remove ALL 'thn metal.+

+Down to the smallest atomic amount of it. They should not have been here, they should not have been able to sic the parasites on low TKs.
+

Khéya shrugs, +Their tactics are changing. Makes sense. Insects are the fastest to evolve on Earth 1 & 2. We need to warn the others too. Still no sign of the large ones Puu and Squeak think they found evidence of.+

Not yet at least. Everyone will get gold torques too. Normally no one below a TK5 needs one. Guess it will become part of the new look. The New Watchers. Keeping the white cloaks though. The Red Vests will remember the legends and we need the fear element to make a handful of people effect this change.

+Logistically we have a lot of work to do Flor. Housing, training, timing.+

+Not to mention keeping this secret until we are ready. But, we have been trained for this. Time to make it work.+ He nods and starts to survey our surroundings. I have already raised Mattie to TK2 and worked on her body some more, but let her sleep through it.

+It would be good to recreate the village. That will have scare factor.+

+But not until we are ready. The village should be underground, invisible, until we are ready.+

+Agreed. The field work can be in some remote location. An artificial city or village, just like the Hu military trained for the middle east. I have scanned. They have projectile weapons. Last thing we need is to lose all of them at the first engagement.+

+Sylvy tactics. You trained with her. Cats are ambush predators. Gorilla warfare as the Hu say, at least at first. Get in, make a squawk, get out

without being seen.+

+Except by a few of the oppressed. They need to see that their heroes have returned.+

+Oh yeah. The New Watchers are here!+

+First, a message bottle to the New Hope group. I would have no idea where to send one to Silver and Turtle, but somehow they need to be told too.+

+And Owa and Sylvy, though if someone tells Silver or Turtle, they will be told.+

Oh Snap

“What’s wrong Squeak? Do you sense something?”

“No, Squeak not smell anything wrong.”

“Then what’s wrong dear? I can see something is worrying you.”

I stare out over the water and sigh as best I can in Rap form. Comes out more like a hiss. Ok, Puu knows.

“In the water, what’s in the water Squeak?”

I look back to her, “We have not told Snap. Snap needs to be told. I am not strong enough to swim that deep. Snap need to know.”

Puu slaps her head, “I completely forgot about Snap. You are right. I don’t think any of us has even scanned below water very carefully.

Hmmm, I can make us a submarine. We can go visit Snap. How did you know she was close by? Only a few kilometers from here.”

“Squeak no swim?” I ask.

“Nope, we will stay dry the whole time.” I watch as Puu makes a ball large enough to fit us easily from the sand on the shore. She pops inside and motions for me to join her. I jump up excitedly and pop in.

We rise from shore and go over the water to where I sense Snap below us. She is in her cave. The water is not that deep actually. Rap are not used to swimming, so I still fear the water some. I feel safer in the ball.

Puu takes her time descending. The water is shallow enough that there is abundant life most of the way down. Totally different from the land forms, though the insect forms look somewhat similar. I remember the land forms originally came from Snap, so this makes sense. Cat told me that this was true on our own origin worlds as well.

Once it gets too dark to see effectively I switch to scanning. The colors are gone, but I can tell difference from what things are made from. Life is different from rock. Not enough light down here for plants or plantimals.

“How do they eat if there is no sun?”

“All things die Squeak. We have talked about this. Even we will die eventually, though hopefully not for a long time yet. Once things die on the surface they sink to the bottom of the sea. On the bottom creatures find them and eat the dead.”

“Fresh meat is better. Old meat not good.”

Puu laughs, “Maybe not for us, but rotten meat is softer and easier to eat for these creatures. They are used to it, so it does not bother them. Just happy to find something to eat.” I am not convinced.

“Miss Cat. When will Cat return Puu?”

“I don’t know Squeak. When she is ready I guess. I miss her too. Even if she can be a pain at times. I don’t miss her pranks.”

“Safe scary is fun Puu. Squeak like safe scary.” Keeps hunting and defense skill sharp.

“Glad someone does. Drives everyone else nuts. We are here.”

Welcome Puu and Squeak. Long time no see.

“Snap can see us Puu?”

“Figure of speech Squeak. Pay attention.”

How may I serve you? Sorry I have nothing available to eat for your kind.

“We are fine. Squeak wanted to talk to you, so I will let her do so.” I scan Snap’s eye stalks moving to look at me. She is slow.

“Snap, ah, thank you for receiving us. Puu has been trying to teach me manners. Squeak want to tell you of danger.”

No need for manners. We are not formal down here. Please tell me of what danger we face.

“There is evidence that ‘thants are trying to make an entrance to our world. Different ones, large ones, at least as large as Squeak and Puu.”

They can live under water?

Puu answers, “They can live in a vacuum, so I assume they can live under water and being made of ‘thn metal, the pressure would not bother them.”

That is a concern. How do we find them?

“Ooo, Snap find them by finding ‘thn metal. Removed all other sources of metal, so only ‘thants have ‘thn metal now.”

Yes, I see, normally your bubble would be made of ‘thn metal, but I scan it is made from quantum quartz instead. A reasonable alternative given our shallow depths. I will instruct the other TKs to scan and remove or report anything they find. I will TP you if we find anything.

“Many thanks Snap.” *Did I do that right Puu?*

Yes dear, very good.

Come again and stay longer once this crisis is over.

“We bring everyone to visit. A reunion!” I get excited about the pack all being together again.

You do realize that Snap’s idea of a get together could last ten years or more. Puu shakes her head.

“Pack is all important Puu. Need Cat back to be pack again.”

“I know.”

All Hands!

“Okay Puu you called this meeting. What’s up.”

“A few are still missing. I will wait Marie.”

“Hmm our group is getting a bit lax lately. Mind if I do a little ‘exercise’ when they show up?”

I smile, “An excellent idea Sensei!” I bow to her and she returns the bow. I move to stand next to her. Squeak, Tia and Sam are already here and have heard this. They sigh and assume positions in front of us. They know the routing. Well, Squeak does not sigh, she likes exercise.

Khéya pops in and sees us, “I have something important to say. Ku has been attacked.”

Marie asks, “Can it wait until the others get here and we do a workout to help everyone get ‘focused’?”

“Excellent, mind if I switch back to Cat?”

“As long as you participate I do not care what form you take.” He bows to her as he changes. By the time he finishes the bow, he is Cat. Amazing. So smooth and fast. I am jealous.

Takes practice Puu, lots and lots of practice. Khéya TPs me.

“Make Squeak Rap please,” Squeak begs me, holding my hand. I sigh and begin the process. Not as fast or smooth as Khéya, but I get the job done. Squeak loves being Rap. She was just Hu for only a few hours this time. There is a certain amount of discomfort involved in changing. She never complains.

Mike comes in with two beer mugs and offers one to Marie who just stares at him. He looks around and sees us in exercise formation and pops out the beer to stand up straighter and take a step back.

Smith and Jones come in. I could feel them scanning us to be sure they were last this time. They pop right into their places, complete with exercise robes and black belts. When did they earn those? Marie gives them a sour look and turns brown. Did not think so. Marie and Cat are the only black belts. To be fair, we all have our own interests. I am happy with my brown.

“Two laps around the compound! Go!”

Squeak takes off like a bullet. Khéya is right behind her. Cats usually run out of steam. Being TK means he can keep up, but the point is to try and not use TK for exercise. We will see.

Marie takes up the last position pushing Smith and Jones as best she can. They asked for it. I wonder what Khéya is going to say. Hope it is

not 'thant related. How much worse can it get?

Our compound has gotten pretty big as time tends to see more and more needs. With near infinite space, it makes sense to just put up another structure for a specific purpose. I estimate about two and a half miles per lap.

We are all panting when we finish, even Khéya and Cats don't pant. Hu left over habit I guess.

Marie, we are really out of shape. Maybe we need to be doing this daily for awhile, especially if we are going in to battle.

I agree. Likely to get chaotic though. We will keep it up as long as we can.

She bows to everyone and they randomly bow back to her. Sloppy.

"Khéya, you and Mike are together. Yes Mike you will be paired with a Cat, remember what it was like with Owa and Sylvy. They trained Khéya. Keep your wits."

"I know Smith and Jones will give each other a good sport, being overly competitive with each other." They smile and bow, nudging each other.

"Sam and Puu. I know Puu is better, but in a conflict we do not get to choose our adversary. Puu, do not be easy on him, but don't kill him either. NO ONE KILLS anyone right? Counting coup only."

Smith and Jones reluctantly agree, kidding each other about it. I would not want to hear their close TP to each other. I can guess.

"That leaves Tia and Squeak. You have worked together in the kitchen for years. Fighting a Rap in Rap form is probably the hardest contest you can ever have." Khéya growls. "Other than a Cat of course." Everyone giggles. Squeak looks confused. Will have to explain later. Egos. "You have been progressing well Tia, do not be intimidated. Do your best." She smiles and Tia smiles back. Ah oh, Squeak. This smells like a set up.

Well, Sam outweighs me two to one and a huge height advantage, but I am faster and more experienced. I love counting coup. Much more fun. Of course worthless against an unknown enemy who does not understand what you are doing and just does their best to kill you. Granted harder with a high level TK, but it can be done if we are caught off guard.

We used to do these match ups all the time, so none of this is new to anyone. Sam is getting better and I am happy for him. I am sure he is glad he was not up against Marie or Cat. He did well, scoring a few taps.

Tia may look like an old mamacita, but she can be fierce. A lot about Rap fighting is show. Look fierce and make a lot of noise. She did not get the most points, but definitely gave Squeak a good work out. She will re-

spect her more now. Even Marie congratulated her afterwards.

Smith and Jones ended up exactly even of course. They always do. Might be wise to end it that way or the other would never hear the end of it.

Mike did not stand a chance of course. Beside fighting as a Cat, Khéya had the advantage in a close fight. Hell, he is unstoppable even as a Hu.

All in all, everyone got a good workout.

“We really need to make this daily again Marie.”

“I agree, saw a lot of sloppy work out there Puu.” Meaning me too.

“Hey, I am the only one who still runs everyday at dawn.”

“I noticed, but you held back on Sam. Take it higher next time.”

“Okay, got it. No nice TK.” I smile and she shakes her head.

The group is sitting around retelling their bouts from their own perspective. Egos never die.

Khéya comes up to me, “I need to get back, can we start this now?”

I nod, “Gather around everyone and listen to what Khéya has to say about a development on Ku Eden.”

Khéya waits until everyone is silent.

“We have evidence that all of the Watchers on Ku Eden were killed by dimension parasites. This allowed a new group of bullies, called Red Vests this time, to take over and oppress the Ku.”

Mike asks, “Wait, I thought the Watchers were all TK2 or 3, well except for the Abbott of course. The parasites ignore a food source of low value.”

Everyone checks their own torque to be sure it is in place.

Tia remarks, “Khéya, you are not wearing a torque. How does that work?”

“Scan deeper. I have incorporated it directly into my spinal column. As you have noticed I change form often. No Cat would be caught dead wearing a collar.” That gets giggles and nods. Very true, they would rather die than wear a collar indicating subservience to a superior being.

He continues, “We are starting up the Watchers again, and the gold torque will be part of the new uniform. Will help indicate we are not exactly the same.”

“Won’t that draw more attention to them?”

He smiles, “It has gone way past that concern.”

Marie asks, “I am still skeptical. What is the evidence for parasites?”

“I second that. None of us has ever seen or interacted with either ‘thants or parasites. Our own knowledge in fact only comes from the

journals. This incarnation is clearly different, as expected of course.”

“As you say, this time is different. We know the ‘thants hate TKs as we are their mortal enemies. We kill them, all over the multiverse. Parasites eat TKs. It is logical arrangement.”

“But the evidence?”

“We have a field fifty years old where the entire Watchers collective was destroyed. There are no live Watchers on Ku any more. We have scanned.”

“Sorry, but you do not actually know what killed them. A TK2 or 3 could be taken out with tech easy enough. What is the current tech level?”

He is going to hate me if I keep up this questioning. He looks at me clearly getting frustrated.

I sigh, “There is a point to this questioning. As you know Squeak and I have been trying to find evidence of a larger version of the ‘thants here at the equator. Mike says he saw some changes to ‘thn metal where he and Marie built their brewery from ‘thn metal. BUT, no one has actually seen any actual ‘thants. I have a feeling we are chasing fears instead of reality.”

That gets him. He nods and sits.

Marie comments, “Kung Fu, you cannot assume actions from your partner. It takes practice and evidence. Paying very careful attention. One mind, no separation from the reality before you.”

Khéya admits, “This has not been done. Thank you Sensei for the reminder. I will return to Flor. She needs help setting up the Watchers again. We will find evidence of parasites or lack of and check out other possibilities to explain what we have found.” He pops out.

Sam says, “I like the idea of the hidden torque. I always found it to be a bit flashy.”

Smith, “Really, even here?” He waves his hand around, “Like any of the natives would fail to notice us?” Good point. Sam shrugs. He does make his torque internal anyway. Never know. I do the same. I like the idea.

I come in, “And we need to do the same here. Vigilance will only take us so far. We need some experience with the ‘thants to know how to deal with them. It takes eight to go to the galactic center. Cat being gone means we need to convince Snap to help us make the transit.”

“That leaves New Hope entirely unguarded,” Tia says.

“We need the eight to initiate transit. Not everyone has to actually go. I would recommend at least two stay behind. Smith and Jones know New

Hope the best.” They sigh and nod. I feel bad about this, as they missed last time. We have to be practical and we have to get to the end of this mess.

“Squeak go!” I nod she can go. How did I become the leader?

“We promise boys, first class trip just for you two next time.”

“Or you will never see cowboy stew ever again,” they are smiling when they say it, but I am sure they would hold us to it too.

No. 3786-AB-5a

The drone is dead. Near impossible to kill a hardened drone. No wonder it never reported in after arrival.

I read the report next to it that it was working on. Judging from the foam on its mouth parts it is a good guess that whatever it sampled was poisonous. Slow toxin or it would be in the report. Another dead end. I will report the world off limits, not worth the expenditure of a full scale takeover.

We need to find new worlds. The colony has expanded into all of the obvious worlds nearby. Time to expand outwards. Always dangerous when supply chains get too long.

Hmm, an earlier report mentioned there was evidence of an old 'thn metal structure. No TKs in this report though. Must be they left some time ago. Could they have made everything toxic or was it just coincidence? TKs are usually not that subtle. Lazy even. Still, why wasn't an exterminator pushed through first to be sure? Need to check with the council. They will want to know.

Let the forensic team determine the toxin and see if there is a gene sequence we can use to get around it. Too bad. It looked promising otherwise. I seal the chamber so no low level worker stumbles upon it. Might be best to hermetically seal it and report myself for disposal after I send in my report. We are too crowded to chance an infection if that is what really happened.

Long Live the Colony!

Oh My!

“Okay, this trip is about two things, ‘thants and parasites. Try not to get distracted,” Puu says to us. I think that is obvious dear. She has come a long way, but there are some older than her. Wonder what they will think of my knitting this time? A lot of amusement last time. Mostly asking why a high level TK would waste time doing it.

Squeak, Sam and I hold hands so she does not get separated during the trip. A long ways, we would never find her if she got distracted.

The trip itself is pretty much the same as last time and we end up in the same receiving hall.

Please move off the platform as soon as possible.

Please move off the platform as soon as possible.

Please move off the platform as soon as possible.

Okay, even, we got it. There is no way to give them advanced warning of our arrival, but any competent TK doing a DS, even long distance can see enough to avoid collision.

Just after we get off the platform a huge creature with an insane number of tentacles or something appears. Okay, maybe it was a good idea. There would not have been enough room for all of us. Squeak growls.

I nudge her, “Stop it Squeak. They have just as much right to be here as we do. Maybe even more if they are part of the council. Behave yourself.” She stops but keeps a close eye on the creature.

Ho, little one. First visit to the center? This is coming from the creature and directed towards Squeak! Rest assured I will not eat you. I only eat plants. Have a nice visit. It ‘walks’ away. Sort of walks. For a little old lady from Flagstaff this is amazing. Who would have thought.

We gather waiting for someone to talk.

Puu gets frustrated, “I am going to the library. No surprise there. I need to learn how to get information and find what information about our subjects has already been recorded. Is everyone clear on our questions?” Everyone sighs and groans. Yes Puu. Stop trying to run everything, we are all equal. She looks towards Squeak.

“Squeak go with Tia and Sam. Okay?”

She sighs relief and nods yes. I am sure the library would bore poor Squeak to death. At least she recognizes it. She pops out. Guess she remember exactly where it is.

Mike looks at Marie, “Well one of the best places for information is whatever equivalent there is here for a bar. Even if nothing would have

any effect on us, it is still likely a gathering place for people to exchange information.” I am suspicious of their motives, but it makes sense.

I am beginning to think we should have rounded up more TKs for this visit.

Sam tells Squeak our plan, “We are going to change to Rap form. We have a special surprise for you.” He grins as he changes. That looks really freaky! I nod and change myself. In a few moments we are a family of Raps on a mission. Feels strange wearing only a tool belt and a carry pouch though. Some ideas take longer to get used to.

Unbeknownst to Puu, the three of us have spent a lot of time in Rap form learning Rap ways from Squeak. She needs a sense of family and the others are too busy. We could have included the boys, but they are so competitive that the entire time they would have been fighting over who gets to be alpha. Besides, they are home taking care of things. We will make do with a smaller pack.

^RSqueak, you are alpha, but we will show you the way.^R

^RI will guard from behind until we get there.^R This is a well practiced maneuver.

We assume pack formation and take off at a slow trot. The others have never seen our kind before and give us a wide berth. Of course, they have seen the larger Di, who are frequent visitors, but they do not run in an obvious hunting pack formation like we do.

Tia, stop worrying about your feathers, you look fine and they won't know the difference. Sam gives me a toothy grin. I was not thinking about my looks and he is just teasing me. I rarely have worried about such trivial stuff after joining the group. I snort back to him and catch up.

We come to the pavilion. There are 3D moving holograms of all kinds of species. Sam trots up to the entrance.

Simultaneously in TP and Rap he states our case. Rap sounds impressive for anyone not familiar with it. Include the redundant hand signals and tooth and claw, and it really sets the stage.

^RWe have come to participate in the challenge.^R

The spindly creature that looks like it would only be good for catching flies toots a response. *Species and origin.* Can any creature look more bored?

^RVelociraptors from earth version Di-Eden, currently residing on New Hope.^R

The creature consults some kind of screen. Apparently there is some kind of problem.

Velociraptors are denied representation from Di-Eden by order the

the Di council.

^RWe do not represent Di-Eden, we are independents from New Hope only.^R

Was that a sigh? Must be something universal. Strange.

Proceed.

We push Squeak to the front. *We will give you information as needed to get through this. Important you appear as alpha.* Squeak puffs up and assumes lead. We fall back and assume recon, turning our heads from side to side, looking for prey and predators. Squeak only looks ahead. She taught us all the roles. The alpha must appear fearless and show little concern for danger. We will warn her if something appears. We are the lesser ones who are just as much afraid of predators as from chastisement from our alpha.

Sam and I watched last time from the spectators gallery. We have drawn little attention so far, just the curious is my guess. Never seen Raps before. I can imagine after a few million years as a high level TK finding something new is not easy.

We negotiated with the gate keeper for our experience. S/he had Di-Eden landscapes and creatures on file, so that saved time. I made one addition, which I did not tell Squeak about. We are here for a reason, not just to play.

Are you sure? You do understand that we will make this as realistic as possible and you will not have TK abilities, only those of a norm of your species. Live TKs will be the minds behind some of the creatures.

Squeak answers, ^RWhat would be the fun in using TK? We live for the hunt!^R

I add, ^RToday is a good day to die!^R Okay, my Star Treks days are not forever buried. Tia looks at me and snarls for effect. I had clued her in before we got here. We are both carrying anti-limiters if necessary, thank you Cat. We doubt they will be needed. I hope they won't be needed. Now of course the crowd is cheering or whatever it is they do back home. In unison we look up at the gallery and roar! That sends them nuts.

The gate opens and we charge in until we find ourselves in an open field. The effect is amazing. They can extend the horizon forever and will use TK to make it seem that no matter which direction we go in, it will be there. So, this is what it looks like on Squeak's home world. She takes off at a full run. She has gotten the scent already. I suspect they start with an easy challenge to test our intentions.

Tia and I flank Squeak as she charges towards a likely mound. We come at it from three sides tearing into it. Ripping the mound to shreds.

Nothing there. An abandoned nest. Good practice. Squeak is off again and we work to keep up. She is clearly having a real good time.

^RWhat is that?^R A roar sounds in the distance. Squeak says, ^RDi!, head for the forest. We have the advantage there.^R

Once just inside the forest we use hand signals to communicate. Squeak has us assume an attack formation. We are going to attack a Di?

When it shows up we see it is a juvenile male, only about five times our weight combined! This is nuts. We do not have TK, we can be hurt.

It is scanning the edge of the forest, sniffing to try and find us. Squeak has us slowly and silently roll in the mud to disguise our scent and image. Squeak take up position ahead of us and goes out into the field. Squeak, be careful! She is not facing me so can't see hand signals. Tia and I shrug and assume our positions, crouched down. The Di sees Squeak and charges. We can outrun a Di in short distances, but will loose over the long haul. Once it passes us, we dart out, circle around, and attack its right flank. The tail flips around and sends me into their air, but because of Rap and Kung Fu training, I am on my feet again instantly. Tia is holding on, tearing into its leg. I come in and help. It turns to attack us, but it is hard for it to turn its head that far around. Meanwhile. Squeak jumps on its back and tears at its throat from the exposed left side.

Once the leg collapses, it is game over and Squeak finishes slashing the major neck arteries.

^RDo we eat it Squeak?^R

^REating it would give it honor. We leave it to rot. They banned me from my birth world and dishonored my kind for countless generations.^R

We are at the edge of the forest, several kilometers from our starting position.

Tia comments, ^RLook over there. What is that?^R

^RRuins of somekind. Let's take a look,^R Squeak suggests.

I think food is more important, but she is our alpha. Not that hungry for raw rodent anyway. No fruit here. We all have some sap chow in our pouches if necessary, but has not come to that only a hour into the game.

^RGoing to rain soon,^R I say looking up at the sky.

The ruins are now only stone, but clearly had wood at one time. Neither Tia nor I have ever been on Di-Eden, so we would not know one ruin from another. Squeak is excited though and goes running from one place to another.

^RDi fortress,^R she finally tells us.

^RSomeone has been living here too,^R Tia comments pushing at the remnants of a recent fire and scraps of critters. There is very little in the

way of shelter here now. Most of it has fallen. A few rooms look more or less available for shelter from the weather anyway. I guess we can stay here if necessary.

^RWe go. Di lived here, not alone. More out there. Maybe too many for us to fight.^R Good safety tip Squeak.

The rain hits, but Squeak has us at a moderate run. We do not want to be near the ruins when the Di return. Certainly not if they rightly suspect us of taking out their friend. Rain does not bother this form. It is wet and warm at least. Our feathers are soaked quickly and stick to our forms making us look smaller than we did. Not that we were going to start flying or anything.

There is something up ahead I definitely do not recognize at first. Reminds me of a Stargate from the old video series from where I was a kid. Only transparent. Then it hits me!

^RSqueak! That is a 'thant portal.^R I only had the written journals to tell me anything about them. Even without TK I suspect they are made from 'thn metal like in the stories.

Squeak rushes in.

I forget and yell in Hopi, ^HSqueak too dangerous! Stay back and observe first.^H So much for my cover. Maybe the gallery has not heard Hopi before and will think it is just another version of Rap.

She watches them for few seconds before deciding to attack. Puu and Cat are never going to forgive me if she is hurt or killed. Tia and I rush in as well, but Squeak beats us there of course.

She picks out a straggler and crushes it with her teeth! I would have used our massive claws. What if they are poisonous? She shakes it and decapitates it instantly. At the same time she slashes at another with her hind feet, obliterating them as well. Tia and I help and make quick work of the remaining ones.

I examine one closely, turning it over. The 'thn metal shell is very thin and could easily cut someone. That is when I notice we all have small cuts on our feet and Squeak a few around her mouth. Nothing serious, but we should be careful. Even nicks on our claws. Damn those those exoskeletons are sharp. So, 'thn metal can be broken if thin enough and enough pressure is applied. Good to know. Of course this is all assuming that the game is as realistic as possible. I did ask for a high level one, not a beginner one. I was expecting more 'enemies' that one Di and a few dozen 'thants though. Not what I would call high level in my childhood.

Tia shouts, ^RDi alert!^R which comes out as a sharp very loud chirp. Squeak and I instinctively turn to face our attacker.

^RThat is one huge Di,^R I exclaim. Male, very large, not happy. White. Shit. Squeak hides behind Tia and I. No longer the alpha.

"TK White. It is an honor. I hope our presence here is not offensive. We have observed the quarantine and have never gone to Di-Eden. We did not even know at first that this simulation was based on Di-Eden."

He snorts and spits on the ground.

"No Hu has shown itself in over a thousand years. Why did you pick this time to dishonor us again?"

"We were in slow time for most of that. We only came here to learn more about the 'thants and give Squeak some experience with her own culture. The Di in the simulation was clearly hunting us and we attacked out of self defense, KNOWING it was only a game. Having been to the Center before and having seen the game areas, I thought this would be a good way to gain some experience with 'thants. We did not request any Di involvement. The sens running the game must have added that.

You have us at a disadvantage in the game room where no TK is allowed or we could share TP to prove our sincerity."

Instantly we are in the main mall and our TK abilities have returned. I had my hand on the de-limiter device all the same. A moment passes.

Come with me. We need to talk. Much has happened.

We follow White down the main boulevard, turn right into a tavern of some kind. Marie and Mike are already there and we wave to them. They join our small group. There are Di and Rap mingling about, together! I am totally shocked. I thought they were mortal enemies.

One Di comes up to us, *You were the Raps who beat me in the game?*

Tia nods, *Yes*, cautiously. There are several Raps with him. Apparently they are all friends here. When did that happen?

We meant no offense. I add. Squeak is still behind us but less cautious now. More curious about the other Raps is my guess. Has been a long time since she has seen real Raps and not one of us in Raps clothing so to speak.

That was awesome! I have never lost in the sims before. And by three tiny Raps at that, no offense. So quickly too. I am never going to hear the end of it. Be careful, everyone is going to want to compete against you now.

Others have apparently noticed us too. Everyone is staring. If the Raps could smile I am sure this is what they are doing. Score one for the Rap team I guess.

We really only came to learn about 'thants. Really.

Di motions us to a table. No chairs. Everyone is standing. Drinks of

some kind are already there.

Courtesy of the house, not that there is anything like money in the Center. Please try some. A specialty on Di-Eden. Both Di and Raps enjoy this beverage.

Squeak not in trouble then? Squeak asks.

Are you the same little Rap who left us so long ago? She nods. A Hu thing to do, but it works.

A TK6. Congratulations for someone so young experience wise. He lifts his drink and downs the entire thing in one go. Our containers are smaller fortunately.

As I said, we need to talk. A thousand years is a long time to hold a grudge and I have forgiven you ages ago.

He means you are not in trouble Squeak. She relaxes and tries her drink.

I hope you can forgive me for being so stupid. You were right, Raps are just as intelligent as Di, more so in some ways, less in others, as would be expected. We live in an integrated culture now. Each has an honored place. He waves his hand at the others to make this last point. They have all gone back their own tables. The Di we beat in the sim is getting a lot of attention though from both Di and Raps. Three tiny Raps beat him. I smile as well as I can. I have to wonder what his other bouts looked like.

I finally remember the cuts. I must have been leaving blood all over the place. I look down, but they are already healed.

Boys never clean up after themselves, Tia TPs me. I shake my head no we won't.

White continues, *The ruins were a simulation of the same ruins on Di-Eden that are still there, though long ago abandoned. As you probably noticed, the forest has reclaimed most of the land around them. A favorite location for us when we use the sims here and at home. The sims here are better of course. Their tech is way ahead of ours as expected. Oh, the 'thants were added at your request of course. None on Di-Eden yet.*

Tia joins in after looking around, *Way ahead of ours too. We have taken a different path on New Hope. We are a fully integrated ecology. Everyone helps things work and helps to defend our world. Caution, do not visit without one of us with you. They can get really nasty as our own training can affirm. Even a TK7 could find themselves in a lot of trouble.* Good warning Tia.

"Where is Squeak?" I look around not finding her.

Tia morphs back to Hu, so I do as well.

"Wait, you are both Hu? Amazing. You acted just like medieval Raps. I could have sworn you really were Raps."

"We train a lot together. Cat and Squeak taught us a lot," I node to Marie. "And Marie taught us a martial arts that transfers nicely to any species."

"Ah Sam, Squeak is getting into trouble with the other Raps I think." All five of us turn around and see Squeak interacting with the others. Suddenly she turns, runs away from them flips in the air, turns and lands in attack mode. Definitely looks like trouble. We all pop closer ready to rescue her.

Amazing! Teach us that one too! Please! All without TK even. All of the Raps are going crazy.

Marie suggests, "Maybe a little Kung Fu sparing. Mike and me, you and Tia."

We square off and attack each other. A lot of show moves. Nothing really practical, but it works to get their attention. We bow to each other and then all turn on Squeak to her delight. This is to make her look good and we let her dispatch each of us in turn. One Rap against four Hu is really not much of a contest, unless it goes on too long. We have longer endurance. Still one of the ways Raps work is to tag off each other and run down prey. A rodent mound is usually easier though.

We all bow to White at the end and he bows back.

It has been an honor to meet you. We are so glad things are going well on Di-Eden and hope they continue to. We need to get going though. We are on a quest to learn more about the 'thants and the dimension parasites.

Squeak goes up to White, *Sorry I was painful to you in my younger years.*

"Imagine that, a Rap who is sorry. Wonders never cease." He does the equivalent of a Di laugh. I hope that was a laugh. The Raps look at each other confused. Have we just committed more cultural pollution?

Tia asks White, "We saw we can easily defeat the individual 'thants, though I think I would prefer a club rather than bare feet next time. The shards are painful and shredded our feet pretty good. How do you stop more from coming in? Without a high level TK, you cannot dissolve the portal can you?"

"Ah, would not help if you do. Once they have your location, they just build another. Takes time of course, but they are exceedingly patient. They are stupid though. They try to build it exactly where the last one was. The secret it to put a thin layer of gold over it. That stops them

cold."

"Just like the parasites. Something about gold stops them. Strange, as it is one of the softest metals." How many temples on E1/2 are covered for this reason? Have to wonder.

"No one has been able to figure it out here either. We just protect ourselves by covering our necks or equivalent and covering the portals when they appear. It works and as you know from running a world now, there is always something that needs to be taken care of."

"How long have you been admin for Di-Eden?"

He thinks for a bit, "Probably close to two thousand years now. A lot of change. Some of it good even. Thanks to Squeak and Cat. By the way, where is Cat? I thought the two were inseparable."

Marie sighs, "She has gone off on some project of her own and told us not to bother her. Not much we can do about it. We tried to find her, but when she does not want to be found, she can't be found."

Tia, "And she added what we call Cat Traps to dissuade us from trying. Small objects made of ordinary materials that are super limiters. Can take down a nine even."

White's eyes go wide, "Good to know. Don't mess with an angry Cat."

We all laugh, including Squeak. Okay, a Rap laugh is creepy as hell and scary. If I ever slept I would have nightmares.

"We best find Puu and get on with this. Can't leave the cowboys alone forever." We wave goodbye and head to wards the library.

The Great Library

I am in heaven, even if I know almost nothing about how to access the information. This is the greatest collection of knowledge in this area of the galaxy. Surely they investigated the 'thants and made that information available.

I spend hours wondering the library. Without my constant checks to keep myself oriented I am sure I would be lost. There are a lot of other quiet scholars around. Shapes I would never have even guessed were sentients. I hope they are anyway. Different time frames is my guess and not wall art. Do Galactic TKs do wall art in their libraries? Best not to take the chance. When in doubt show respect.

I find something that looks like a terminal of sorts. Actually an entire bank of them. Other sentients are using some. I watch and learn. I use passive TP to try and pick up on their thoughts and TK use as well. I do not want to intrude, but how am I going to learn how to use a terminal.

Wait? What? NO WAY! The terminals are sentient! Well some kind of high level AI at least. TP will work with them! What a relief. I was sure I would have to learn some galactic language at least.

At last! I am ready. I go up to the nearest available terminal.

Hello. Nothing.

Anyone here? Nothing.

Out of the corner of my vigilance TK I note a huge spore like thing approaching me. I turn to face it.

May I help you little one?

Are you a librarian?

A pause.

An interesting idea. That would be a useful service, especially to sentient new to the library. I will pass on you idea to the council. I am not a librarian, but I am willing to help you. I will demonstrate.

Open access, Sentient of Gissie 451. The terminal comes alive with another spore like creature in 3D space appearing on the screen.

Close access. The image disappears.

I bow to the sentient, *Thank you for your assistance. Peace be with you.*

Oh, that is a nice sentiment. Thank you. Peace be with you. It floats off.

Now my turn. *Open access, Sentient of Earth variant New Hope.*

Nothing appears on the screen.

Sentient not recognized. Would you like to be registered?

Yes please.

Scan commencing. Scan complete. That did not hurt at all.

A human like face of non determinant gender appears.

You have TK8 access. How may we help you? We? Yes, that makes sense, probably networked.

First of two requests for information.

I would like to learn about the species that uses 'thn metal in its exoskeleton.

Three thousand and eight species use 'thn metal in their life forms.

Please be more specific.

Can I send images? There were drawings in the journals.

I send a mental image of a 'thant.

Specify size please.

In what, hydrogen units? I hold up my hand. About the width of my hand. Maybe a little bigger.

What is a hand? Aaaagh!

Send mental image of hand, placing image of 'thant on top of it.

There is one general type matching your description and two hundred and sixty three variants.

General information first please.

DANGER, this is a highly invasive species that is highly destructive and very hard to remove once established. Well, that much I knew already. Good to have it confirmed at least.

Turns out they are very much like ants. Makes sense, what works is used multiple times. What Silver met in the past are likely scouts and maybe builders. Builders are the ones who work with 'thn metal. Scouts check out new situations to decide if they are worth pursuing. Fortunately we have never seen the warriors. Those look really nasty. Would take a high level TK to take one of those out.

The variations are impressive too. They seem to vary depending on the living conditions: different atmospheres, temperatures, weather conditions, etc. This makes sense too and limits what we are likely to meet to only two variations. Only one of which sounds like the ones Silver encountered. The second one likes swampier conditions. Tropics or seashore is my guess.

They are attracted to existing 'thn metal constructs. Apparently they can tell the difference between 'thn metal made by other variants of 'thants and those made by TKs. They try to avoid worlds already inhabited by TKs, but if desperate will try anyway, especially if the TK made

'thn metal is in remote locations on the world. They are NOT put off by sentients and will attack any encountered. Great.

Library, how many sentient worlds ultimately are attacked by 'thants?

Some sentients die out before an attack has happened. To be expected. Sentient species can be fairly short lived. Tendency to self destruct. Approximately ten percent of sentient worlds are attacked while sentients are still present. Not great odds. Given the trillions of worlds in the universe and at least billions of multiverses, that is A LOT of worlds.

Why are not all sentient worlds attacked? I would think, given their fast reproductive rate, all would eventually fall victim to them.

Unknown. TKs certainly dissuade attacks. One defense that appears to be effective is to place a thin layer of gold over any 'thn temples encountered. Well, that would certainly explain some of our history. Wonder how many times 'thants tried to take over an earth before that was figured out?

Do you know anything about the 'thant home worlds?

Negative. All attempts have failed. TKs did not return. Shit! So, they do have some defense that does work. Apparently one that is hard to transport to a new location at least.

Next topic, what do you know about TK parasites? Apparently they are trans dimensional.

There are entire ecologies of trans dimensional beings. Most can attack fourth dimensional beings, such as yourself, if provoked or insulted.

Great.

How does one avoid these beings?

Being of higher dimensions the chances of encounter are small. Only way to avoid entirely is to avoid dimensional travel. Some species, because of their method of attack, can be thwarted by a thin layer of gold over the brain stem region. This only works for species, such as yourself, who are configured in this way.

Thank you for your help Library. I will return when I have more questions figured out.

It has been a pleasure to assist you in your accumulation of knowledge. The 3D screen goes blank.

Forgot to mention, during the discussion of the 'thants, I had the library print me a three dimensional representation of the species we are most likely to encounter. It is about ten centimeters in size, as mentioned in the journals. At least that appears to be consistent. At least I have something to show the others.

Will TK Puu of New Hope please report to the Di-Rap club house?

What the? They have a PA or rather a TP system here? Where is the club house? Do Hu get one too?

Di-Rap Club House

"White! What the hell was that all about? You do realize NO ONE here knows where the Di-Rap Club House is or even what it is. Took me forever to figure it out. Finally just scanned for a location for the highest concentration of Di and Raps."

I smile, "Everything is a test Puu. You of all people know that." I continue to smile. She hits me on the thigh, being the highest she can reach without TK. I snarl in play back at her. She holds her ground and I laugh. Hu are so much fun to tease.

"I thought you two hated each other."

"So old school Puu. We like each other now. Not to say there are not shuffles once in a while. Nothing too big to handle. You would not believe how much our culture has changed once we combined our efforts."

"Gee, leave you alone for a thousand years and everything goes to hell," she teases back.

"What tech level are you at? Is everyone TK?"

"Only the council of Di and Rap have TK and they lose it once their term is over. We have been going really slow tech wise, trying to learn from what happened to the Hu."

"At the same time trying to avoid a stagnant society."

I nod, "Not easy." He smiles.

"Where is everyone else?"

I sigh, "Squeak has become the Rap of the hour and is giving lessons on Rap Kung Fu or something like that. I hope it does not all go to her head. Fortunately the language has changed A LOT in a millennium. Slows her down some."

"Not surprising there. I would hate to try and understand Hu from a thousand years ago. Thank goodness for TP."

We walk towards the others, "Not so good when you are trying to be as you Hu say, 'under cover'."

"Yeah, I guess talking in people's heads without moving your lips or hands would sort of freak everyone out. But, certainly everyone here is used to TP?"

"Oh, they are, but they hide their thoughts from Squeak so she does not have all of the advantages." I smile and Puu laughs.

"Good idea!"

We reach the others and Mike notices something sticking out of Puu's backpack. I can tell Puu is already nervous. Too many sens about for an

introvert is my guess.

"Ah, little Puu has a new dolly!" Jerk.

Puu takes it out and using TK to animate it, sets it down on the table and then has it attack Mike, biting his face with 'thn metal jaws.

"No dolly! Leave poor little Mikey alone. He did not mean to dis you." This get the others howling. Mike tries to hit the 'thant and Puu pops it back to her backpack before he can succeed.

"Where the hell did you get a live 'thant? Why isn't it dead Puu? You of all people should know better." This makes the others laugh even more. They had all figured it out.

Puu shakes her head, "Not alive Mike, just a little dolly. Is Mikey afraid of a little dolly?" She has it in her hands and shakes it at him. He finally gets it and laughs too.

"You got me. To be fair, the others here have been telling us horror stories of worlds taken over by them. Best timing in the world to sick one of those on me after all that."

Tia comes in, "Sam, Squeak and I beat a Di in a 4D simulation where we got to battle 'thants too. Turns out they break really easily. Of course we were in Rap form, but even a Hu with a club should be able to kill one."

"Where is Squeak?" Puu looks concerned about not seeing her with the others.

I offer, "Let me take you to her. This is the first time she has been able to play with her own kind since she was a baby." Puu nods, but looks concerned.

"Shit, shit, shit! I forgot a really important question I should have asked Library."

"What is that? I have been here a few years longer than any of you and have used Library extensively."

"You, really? I thought you only bullied poor little Cats and Raps around." She is smiling when she says it fortunately. Going to take some time to live down that mistake.

"Just tell me your question," I sigh.

She is still holding the 'thant doll and holds it up, "Are 'thants sentient? They have some TK ability and I thought that you could not have TK without sentience."

I stop where I am, "A most astute observation. I don't know."

"It would make all the difference on how we approach them wouldn't it? I mean, from what I have heard, everyone just kills them on sight."

"And we are forbidden to kill sentients with TK. Or at least, if they

are not attacking us."

"Has anyone ever tried to talk with them, or even TP?"

I sigh, "I can see you have not changed a bit Puu. Stumped me again. I really do not know. These are good questions for the council maybe?"

I am actually upset that we have all been blindly following the crowd without really thinking about it. How many millions of years has everyone just taken it for granted? What if they really are sentient? Are we the evil ones? I have seen live 'thants. I have killed live 'thants. I have seen worlds destroyed by them.

Puu continues, "If we are the evil ones, that really changes everything."

"Yeah, maybe we should be working with them instead of, ah, killing them."

"Library says no one has ever been to their home world and returned."

"Well how would you react if a creature did their best to kill you every time to you tried to com with them. Every time, without question. No warning, just kill. How would you react to them if they showed up on New Hope?"

"Yeah. Look around you," she waves her hands. "There are creatures of all possible kinds here. If any of these showed up on your world pre TK, pre visits to the center, what would you have done?"

"Probably tried to kill them without a second thought. Especially if they kept trying. You know, I do not know of a single incidence where a 'thant attacked anyone, much less killed them. Though some rumors say otherwise. Of course the damage they can do to a world will cause millions to starve to death, but I know of no incidence where they have directly confronted someone."

"My guess, is they do not see us as sentient. Just an annoyance to avoid or overcome. On some of the earths, the 'sentients' have destroyed entire ecologies without much thought to the future. Killing themselves in the process of course. Just following orders. Oh and Library said there are documented reports of 'thants attacking." She is upset.

I stagger and sit. Squeak sees us and comes running over.

"Aunti Puu, come meet my new friends." Squeak grabs her hand and drags her over to the assemblage of Rap and Di. I will leave Squeak to do the introductions. I think I need to talk to someone about this.

Maybe my own trip to Library is in order. We are not supposed to DS in the center itself, though everyone knows it happens when sens are in a hurry. Best if I use the time to think about this. I often find interaction with Library to be confusing.

I wave to many on the way. Guess I have been hanging out here too much lately. Di-Eden is doing pretty well on its own and I don't feel like I am needed much there any more. Combining the Di and Rap cultures made a huge difference. Strengths in both species that combined was unimaginable. The Raps are incredible at intricate detail work and being smaller makes them perfect for getting inside tight spaces. We used to depend on our young to do that. Not good, dumb as rocks. Took forever.

Di, being larger, ended up doing a lot of the grunt labor at first. Better than when they insisted on being upper management because they could bully the Raps. That just made for stupid decisions that only benefited the Di. That could not last. As we have seen in the arcade, a well trained pack of Raps can take down a well trained Di. Of course we do not kill each other any more, well, not most of the time. Crime, mostly sneak thieves from the Raps and break-ins from the Di. There are always ones who try to take shortcuts. None of them have figured out if they spent as much time doing it the right way as they do trying to figure out an angle, they would be hugely successful and respected instead of being on the most wanted lists.

For some reason I do not understand, Library is hardly ever busy. The usual Estrella are about. They are pretty, though I have no idea how they evolved without TK. They are large spore shaped creatures with a lot of tiny tentacles. They float around where ever they can fit in and are intensely curious about anything non-sentient. They love to decorate their outer surfaces with shiny objects. I think other TKs purposely make things to see if an Estrella will like it. Spoiled by bored TKs.

I might as well get this over. I trudge up to a terminal. Terminals are not really needed, but it serves as a point of reference to let Library know someone wants their attention I guess. They are TKs and can 'form' any information visual or otherwise anywhere in the library. I have never heard Library outside the library so there must be some limitation of what can be done. Or may Library likes it here and never wants to leave.

Library, White of Di-Earth requesting information.

I am available for your request. Please proceed.

I have never been here when Library was not available, so why is this said?

Library, do you ever leave the library? That is part of the confusion in being here of course. This area, with no real separation from the rest of the center is called the library, but the AI sentient who runs the place and answers everyone's questions is called Library. Confusing.

No response. That's strange. I wait. Never waited this long before. Did

I break some rule? Have I just been really rude? I really was just curious. My own insecurities I guess. Maybe this whole mistake with the Raps has made me more cautious, and probably more polite. Di really do tend in the bully direction.

Are you asking me out of a date Di White? Okay, I did not see that coming.

Do you have a physical form that can, ah, leave then?

Something taps me on my shoulder. Strange that anything can sneak up on me. Must be an Estrella begging for a trinket. I turn around and see the most beautiful Di female I have ever seen. I mean, I am TK. I no longer respond to that sort of thing, but she is gorgeous.

!I am still limited to the Center, but I can be physical any place here.! There was an emphasis on physical that makes me swallow hard. What have I gotten myself into. NOT, into that. Must get my mind off that.

!Maybe some place a little more private so we can talk?! I suggest.

A sour look, !Just talk? I have just talked for millions of your years.!

Well, the questions were answered, she, and she is definitely a SHE in this case, can leave the library. She even hung a sign on the terminal saying the 'library closed' in at least ten visual representations and who knows how many pheromones, etc. I have been coming here for over a thousand years and have never seen that before. I do a gentle purr in my throat that makes Library cling to me even closer.

After the most lovely afternoon I have ever had in my entire existence and I mean, ENTIRE, as I count past incarnations too, we come back out into the main area proper.

Puu is staring at the sign on the terminal, confused, pissed, frustrated. She looks around and finally sees me but becomes even more confused seeing me with another Di wrapped around me like we are one organism.

"I did not know you were married White. Please introduce me." She bows to the two of us.

"Puu, this is Library. Library this is Puu of New Hope Earth." Her mouth falls open and she stares at us.

"Pleased to meet you Puu. I have heard so much about you and the others." I had quickly TPD Library all the particulars. Thank goodness for TP.

I sigh, "Close your mouth Puu, it looks funny even on a Hu." She does so.

"Library, you are real? I mean, of course you are real. I mean, I thought you were an AI and not in physical form."

"I can assume any form I wish while at the Center. Just no one ever

asked me to leave the library before. It was wonderful. I truly hope I can do this again." She purrs when she says this. Okay, must have been good for both of us. That makes me feel much better. Hey, I am not a mud eater. Very modern I am.

!So did you ask her the question?! Her accent is horrible. She probably leaned Di from a juvenile Rap. Also Hu mouth parts are really not set up for our speech.

Library comes in, "We are not married if that is what you are asking. I have not asked White yet at least." Females are the choosers in our culture. If Di could blush I would be blood red right now. I look down to the floor.

Puu does blush, "Not that question, the OTHER question." Oh, blinded by love, that question.

"What does she mean dear?" Library looks at me confused.

"It is not important now. It can wait until later."

"What do you mean not important? It could change the entire universe, maybe even the multiverse, other incarnations even."

Library disengages from me. I nearly die on the spot.

How do you two know of the other incarnations? That is forbidden knowledge, NOT to be spoken of outside of restricted TP. Please do not do so again or I will be expected to report you to the ruling council.

Puu spits out, "It was not like were handed a rule book when we arrived! How was I supposed to know this?"

"Simple dear, if you were not supposed to know, how could we write a book, as you call it, that tells you not to talk about it?"

"Shit. I'm sorry. That was really stupid. This is getting off track. I came for a different question."

!I am sorry dear, but it looks like I need to get back to work. Come and visit me ANY TIME you are free.! She rubs against me purring. I am turning to jelly. She disappears.

"You ruined the most wonderful time of my life. At least your timing was not too bad." I sigh.

"Looks like the 'important' part was already over," she smiles at me like she just ate a baby Rap.

"Shame on you Puu, you are way too young for that kind of knowledge. Any earlier and I might have shredded you."

"I am well over a thousand years old, given most of that was slow time, but I have more knowledge than you will ever know. Remember, I was Cat's roommate for years. I may not have physical knowledge, but the images in my mind are plenty real.

"Rape is not what we did. NOT THE SAME. There was no predator or prey involved."

In a small voice she sighs and say, "that is not what i meant. i'm sorry."

The sign disappears and I point this out to Puu, "Ask your damn question Puu. Get this over with." I respect the pain she had to endure, but what I just experienced with Library was very different.

She turns to the terminal, *Please, Library, just one question. I am sorry for any misunderstandings. Ah, okay, here goes. Are 'thants sentient?*

FORBIDDEN

"Why?"

Consult your manual Hu Puu. The terminal switches off.

"What manual!?" She pops out. Not good.

This just went from the best day of my existence to the worst.

I am so sorry Library. I did not intend to offend you. I love you and would never try to do anything to hurt you.

That is so sweet White. I am not offended. The knowledge really is forbidden.

Then we can meet again, ah, in person?

I would like that very much. She purrs as she says this. I did not know you could purr in TP. I am a puddle. But happy.

Squeak comes running up to me in battle stance, ^RWhat did you do to hurt Auntie Puu!^R I have upset another female. Can't win. Make that two females. Have to remember, Squeak is full grown now, even if only a TK6.

All Earth sentients to main pavilion. All Earth sentients to main pavilion.

Now what?

"We had better go Squeak. I did not mean to upset Puu. It is hard to explain. I am sorry. I mean none of you any harm."

"We go. Follow me." She takes off towards the pavilion at Rap speed. When did she learn the layout? Women.

Meeting

Why only the earth TKs? What is going on? I ask the others from our visit. Squeak is staying close to me like she is protecting me from White. Cute. White and I are both TK8s and I have a lot of friends here. I know he did not mean any disrespect and I was just teasing him. Way too sensitive about sex. Maybe I should try it at some point just to get it out of my system. I suspect Library would be happy to assume Hu form. I think I would be more comfortable with a female at this point. I will never get the Cat images out of my head. Actually I don't think I ever got crazy over males my age even before TK.

"Whoa. There are a LOT of earth TKs here. I only saw Di, Rap and Hu the last several days," Sam comments.

I offer, "Maybe they were only pretending to be Di, Rap and Hu or maybe some Di, Rap and Hu are now pretending to be something else." Could happen.

"Isn't that Alessa and Nease?" Ba and Ceph do sort of stand out. Tia waves to them and they start over towards us. Nease does pretty well on the slick floor. Sucker power.

Marie exclaims, "There are Droopy and Randy!" She waves them over. It is like the entire gang is getting back together. Strange. Why here and now?

Flor and Khéya slip into the group soundlessly. Ku and Cat respectively. I am guessing Khéya really does prefer Cat form. Have not seen any actual Cats yet. IF they come, they will want to be last of course and pretend they don't care.

How is it going on Ku-Eden? I tight TP them.

Too early to tell. The Red Vests suspect something is up, but have not found any evidence other than Ku attitudes are not exactly what they expect. Words have gotten out to get Ku thinking and ready for us. I am sure some it has gotten back to the Reds as well. All part of the plan. Wish we could go way faster, but I know from our training that slower is better. Sens really do not like change.

Is it safe to leave them alone right now?

We have three who are TK5s, with gold wrapped spinal cords. That should keep it together.

You think the parasites are still around with nothing to feed on?

Not taking any chances.

Has anyone seen Ron?

He was talking with Silver and Turtle the last I saw.

"Wait, Silver and Turtle are here too? Where?" Others look at me after my outburst. Sorry.

I look around and finally find them in the crowd. Still can't believe there are so many earth TKs here at this particular time. Makes me think something is going on. Like, why were we called to the main pavilion and no one else? How long will they wait before we know? Still no Cats. Of course I have not seen any in my walking around except Khéya.

Has anyone made the connect that the only two 'species' that seem to use 'thn metal are the 'thn themselves and the 'thants? Are they related or both part of some ecology we don't know about?

Whoa! Those are some big 'thn. Five, no seven, at least one meter in diameter. High level ones. We usually do not see them this high up the ladder. I only saw one the last time we were here. Of course I was mostly in the library with my head in a terminal. Or, rather, trying to figure out how it worked. This time was way easier, even if I did not get all that much. They are forming some kind of formation in the center of the pavilion and everyone else is giving them space.

Attention all sentients from Earth. By order of the high council all will be returned to your respective home worlds and fitted with limiters to live out your normal life spans. Puu of Earth New Hope, your life is now forfeit.

What the hell? WHY!? I have a right to know.

Suddenly I am in the center. Five around me and one below and one above. I am floating. I feel my TK leave me. They really are going to do this. I am guessing that everyone else is being blocked, if not already lost their abilities. I can see many with their mouths open.

Instinctively I grab the tiny art piece that Cat gave me. Do not use unless an extreme emergency. Never needed it till now. Guess this is the time. "I AM NOT PREY!" I shout and give it a squeeze. The world goes black. I mean nothing black. No sense of anything. Did they kill me and this is the end? No pain at least. It was a good go, even if what was promised. Sorry they did not give me time to say good bye. Hope Squeak does alright. Cat will never know what happened now. Hope they don't find her. One of us got away at least.

Surprise

The 'thn never learn. Something is up if they are taking up the center and everyone is pushed to the sides.

Attention all sentient from Earth. By order of the high council all will be returned to your respective home worlds and fitted with limiters to live out your normal life spans. Puu of Earth New Hope, your life is now forfeit.

I smile. Yep, they did it again. This should be interesting. Press the Cat Trap Puu. She does. Good Hu.

A black sphere with absolutely no reflection appears in the center of the seven 'thn. Suddenly they all fall to the floor, even the one at the top rolls off and hits the floor. No movement from them at all. Everyone's TK returns. Of course I never lost mine, but the 'thn know they can't touch me. Trying it with seven was a long shot. The sphere is not my doing and I am impressed. Cat has really come a long way.

A moment later, the sphere is gone.

Okay folks, time to go home before they wake up. Everyone get out of here ASAP, I TP to everyone. I will be the last to leave.

White and Library come up to me, "We would like to take Squeak with us. Tia and Sam want to go too. New Hope does not really need more than the four remaining to carry on until this is over. The more spread out and mixed up the better right?" I nod and they pop out. Without the 'thn overlords, Library is free to leave. How did they get away with imprisoning a sentient? I smile at the thought of Library taking on the fluidic form and making her escape. Good for her. Been a long time since she assumed the librarian role. Good for someone else to take over.

Mike and Marie come up to us confused and worried.

Turtle says, "I can take them back to New Hope and make sure everything is fine at that end. Nice trick. Was that Puu?"

"Cat I am assuming. Puu was already TK dead when it activated. Best move Turtle. Be safe! Meet up on Earth 2. Need to warn the lazy Cats." They pop out. Others are leaving too. The pavilion soon empties out, spread out over hundreds of worlds. I am the only one left.

The smaller 'thn are gone too. Guess everyone fears the bullies when their plans go wrong.

I laugh, the entire center is empty except for the eight of us. The center will start to run down without 'thn support soon. That device really has some kick Cat. I am definitely impressed. Good thing I made copies of it

before it activated. I get them out of my cloak just as the 'thn start to stir. They rise slowly a few meters off the ground. I hold the devices up so they will notice. No eyes, so one can never be sure where their attention is. They pop out. Hey, you forgot to turn off the lights guys!

Di Eden

I am home! I never thought I would be here again. It smells just like I remember. I scan my surroundings. Definitely not the same. I sense Di and Rap freely interacting with each other. Villages with markets, forges, stables with dudongs! Very tasty. Looks like they are being used to pull carts though. What a waste. You might ask how I know about forges. TKs love playing with the old methods when they get bored.

I am going to have to be very careful. Tia and Sam told me the rules are different here. I am not to strike or eat anything without permission from a local first. AND NO sniffing. What is wrong with sniffing? Hu are weird. I was able to trade languages at least, so I should be able to understand everyone. There is now a universal Di-Rap language, though the Raps have kept a rudimentary form of their sign languages, especially the younger ones trying for higher positions. Tia said every young generation in every sentient does this. I really feel like an old Rap now by comparison.

"We will use Hu, as no one else local knows it. I have already sent the others on to their classes. No one becomes a TK council member overnight. Some of them will be selected out of course."

Aunt Tia asks, "What percentage make it?" They are both in Rap form. Probably safer here. I like it when they assume Rap bodies. Makes me feel less alone.

White sighs, "Surprisingly few. We have to wipe their memories of course. Can't let the secrets out." He looks at me, "Don't worry little one, you will never suffer that fate, at least not from me. Even subtracting the time in you were in slow time, you are definitely an adult now Squeak. The ones you were playing with are all less than ten, think young adult in Hu terms."

I look around, "Where is Library?"

"Settling in at my home Squeak. She lives here now too." Will she become alpha?

Sam comments, "Back before slow time, a Rap was adult at about five."

White sadly says, "Mortality was high. We were partly to blame, but there was also intense competition for resources, which I guess we were to blame for too. That and no birth control of course. We have learned from the Hu about a few things."

"Grand tour! Squeak wants a tour!" I jump up and down.

"Squeak, you are an adult now. Act your age," Tia whispers to me.

White laughs, "Oh Raps never get over their enthusiasm Tia. Tour is a good idea, beginning with this compound. We are in the rec area at the moment. Raps and even young Di love to run and it gets rid of some of that excess energy."

Sam laugh, "You are still young White? I remember you love to run also."

"We all like to run," Tia nudges Sam.

"That will make it easier then. Follow me and I will point things out along the way." He takes off, I follow with Tia and Sam close behind. Feels good. Even in the simulation at the Center it is not the same as out on a real world again.

Remember, no biting Squeak. Tia of course.

Squeak no bite. Remember.

It does not look like the garden that Tia and Sam made on New Hope. Looks like open forest. Similar to what I remember as a young one. Can't believe I am an adult now. I am not running a pack. Always felt like Cat, Puu or Marie were the alphas and I was the lowest member. Everyone else is TK8 and I am a lowly 6.

I don't want to make noise shouting, though Rap sounds more like barking, so I TP instead, *What level TK are the council members TK White?*

Just White for you. The council members are at best TK5, so yes, you outrank them. Try not to tease them about it. Actually best if you hide your TK entirely for the time being. At least until you understand how this culture works. Makes sense as Puu would say.

Is Puu okay?

I don't know Squeak. Silver remained. I am sure he would not let harm come to her. But seven regional 'thn is not something any fluidic should stand against.

There are trails of sorts and we are following one. I will have to scan the area later to keep track of where things are, but right now it is just fun to run. I miss Puu and Cat.

We all knew being TK was risky. Part of what you agree to when you accept it.

Why were they mad at her? What could Puu do that would warrant that treatment? Never heard of any stories of this happening before.

Nor I Sam. All she asked was were the 'thants sentient. Seems perfectly reasonable to know, seeing as they are under instant death sentences.

Don't question, just obey. Hmm . . . we have been spoiled by the journals. We know the 'thn are not really the masters of what is going on. They put on a good show. I don't think they would go through with it. Make the others think all earthers are banned from the Center and remove the one trouble maker as an example. I bet Puu is back on New Hope.

I think they moved the Center so no earther can reach it again. All of multi space is a long search for anyone. No need to mess with us at all, but everyone else, never seeing us again, would have to believe their side of things.

I hope your reasoning is right Sam. If I remember, you used to play lots of games like the Center's simulator. There are always surprises.

Don't forget, they banned the group, including Silver to Farout. Silver is back anyway. So are Randy, Snap and . . . what was the Di's name? No matter. They were not killed is the point.

Droopy. So, what is it about 'thants and 'thn? There must be some connection for them to get so wiggled out about it.

Enough! We are here to run and breathe and have fun! I speed ahead of everyone, but of course I do not know where we are going. Not so smart. Know your range before confronting an adversary. I will never be an alpha. Except in games.

There are buildings ahead. I sense others. Slow down and observe.

No one will hurt you Squeak. They know we are here. Come, I will show you your rooms, dining hall, showers, library and classrooms.

I tell White, One room for the three of us is fine. We do not sleep and are used to being together. Sam raises an eye ridge and smiles.

Well, as no one objects, that is fine with me. Maybe a slightly larger room befitting your station as ambassadors from New Hope?

We are led into an entire building with many rooms. Everything is open to the outside. No doors. I know doors, why do they not have them?

"I am not sure what you are used to on New Hope. You will have to invite me there some time. Our waste area is over here. You stand over the hole on those raised sections, do your business and the rest is taken care of underneath. Nothing is waste actually. Will be used in the garden after processing to remove any unwanted life forms. The new TK4s get that honor as part of their training." He gives an evil smile.

Glad I never got that duty, though I never understood the Hu revulsion of life waste. Took them awhile to convince me it had to be done their way. I am sorry to see it continues here. I am an adult now. Have to accept it I guess.

"This the cleaning area. Basically, you turn it on, walk in, get wet, turn it off, walk out. Sunny area out that door to dry off. Oh, sorry, Hu are sensitive about being seen without covers? No one here cares. Best if you get used to it." Never bothered me. Rap only use them for utility, to carry things with.

"Vanity is for breeders. Gave that up over a thousand years ago," Sam says matter of fact.

"You will feel right at home then. No breeders here. No juveniles either. They do give that up when they arrive. We loose the urge normally at TK3. Until then they have to take vows. Those who break them are removed. Part of being a TK means learning self control."

"I agree," Tia of course. She continues, "What about kitchens. I would really like to see the kitchens."

"Everyone takes turn in the kitchens, even me. There are no alphas when it comes to chores. Raps taught us that. A good alpha is one who gets into the mess with everyone else." I relax. I was not sure even what Di culture looked like. Maybe not that different.

We tour the kitchen. Tia and Sam are very curious. All of the materials have been adapted for Rap and Di use, accounting for differences in size, arm length and most important, tail length. Can't be knocking everything down with your tail. They pick up various items to test.

"Change New Hope kitchen so I can help too," I comment.

"Here is where the food comes in to be fixed for meals." We go though an actual door this time. Lots of bins. Some have plant material and surprisingly, some have live food! There is an entire rat colony in its own section of course.

"As both Di and Rap are omnivores, food prep works for both of us. Portion size is adjusted of course. Actually, the Raps are more partial to meat." White sees me drooling over the rats. Everyone laughs.

"All I got at New Hope was Sap chow." I pull a few out of my utility pouch.

"Oh mercy, is Silver still pushing that awful stuff? Well, Squeak, you will eat well here. No Sap Shit." I lick my lips. I can't help it.

"It does not bother you that rats are sentient?"

"These are bred to be as dumb as rocks. They eat and breed. Not much difference from the plants. Yeah, not ideal, but then most of life is not ideal. We did try vegan for awhile, but once word got out, not a TK secret, we had no recruits. We have to blend in with the outside community. If we always refused meat we would have a much harder time integrating with the norms."

"Did not stop Hu religious from being vegan. Buddhist monks and even NA ascetics went without meat even among norms for thousands of years."

"We are different. Does not work here. We have no history of sens like that. Maybe if we had it would be less of an issue. We all work with what we are given. Let me take you to the classrooms. You will be spending a lot of time there to start."

"Back to school? Ah Dad, do we have to?" Sam whines like he is going to die.

"Not exactly."

Classrooms are open air half circles with steps leading away from the center of the straight portion. Strange.

"An amphitheater! Just like the Romans. Do we have gladiator contests too?" Sam is excited. All my schooling to this point has been with just the small New Hope group. Usually one on one. This is strange.

We walk down the aisle to the center portion, turn and look back out at the steps. Why? I see nothing moving. Am I missing something?

"You did not think you would be mere students did you? It really won't take long for you to adjust to the culture. But we cannot waste a resource such as the three of you."

Huh?

"You want us to teach?"

He nods, "Whatever you want, though we hope you will tell us about cooking, Hu and TK culture and mistakes, especially you two Tia and Sam. But definitely not least and most important." Everyone turns to look at me smiling.

"squeak teach?" everyone laughs when it comes out as a squeak.

"Ah come on Squeak. You are a natural. Look at all the Raps you taught hunting tactics to at the Center. Imagine having an entire theater full of eager ones." I want to hide so bad.

"Back to New Hope soon?" I squeak out.

"Speaking of which. Squeak was most impressive as were the three of you as a team. We call it sports, but really we are teaching them how to handle themselves in the field too. Can't rely on TK in all conditions."

"That was sure rammed into us. Between Silver, Marie and Cat I had bruises on bruises. Who ever said TK did not hurt was lying."

"To answer your earlier question Sam, we do not have gladiator trials, but we do have, what was it you called it, ah, a dojo, to train in. Open air of course."

"Marie would be so proud. I think I am going to like it here, even in

Rap form."

"The dinopologists are most anxious to talk with Squeak. Think of it, an actual living Rap from over a thousand years ago. All the language, culture, skills. You are a true treasure Squeak."

"I think we have gained an audience." Tia points around us.

^{DR}Master White, what language were you speaking? We have never heard it before.^{DR}

"And so it begins. Buckle up everyone, teaching time." Sam seems very happy. Tia is quieter. She understands how much work it will be. Sam is not good at planning. I am terrified. I want to hide behind the others, but I am an adult now. It sucks, as Cat would say.

WTF?

It's still black, but I have TK back at least. I make a light, but it does not reflect off anything except me. The surface is either huge or totally non-reflective. I am weightless I think. I could be falling and never know it. I sense nothing with TK either. At least I won't suffocate or starve. Could get terribly boring though. It feels like I have been here for days, but as I am not wearing a watch, always seemed silly on New Hope, I have no sense of how much time has really past. Like one of those sensory deprivation chambers from the 20th century earth two.

A blast of light and I am sitting on the ground with a thump. Not Kansas, that's for sure. The plants are primitive and few. LOTS of lichens covering nearly every surface, including my seat. Sorry. I lift up and they slowly come back. At least I did not crush them. Feels like earth gravity and air is a tad high in oxygen, but not that different. I sense almost no animal life. Nothing moving anyway. A total plant world?

I expand my scan and find a 'thn sphere a few kilometers away. Where there is 'thn metal there are either TKs or 'thants. At this point my curiosity is so intense, I would settle for either. What were the 'thn hiding?

As I get closer I see someone sitting on the ground. Female Hu, not very big. Bald. No TK that I can sense. She gets up and turns around to face me as I get close. I am sure I did not make a sound.

The cowl comes off and I see!

"Hi Puu, welcome to Cat's World. Glad you made it. Never know when I make these things if they will work or not."

"I could have died you asshole! There were seven one meter 'thn about to take me out. That was intensely close, as it always seems to be when you are involved somehow."

"Good to see you too," she laughs. Two mugs appear and she offers me one. Stew of some kind, steaming hot.

I take one and taste it, "Whoa, high chocolate concentration Cat."

"I did actually try the device myself. Find chocolate makes you recover faster. Probably because of the high psiotics involved."

I take it out of my pocket to examine. Of course I scanned it a long time ago. Carbon and gold. At lot of amps for TKs are made of this, but never noticed anything until I squeezed it.

"You can throw that away. Only works once. I can make you another for the next time you need one."

"What exactly does it do?"

"Isn't that obvious? You are here. How long did you try and find me?"

"Over a year."

"Oh Dorothy, all you needed to do was to click your heels three times and say, no place like home."

"Funny."

"I am sure the 'thn thought so. Turns out there is quite a kick to it. Anyone with TK abilities nearby when activated are hit with one hell of a punch. Probably knocked them out."

"Is that safe? They get really pissed. Hope you did not kill them."

"Nope, I am sure they will have one great big 'thn headache, but should be no lasting effects. Not that I ever tried it on one that large. Er, rather on any 'thn. All theoretical actually. Hey, it worked."

I look around. There is a ten meter ball of 'thn metal sunk nearly half way into the ground. The area around it is smooth as glass. Makes it look like the rings of Saturn.

"What's with the play thing?"

"Things actually. 'thant trap. The 'thn metal is the bait and the ring is the trap. I have ten spread all over this world. Ah, don't touch in case you are curious."

"Nope, had enough experience with your toys. Marie was impressed by one you left on a moon." She smiles.

New Hope

"About time! I thought we would both die of old age before you returned."

"Really? We were gone less than a week."

"Turtle!" We both run up to her to give her a hug.

"Bad news boys, about that trip to the Center. Been postponed, ah, likely permanently."

"What did Cat do this time?" I sigh for effect.

"Not Cat, but Puu this time, though likely Cat had something to do with it."

"Ah, I knew we should have insisted on going. The tit fairies could have taken care of themselves for a week. We were gypped again brother." He nods agreement.

I look around, but it is Smith that comments, "We have visitors. Ron? You probably don't recognize us, Smith and Jones, all grown up. How are you doing? How is Mars going?"

Forgive the TP. A thousand years is a long time. I am afraid I have not spoken standard in ages.

Not a problem. We are comfortable with either.

Mars goes well. We have over ten thousand Martians now. The ecology is much improved. We have thousands of square kilometers of ecology now. Not all farm land either.

What about the religious nuts?

He smiles, *They are gone. We control the hierarchy from the background. Trying not to be so overt. Tweaking things when needed, but otherwise being hands off.*

"Speaking of which, I need to get Ron home. Need to get the others home too." They all pop out before we really got to visit. Two remain. Marie and Mike look as confused as we do.

"What the hell happened? Where is everyone else?"

"We think Tia, Sam and Squeak went with White to Di-Eden."

"To prison you mean. Were Tia and Sam in Rap form?"

"Yes, er, I mean, they were in Rap form, but not prison. Things have apparently changed a whole lot. The Raps and Di get along now. A cooperative society."

Marie, "Wish Hu could do as well with their differences. Amazing really, after what was likely millions of years of conflict. Almost overnight they are working together now. They both benefit the other."

I have to smile, one of Cat's 'mistakes' turns into a blessing.

Smith, "What about Puu, where is Puu?"

Mike, "We are not sure. Complicated. The regional 'thn turned against all of us, but her in particular for reasons that do not make sense. Something to do with the 'thants and asking too many questions is what I heard."

"That's silly. " I agree.

"Still no sign of Cat I assume." They both shake their heads.

Marie sighs, "I guess it is back to fairy herding then. Where do you want us to start."

"I am going to miss Tia and Sam's cooking. Back to Sap Chow I guess. I certainly do not know how to cook and cowboy chili is going to wear on me if we have that too much."

"Oh, such babies. We have a library of things we can dupe. But, if you prefer Sap Chow, we can make that too." I roll my eyes. No thank you.

Ku- Eden

+Commander, One Button Kers has not returned from night shift.+
Two Buttons can be so annoying.

+How many is it now?+

+Three in the last luna Commander. Zero for previous year.+

+Have day shift run two laps this morning, in full gear. I will address them when they are done.+ The Two Button bows and leaves. I did not earn my five buttons by being soft. What is happening? I mean, we do get washouts, in spite of the penalty, flight school. An old method, but usually effective. If we are not tough on ourselves, how can we control the flock? What has changed this luna?

I stare at the stack of leaves on my desk. Sigh, hope I can finish before they get back. Endless. I scratch the surface to get started.

I hear a peck on the door entrance. Two Button comes in.

+Commander, we have lost two more. Another One Button and a Two Button.+ The bird before me is visibly shaken.

+On a simple run?+ He nods.

+Did you go with them?+ He nods again. I have had twos before that shirk duty when not directly ordered to participate.

+Where did you notice them missing?+

+Same as the previous Commander. We spent time looking for them, but the fog was so thick we could not see much.+ Damn Watcher's Field. Not the official name of course. There is no official name. It was removed entirely from all the maps of course. We all know this history. My rooster saw the massacre fifty one years ago and told me stories when I was a chick.

+Gather the flock.+ He nods and leaves.

I go down to the gathering area. They are waiting for me. Everyone is looking around. I can see some counting again.

+Eyes forward!+ My Second commands. Everyone straightens up.

I pace back and forth a few times gathering my thoughts.

+Red Vests. We are Red Vests. We are the most feared and most trusted to maintain order, and to capture and punish the soiled. When this gets to the others we will be the butt of jokes. We will be laughed at. We will lose credibility with the flock. This is unacceptable.+

+#2 mentioned fog. I have never seen fog on Watcher's Field. When did this first appear?+

They look at each other and finally one answers, +About a month

ago?+ Not so sure, but matches all the disappearances.

+Watcher's field is hereby off limits until further notice. NO ONE goes there without written permission from me. Even if a suspect runs right into the place. DO NOT GO IN. Record the event and report it, but do not go in. Understood?+

In unison, +Understood!+ Visible relief shows.

+Dismissed!+ They relax and disperse to their assigned duties.

My #2 comes up to me, a Three Button. Good bird. Would trust her with my life.

+What the hell is going on? We will all get sent to flight school if this is not solved #2. This goes to the highest perch. Let's figure this out.+

+May I make a suggestion?+

+Go ahead #2.+

+Rather than sending in the whole flock where stragglers and the overly ambitious can be picked off by a predator, I would recommend a small band of well trained Predator class birds.+

+No more good birdie.+

+Precisely Commander.+

+I like it. Make it happen and report back to me when they return.

Dismissed.+ She nods and leaves. She is Predator class. I suspect she will lead this mission. Good. Someone I can trust to do this right. They will be heavily armed, well protected with projectile proof vests under civilian clothing to avoid attention.

I can see them from the tower if I remember correctly.

+Two Button, get my farseers, we are going on a walk.+

+Yes Commander!+

Of course, the tower is on the other side of the complex, but I need to stay in shape too. Perching all day in an office with no windows is not good for this birdie. Besides, it will take some time for the Predators to reach the field too.

Two Button hands me the farseers as we reach the tower. I adjust the focus to my eyes. I suspect someone else is using them as they are always out of adjustment. Might have to lock them up.

Warm day and the Predators are easy to spot, being much bulkier than the thin locals. They are spread out approaching the only entrance. The field itself has been off limits for decades. I look around. The wall does not appear to be breached. All of the spikes are in place. The entrance is chained and locked. I scan the field itself. No fog. Looks normal to me. A barren field with no life. As expected.

#2 reaches the gate and unlocks it. They are not blending in now. Ev-

everyone will know something is up, but I see birds averting their gaze once they realize these are not ordinary birds. I bet if questioned, they would say they saw nothing out of the ordinary. She locks the gate behind them and then spread out.

It will take them several eights to cover the entire field. I notice a few have taken out metal detectors. I was out there myself as a two button when first posted to this coop. I was told that there are areas of our world thousand of times larger than the field, that look the same. What's so guano about this small plot?

+Let's go back to the office.+ I hand the farseers to Two Button and proceed back.

+I want to know as much as possible about the Watchers Field before they return.+

+Understood.+ The Two Button takes off in a different direction to find the necessary leaves from the archivists.

I stop to get a seed cup from the kitchen. Others complain about the lack of variety, but we are not a playground. I quickly eat mine and return the cup to the counter. I doubt I even tasted it. No matter.

Two Button comes running up as I enter my office and sets the leaves on my desk. I mount my high perch and proceed to read what they have. Old script. The leaves are not that old, but the archivists insist on writing this way for some reason. It will take someone higher perch than me to change them though. I guess it does insure that no one not allowed this information can read it. Hated that part of officer training. Lots of pecks from the instructors I can still feel.

I am near the last leaf when #2 comes in, preened very nicely. I am sure it was hot out there, so I appreciate her concern to clean up.

She waits until I acknowledge her.

+Proceed #2.+

+No fog today. Until these disappearances there have been no reports of fog and I have not seen it myself. When one buttons are questioned, they all report seeing and being in the fog. Their feathers do come back damp. We do get fog over other parts of the community, so none of us thought anything of it.

We did a very thorough search and found nothing unexpected. We found the loop trail the patrols used through the field and saw no tracks that deviated from the trail. No blood, feathers, missing gear, anything.+

+That does not make sense #2. How can someone disappear without leaving the others? How come they are not seen leaving? Where the stew pot would they go? There is nothing there!+

+No commander, but the fact that they only disappear during the fog may give some clue.+

+You mean some giant imaginary eagle capable of lifting a full grown Ku with gear into the sky without being seen is the cause. Ridiculous!+ We are the largest birds and being stuck on the ground means we are way too heavy for anyone else to lift one of us.

#2 remains silent.

+Do a search outside the wall. The low perch will not like it, but I want this mystery solved. Look for tunnels under the wall. Maybe they were taken from below rather than above.+ #2 raises a few feathers. I don't believe it either, but something is happening. There are bugs that use this tactic. Why not some clever bird bent on revenge?

+Instead of patrolling the field itself, set up a rotation around the outside. Along with the coop searches along the way, do random ones with the patrols as well. +

+Understood.+ I can see her smiling. Good when we are of one mind.

+Dismissed.+ She nods and leaves.

Only the lowest of the low live literally against the wall. This will not be good for moral. A lot of squawking. The locals outnumber us eight to one. Even though we have weapons, it would not be pretty. No commander will remain on perch with the locals all dead.

It was fifty two years ago when the white cloaks were routed by unknown causes. They had already defeated the Black Vests and taken control of the highest perches. Then within an eight day, they were all gone. Dead, lying in their compound. The wall was built by the locals themselves, afraid of catching whatever happened.

It was not until the Red Vests were instated two eight years later that the compound itself was destroyed and the bones crushed and thrown into covered pits. There was a drawing of the medallion worn by the white cloaks in the archival leaves, but none have been found since. There is a suspicion that locals found them and hid them. Searches have found nothing however. The world is a large place and if someone really wants something that small not found, it will not be found.

There were hundreds of white cloaks according to the leaves, but fifty two years is a long time. There have been several changes in leadership. I am sure I do not have the original records. How much has the number been inflated over time? The field is not large enough to support that number with expected attendants, gardens, rec areas, etc. No one had bothered to record what the original layout of the coop looked like. That would have been useful.

+Two Buttons!+

Two Buttons comes in, nods, +Commander.+

+Take these back to the archivists and ask them for a record of the Watchers coop layout. I want to know where it was in the field and how many hutches there were.+

+Yes Commander.+ Two Buttons nods and leaves.

There has to be an explanation. Birds do not just disappear! Well, unless we make them disappear.

Earth Two

"Will you stop futzing with those things. Either activate it or leave them alone."

"I have no idea what it does. Truly amazing. Cat did an incredible job on these."

"You just can't accept the fact that she has one up on you." Turtle smiles at me. She's right though. Very humbling to have a young upstart do something you cannot even understand.

"These are way, way beyond any carbon/gold constructs we have ever made in countless incarnations."

"Not the only change either. Parasites never attacked non-DS capable TKs before. How do they pull that off? It would mean they are now capable of coming into our 4D space. That is scary as hell. How long before gold does not stop them?"

I ignore her, "All we know is what we saw. The bubble forms around the person who activates it. Any 'thn in contact is knocked unconscious. That must have scared them like nothing has ever has done before. They always pretend to be indestructible. It then disappears, not like a pop, but sort of like a squeezing or shrinking. When the 'thn come to, they are fine, but of course a lot happened while they were out. The entire center evacuated. No one wanted to face the pissed off 'thn, all seven of them."

"And that is the reason you stayed? You have a death wish?"

"Does not matter. Even if they killed me, I KNOW I will remember everything. They know it too. I probably scare them as much as the bubble did."

"One thing I do not understand. There are thirteen basic personalities. Yet there are countless beings. How come most of the time, all thirteen happen at once on some earth? Why here and now?"

"Home come there are thirteen to the thirteenth total dimensions? How come there are thirteen TK levels, counting the solidics? What is so special about thirteen?"

She smiles. She knows not even I know what TK level I am. Well beyond the normal fluidic level of nine anyway. It is not so much as the abilities get more numerous, but they definitely get more powerful.

"I knew for a fact that the 'thn would leave me alone. Not pride, not not caring, I KNEW. The Hu TK9 abilities multiplied thousands of times. BUT, I do not know what would happen if I pressed it. That totally bugs me."

"Not superman after all. Er, rather Super Owl!" She laughs. I smile, ha-ha.

"I guess I had better check on the Cats. I sense that Owa and Sylvy are lounging together. They sure have gotten big and fat. I think they enjoy being at the top of the Cat hierarchy a little too much."

"They do not see it as a responsibility stupid monkey, er birdie." Ha-ha.

"Well, don't let them ruffle your feathers." She pops out. Enough with the birdie jokes. It was just where I landed this time. The form has some advantages, especially when keeping an eye on the Hu. At least the Hopi respected me. Of course the Cats wanted to eat me. Especially Owa. She just can't accept the idea that I always beat her. Not an even contest dear.

I have to admit that the hunt, as the Cats think of it, is fun. Something about outsmarting your prey, the chase and the warmth of fresh blood on the tongue. Nothing like it really. Sap chow is just not the same. Of course I use TK to keep my form balanced and healthy most of the time. only really eat when I am with others. I have noticed the New Hope group still eats quite a bit. Must be a social thing.

I morph to my Owl form and pop over the sky above First Mesa. Even now there is something sacred about the spot at Hotevilla. Like a psiotic navel or something. The two of them are below me and when I get close enough I can hear both of them growling at me without looking up of course.

I land outside of striking distance just to tease them. Of course, the entire planet is striking distance to the two of them. I still occasionally find traps if I hang in one place too long.

Both of you missed the meeting at the Center. Cat knocked out seven high level 'thn and she was not even there. The Center has been evacuated now and all earth TKs are banned from it.

The both yawn and roll over to go back to sleep.

Well, I was just keeping you up to date on the news. Sorry to have disturbed your highnesses. I pop out. I am sure they heard every word and will hold it against us for their being locked out of the Center, even though they have no interest in it. Pride is a terrible thing to waste. They were huge though. Surprised they have both not died of heart attacks. Fat Cats indeed.

I head to former Madagascar where I sense TK presence. Should be confined to the Cats and Turtle.

I come out from behind a shed on a wharf. We have purposely kept the tech low this time. Easy really. Just limit metals and no mining for

more. Ceramics are okay, so they can still make tools, but they break and it takes longer to make them. No more disposable society. Most things are made from plants, wood, bamboo, leaves, starches, etc. Give them time and they will find substitutes for whatever is really needed.

I make a travel bag for myself and head down the towards the few ships tied up at the end. Ah, this one. I walk up the gang blank and am met by a sailor.

"Be nam?"

I hold up a silver piece. She takes it and indicates I may proceed.

"Ne fud?"

"Bu-shr." No. I point to my bag to indicate I am carrying my own provisions.

"Ne shelt?"

I shake my head again, "Dek fyn."

She shrugs and heads off to her duties. She will have to turn over the coin to the captain unless she wants to take total responsibility for me. As I am a total unknown, not likely she would want that hit. When no one is looking I change into my robes. Would not have gotten on board wearing them to start.

I find the two on the bow looking to sea.

One turns and sees me, "Merde, luk cat lyt on." He taps the other and he turns to me too. He is absolutely huge. At least a hundred fifty kilos.

I announce myself, "Be Owl." Their eyes go wide. I am at full masking mode just to tease them for hiding from me.

"Nu Owl. Lan tym."

"Be Drup," he points to the other, "Be Rand." Ah, Droopy and Randy.

"We can keep playing the game if you want, but it will waste a lot of time."

The lady who let me on sees us, "Frekn Pryst! Be ded sur." Not from me, but from the others.

Rand turns to her, "Be fren. Bu-shr pyne." She does not look convinced. The priests, as we are seen as, scare people. On the other hand, it saves a lot of trouble. No one will try to con me, steal from me or molest me in anyway. Normally, an old gray hair handing out silver coins, would be an easy mark. Probably more upset she will lose out on a share of the spoils now. The coin I gave her was enough to take me around the known world, excluding the Cat zones of course. Hope she turned the coin over to the captain for her sake.

Alone again, I inquire, "We did not get much chance to talk at the Center. How are you two? Having fun?"

They look at each other and Drup answers, "We have been here close to forty years. Not all on this one ship of course. It feels good to be leading a simple life again. Leading a low profile. Not using TK unless absolutely necessary."

"Explains why neither I nor Turtle noticed you two." They beam at their success. It won't happen again either.

Rand, "Most of the earths are empty of sentients, well sentient enough to interact with in Hu time. A lot of strange cultures with equally strange rules. I agree with Drup. We know the rules here and just want to stay out of trouble for a bit."

I laugh, "Yeah, I can imagine. I have not been as well traveled as you two, but I have seen enough to know what you mean. I think the Rats were among the worst. Never could convince a single one I was not running a con of some kind. Extreme fear of the unknown."

"We managed to find the Ceph world. The rules of etiquette were beyond imagining. Nothing was right. I guess you need eight brains to figure it all out."

"Did you find Rooi?"

"No, we really tried. But we were there only a few weeks before total frustration set in. I can give you directions if you want to check it out."

"You did do recon first? No TK found?"

"The odds of catching Rooi while she was still there but manifesting would be very tiny. Off a year or two and we would never find her. She could be anywhere, even earth one if the story holds."

"Hey Silver, how is earth one doing?" Rand asks.

"You have staid away right?"

"That's why we are asking."

"No comment. Concentrate on Earth Two. Do you like how it is turning out?"

They look at each other again, "Very much so. Nice vacation paradise."

"Wyn Up!" Someone yells.

"We have to get to work. We are about to make sail. All hands are needed. Find us again once dark. Only a night watch on duty then."

They scramble to their stations. I can hear them having to explain me quickly to the others. Rand goes up to the top of the mast, Drup does the heavy work of setting the sails single handed. Well done boys. I am sure the captain is very happy with them.

We leave port and head north.

The lady who greeted me when I came on board approached me.

"Ah, Hy Pryst, ah, be need?"

"Nam be Owl." I smile and bow to her. That freaks her of course, always does the first time.

"Owl, be bird?" I flap my arms, but of course do not leave the ground. I sigh my disappointment. That gets a laugh at least.

"Be com, bu-shr pyne."

She holds up the silver coin I had given her, smiles and walks away. She played that one right. Good for her.

We are running steady with the wind and should reach the next port soon enough. Certainly before dark. Ship is too small to be out in rough weather and high seas. Best to stay near shore. All and all a pleasant voyage.

Once we reach port we do not go to the docks this time, but anchor in the free zone. Away from the weather, but also away from port fees. No trading here is my guess. We cannot weigh anchor, as there is no metal for an anchor. Instead the harbor has run a line out to a permanent rock island and you tie to that. Two other ships are already there. About twelve in the harbor total and three at the docks. The land looks lush and there is a good sized stream or small river to one side. Slight breeze, but the sails came down quickly. Now just a gentle rocking.

"Fud! Fud! Fud!" The crew takes up the chant.

Drup comes out stripped down, actually stripped down to nothing really. He ties a small rope around his waist with a large coil next to him that is attached to the railing. He mounts the railing and jumps in.

Rand comes up to me, "He holds his breath for up to four minutes. Any longer and he might be found out. We are careful."

"What is he doing?" Seems strange behavior to me.

"Wait." Randy smiles watching with the rest of them.

Soon fish are flying up over the railing one at a time to land on deck. They scramble to catch them, before they can slip back in the bay, and hand them to the cooks. who have already set fires going in ceramic pots. On the order of ten minutes there is more fish than can possibly be eaten. Ah, I see some of it is being filleted to be dried. Good for when conditions don't allow Drup to go fishing.

Drup climbs the side of the ship and hauls himself over the side. Someone hands him a blanket to dry himself with. He then wraps his clothing back on and is ready to join everyone else waiting for the fish to be done. Which happens in short order.

I mention to Rand, "Did I feel the ship haul over when Drup came aboard." Rand laughs at my joke. It did move actually. A lot of weight to

counter balance on a small ship. Total crew including the captain is about ten.

I take my robe off and store it in my bag. They all know now. No point in rubbing it in.

The captain acts just like one of the crew, running around, helping wherever needed. I like her attitude.

Why not. I find a bucket, haul it over the side attached to a rope and bring back a load of water. I then proceed to swab the deck. They are all standing around looking at me.

"Que? Dek fis mess." Not sure of the exact words to use. Three jump in, including the captain and we finish the small deck quickly.

Sunset comes quickly and is gorgeous. I can see why Rand and Drup like this life. Should spend more time myself. Usually I walk the roads between towns. Don't really have cities any more. Hierarchies are discouraged, as in anyone who tries runs into a lot of bad luck.

Rand comes up to me, "I volunteered us for night watch as we would be here anyway and talking standard would just make the others suspicious. Already bad enough that we clearly already knew each other and not afraid of you."

Drup adds, "Though you are doing great to take the mystery out of things. Stripping down to clean the deck was a good start."

I laugh, "Nothing to hide." My naughty bits look the same as others.

"Except for the robe you look the same as they do. Well, skin may be a little light," I am tanned for a white guy, but no where near as dark as the others.

"Changing that now would be suspicious."

"What is so urgent you needed to talk to us about?"

"Puu was taken hostage by seven regional 'thn and threatened with death. She activated a Cat trap to escape and knocked out the 'thn for a few minutes. Enough time for everyone else to evacuate the Center. Oh, all earthers were threatened with loss of TK. I think they will just move the Center and not tell us instead. And White has befriended Library in physical form. They, Tia, Sam and Squeak are all on Di-Eden. The Center is without their library now.

"And the reason they picked on harmless little Puu," Drup asks.

"Ah, that is the interesting part. Apparently she asked a forbidden question of Library."

"That's it? A question? Wow, talk about bullies. Death sentence for asking a question. Dare I ask what the question was?"

I smile, "First a little background information. Ku-Eden lost all of its

TK, called White Cloaks, apparently to dimension parasites. Even the TK2s were killed. Khéya and Flor are 'repairing' the damage, but that will take time. A new group of bullies has taken control, Red Vests. Just as nasty as Black Vests. I have seen this with other cultures. A takeover occurs and the new group quickly becomes the same as the ones they replaced."

"We have seen that over and over too. Must be genetic." Rand nods at Drup's comment.

They look at me expectantly.

"The New Hope group was curious about the 'thants. There was some evidence they might have started a portal in the ruins of Marie and Mike's brewery. Mike accused of Cat of being reckless. Cat got pissed and popped out. No one has seen her in over a year, in spite of searching. She will be fine, but it got everyone wondering about 'thants. They decided to go to the Center to get more information.

Puu headed to the library. Tia, Sam and Squeak headed to the game room to get some experience with virtual 'thants. Marie and Mike headed to the bar to get local take on things."

They are ready to kill me, "The question?"

I tease them, "Sorry, but if I repeat it, the 'thn will come and kill you."

"Aaaaaaagh!" Not good to get Drup upset.

Some one comes up to see what the commotion is about.

Rand tells them, "Mal tal. Bu-shr pyne." They go back down sleepy eyed.

"She asked them if the 'thants were sentient."

They look at each other confused, then back to me. I am looking over the railing at the stars. Without light pollution they are amazing.

"That's it? One simple question?"

"Well, do you know the answer?"

"Actually, no. Oh, we have seen them and of course killed many. You know that if you cover their portal with gold they cannot get through. Does not stop them from creating a new portal of course, so you have to keep up on it until they give up. That takes a few hundred years."

"The gold covered portals become gold temples as people forget why they were made, and well, gold is gold. So . . ." I nod.

"If they were sentient, that would totally change the equation wouldn't it?" I nod.

"Scary. What about the parasites?"

"Don't know, but Puu thinks they are related. She did get information on parasites and 'thants from Library. But as soon as she asked the ques-

tion, all hell broke loose."

"The parasites do not contain 'thn metal do they?" They read the journals and know about my past incarnation experience with them.

"Not that I know of. The parasites are 6D though, so who knows how 'thn metal comes out in that equation."

"Would be helpful if had some to play with I guess." I nod.

"We could give you coordinates for a few places that had 'thants recently. "

"That could help I guess. I could snoop around anyway."

They TP the data.

"Shit! Shit!" Rand runs to the gong and pounds it repeatedly. Everyone below decks comes up and runs to the weapons storage.

I scan, there are three ships slowly moving towards us. Pirates? They were not here the last time I was in the area. Wealth was not concentrated enough to make it worthwhile. All the metal on board could fit in a tea cup.

"Time to earn your keep Wizard. You can understand why we can't do anything." Drup takes off with two large clubs each about two meters in length. He has also covered himself with a tied together hard wood armor. Doubt the others would be strong enough to carry this. Then again he is the largest target.

The others are looking over the rails at the ships coming toward us. They know we know they are coming and they are also lined up at their railing expecting to board us.

There are so many possibilities on how to proceed. I really abhor violence though. Does it matter how this is done really?

I make something to eat from the leftovers of last night and lean against the mast to eat it. The crew is incredulous and shake their heads in disbelief that that is all I am doing. Even the captain is amazed that I can be so cool. Everyone else is sweating in anticipation.

A hundred meters away the first ship stops. Then the second one does. The one furthest out is still coming towards us. Hey, I did not promise to not cheat. Does not take much to stop a ship of sails.

The crews of the two boats are trying frantically to get their ship going. A few try firing arrows at us, but are too far away to succeed even without the barrier, just wasting arrows instead and of course the arrows stop at the barrier too.

"You took away all my fun Owl." Drup of course. The only one on board not likely to be threatened by the pirates. He sets down his clubs and removes his armor.

The others are at the railing shouting obscenities at the pirates, including Rand. Not helping even if I understand the sentiment.

The captain comes up to me and stands next to me. They have certainly gotten over their fear of me. Still cautious of course. It is clear I can not be over powered easily. What do you do with a tiger on board, even if it appears friendly and purrs?

"Yu gud luk," she says and then turns to get the others below deck again. Long day tomorrow.

The pirates can see me and some point. People in these robes are known for causing mischief.

"Might be time to introduce rockets. No metal needed. Could use a hollow bamboo tube like a bazooka."

"And so it begins. Not my first choice," I sigh. It was better before pirates. Will have to do a scan of income distribution. Should not have gone this way. No rich people, enough food for everyone, no need to steal from others. Concentrated wealth or power is always trouble.

Our cargo is just grain. Who would send three ships to attack a ship of grain.

I ask Rand, "Where is the grain going?" He is leaning against the railing next to me.

"We have had a hard time lately because of the five year drought. This is surplus grain from Madscar. We did not suffer as much as others. It is headed for Mussel Point to be distributed to those in need. We were expecting to be there tomorrow afternoon. Yes, I would have already been there if we traveled at night, but without a compass or visible lights, oh, and lots of reefs, it is not safe. If we were empty and in a hurry, we might chance it, but this shipment has to make it or many will die."

"That is your side. Need to hear theirs." I pop over to the ship that held back. I am greeted with shock and then fear armed with ceramic knives, clubs with spikes and other odd weapons of choice. All of them are malnourished.

I remain motionless. One eventually gets impatient and stupid and tries to attack me. Of course the shield holds and they might as well have been attacking a rock. Others join in with no luck either.

The captain comes up and orders them to stop. He is only slightly better off than the crew.

I ask him, "Do you speak Standard?"

"Enough. You have signed our deaths. We need that grain or we, our parents, our villages die."

"I was told about the drought. I cannot allow you to take food that oth-

ers need as much as you."

"Then we are all dead. Better if we jump overboard and drown. We cannot return. There is no food for us. Drowning is preferable to starving."

I pull a bag I have just created while we were talking, out from under my robe. I remove one of the biscuits and eat it.

"Does not taste great, but it is nutritious and will satisfy your needs." I hand one to him. Suspicious even after seeing me eat one, cautiously tries one. I continue to eat mine.

"What is this horrible stuff called?"

I sigh, "Sap chow. I ate it for tens of years as my only food. It will keep you alive, even if you wish it did not."

"That bag will barely feed us for a day. Then we are right back to starvation."

I smile. All of the ships shudder violently.

I hand the captain the bag, "I think you will find your holds are full of this stuff now." He takes another one and hands the bag to this first mate to hand out to others. No one likes it, but they eagerly take one and gnaw on it. Teeth are not that great. That can be fixed too. Sigh . . .

"You can soak it in water to make it softer. Oh, where were you going to take the grain too? Maybe I can help there as well."

Captain looks at me shocked, "We cannot afford to trade. We have nothing." Trade, when did they learn that word? Needs to be freely taken care of without thought of compensation. Is capitalism coming back? Has the drought brought on this thinking?

"Nothing is expected."

"We come from Mussel Point."

I start laughing and shaking my head. They do not understand.

Catching my breath I finally tell them pointing back to Drup and Rand's ship, "That ship is headed for Mussel Point with its load. They were coming to help you out in your need. No compensation expected or accepted."

A cabin girl tells me, "We did not know. We were desperate. So hungry. So very hungry." She goes back to gnawing on her biscuit.

It should not have taken this long.

"You can't plant sap chow. You can store it unfortunately for nearly forever." I make a face of knowing how bad that sounds.

"I would recommend passing out the sap chow first and planting the grain so you have food next harvest." The captain nods.

"You need to get there before the grain ship does for this to work."

Desperate people will eat the first edible thing they find."

"Yeah, and given a choice between this, ah, sap chow, and real food I know which they would choose. I know which I would choose."

"Can't argue with that." The ships are now sitting in the harbor at Mussel Point.

"I believe you need to tie off your ships so they don't float away." Everyone is shocked, especially the dock workers.

Turtle pops in next to me, "Are you done playing god? Meep has shown up. We need to talk with huq."

"I agree, you lead the way. Good by all and good luck. Ask first before plotting anti social behavior. I suggest you unload and be gone before the grain ship arrives to avoid any further embarrassment."

"Agreed." We pop out.

Meep

"You really need to stop teasing the norms." He is just like a little boy sometimes.

"I was not teasing them, I was helping them. And, keeping Randy and Droopy's cover going. Could not expect them to save everyone and not end up having to find another group to integrate with. You know how long that takes."

"You were playing with them admit it. You enjoy interfering to make some high moral point. Not everyone needs to be saved either. You don't think similar things aren't happening all over the Hu areas?"

"Likely, but I was there. The sea was wonderful, and the stars at night, incredible. Best thing we ever did was forbid high metal tech."

"Yeah, everything is manual labor now. You wanted to go back to grinding corn on a rock. There was nothing glamorous about the stone age." And women are still doing most of the work.

"Not the stone age. They have excellent wood working, ceramics, better nutrition, larger social units. Very cooperative too."

"When you step in to enforce it. Bet your first thought was some kind of rocket device to 'discourage' the other ships." What is with boys and things that go boom?

"You are in a sour mood. It was not a rocket, but an incendiary peashooter."

"Not an improvement. Meep has me worried. You need to hear huq story."

We remain silent for the short walk to the small open hill where Meep is. For some reason it is easier for huq to come to our dimension in such locations. How she knows where we will be is something I will never understand. Do they even have TK abilities? What would that even mean in their dimension?

Silver waves his hand, "High Meep, you look dazzling today." I roll my eyes. Meep just keeps changing colors and patterns.

Ah, a reference to how you perceive us. Thank you for meeting. Turtle has told me about your quest to understand 'thn, thant, and ovgers.

Parasites.

I got that.

The ovgers are changing. We do not know why. Normally they ignore our kind, but recently they have attempted to extract nutrients from us as well. Most disturbing.

Welcome to our world. Have you tried gold? We wear it around the base of our thinking organ to prevent attachment. Silver, they are trans-dimensional. It cannot possibly work the same way.

We are six dimensional. Gold has no meaning. See, I told you. Well, not really, I thought it though.

Humor me and try it. I will make you a sheet of thin gold. Try wrapping around the part of your thinking unit that they try and attach to.

It won't work Silver.

He makes a two meter by two meter square sheet paper thin and uses TK to move it towards Meep. Huq envelopes it and it seems to incorporate into the pattern of colors and changing shapes. I can see what I think is gold once in a while as the patterns change. Does not look square any more. Very distorted, no longer two dimensional.

A moment later it comes out as a shower of gold droplets nearly hitting us.

Unable to com through gold and it hurts on contact. There may be some learning necessary. Gold will be remembered and discussed to the collective.

There must be some six dimensional equivalent. In our dimension gold is unique because to does not react with other elements. After thousands of our years it looks unchanged.

Yes, I know of such substances. A good lead as you think.

I have a question, finally I get some say.

What is the relationship between Meep and ovgers? You are both six dimensional beings.

That is complicated. Simple answer is we share a common origin it is thought. They are less intelligent. You have such creatures in your existence too?

Very many. Some are little more than necessary code to reproduce using another being's code machinery. Others are quite complicated and must use several types of beings to succeed. It is thought to be a means of keeping over population in check. When a type of life gets too numerous, these creatures are successful and the population goes through a rapid decline. Having no being to attack, the creature itself then goes through a rapid decline too. It balances out in the long time.

Simpler to just not reproduce. Your existence is indeed messy.

If the ovgers are attacking your kind and even the lower forms of our kind, they must be over populated. That means there were abundant creatures to prey on for that to happen. Why is that? Most have learned to protect themselves. How could their population become large enough?

We do not adjust their population size. It did not seem important. It is true that their normal prey is nearly gone. That would explain their desperation. A good line of thought. Thank you.

Meep shrinks to a point and disappears.

"Glad we could help, or rather you could help. Good thinking Turtle."

"Most of it came from the girls homework. Who would have guessed school work from a Hopi school over a thousand years ago could now be used to save an entire species of trans dimensional beings."

"I would have thought that six dimensional life would be more complicated but it appears to be the opposite."

I shrug my shoulders, "Maybe because we are puny three dimensional creatures we have to do complicated work arounds to make it all work."

"Could be. Have you ever sensed TK from Meep or others of huq kind?" I shake my head no.

"Another complication then. Another piece of the puzzle, but definitely not an answer."

"We need a solution not a total understanding. Hell, we may not even be capable of understanding. Even remembering past incarnations seems to laugh at us more than help."

"I agree with you there. Funny how everyone thinks being TK is an easier, better life. No more worries. Right. At least norms do not need to worry about dimensional parasites attacking them and other creatures that cannot even be imagined."

I laugh, "No life is easy. All suffer pain. Samara my friend."

"The endless cycle of birth and death. Yes, oh Buddha." He smiles.

"Hardly. I worry about Puu and Cat."

"We all do. They sure seem to find trouble. I know Puu does not intentionally, but she always seems to get caught in Cat's traps."

"Oh, I forgot to give you one of these. Cat made one and gave it to Puu. I believe this is what saved her. Don't squeeze it. When I sensed Puu squeezing it is when the totally opaque sphere formed around her, knocked out the seven regional 'thn and then disappeared. I have not been able to figure it out I admit. Impressive."

I scan it, "Just carbon and gold. How could this do anything?"

"Scan at the quantum level. I never even knew Cat was playing at this level of sophistication."

"Whoa! This is insanely complex." He nods.

"There are patterns to it I am starting to unravel. I believe it is a transport device."

"But it knocked out high level 'thn. No transport device I have heard

of ever did that."

"Might just be a fortunate side effect. Or Cat knew the most likely threat to us would be from the 'thn."

"They can be nasty little things. Speaking of which where are Br'thn and Pr'thn?"

"Off playing somewhere I suppose. Kids." He smiles when he says this. Once they reached sentience we hardly ever see them. They do grow up. Sigh . . .

Ku Eden

I am standing at the gate. The entire quarantined area is knee high in grass and flowers. How can this be? This is the dry season, there is no water. The fields were heavily salted with toxic material. Nothing can live or grow there. It even gets under the walls and poisons some of the peasants living against the wall.

We have found nothing. No more patrols inside after I commanded them to stop. No more disappearances either at least. Patrols were more to keep citizens out anyway. Seeing all the life though will encourage them to enter again.

I open the gate. I have my own key of course.

+Commander, is this wise?+ My ever present Two Button.

+Stay. No point in endangering anyone else. If I do not return tell #2.+ I do not even look at her when I say this and proceed forward. I reach down and feel the soil. My parents were soil users. This is good soil. I taste it. Incredible. I taste none of the salt and toxins. I spit it out to be sure though. I pick a flower and smell it. Wonderful. My mother hen had a small flower garden I used to play in, searching for bugs to eat.

Without thinking I find I am several hundred meters in. I am surrounded by sweet smelling life. Small bushes and trees are starting to grow here as well. This is quickly becoming a paradise. Would make a great park. I would be thrown off a cliff if I ever proposed it though. Going soft is not allowed.

I sigh and turn back towards the gate. We will have to destroy all this. Such a waste.

+Glad you think that Commander.+ Guano, a White Cloak is standing before me. I remember the pictures from training. She can't be real though. They were all destroyed.

+If I was destroyed, then how could I be here?+ I freeze. She read my thoughts. I am surrounded by fog. I am about to be disappeared. She shows amusement.

+Took you forever to see for yourself. Please follow me and I will show you the rest.+

+You are not going to force me?+

She laughs, +Why would I do that? You are no threat to me. You are free to go if you wish.+ She points towards where the gate should be if not for the fog. I can see my foot prints going into the fog. I could follow them back to reach the gate. If I was a two button I would be required to

in fact. Report back, do not take action yourself. The burden of command.

+But then you would not see something wonderful.+ Teasing me. I am torn between curiosity and desire to flee. She seems totally non threatening though. No weapons of any kind. She is wearing the medallion and there is a now a gold section to the cloak around her neck. That's new. Maybe she is of higher rank.

+I am your equivalent for our coop if that is what you mean.+ I keep forgetting she can hear my thoughts.

+Don't worry, you get used to it. You can send me images as well. Very useful. No more scratching in the dirt to try to get ideas across.+

+If I go with you I will never be allowed back. No one would trust me.+

+Why is that Commander? I will not hurt you in any way. You are perfectly safe and may leave us at any time. You are free to tell anyone what you see. You are no threat to any of us.+ Guano, no one ever says that to a Red Vest. I remember the Black Vests were morbidly afraid of them. I didn't know why, but I am beginning to get that feeling.

+Us? I have seen none but you.+

She laughs, +Oh, we have been outside most days, but of course we do not draw attention to ourselves. It would be hard for you to find one of us.+ She thinks for a moment, +Likely impossible given your usual methods.+

+What do you mean by that?+ I am heavily trained in suppressing dissidence. Someone wearing the forbidden white cloak would be easy to spot.

+We are not stupid Commander. No one wears this outfit outside the forbidden zone.+

+Why? Why do all this? We have a well run society.+

She shows amusement, +Oh really.+

Another Ku in a white cloak approaches. The face looks familiar.

+Welcome Kily. I am to be your tour guide if you will kindly follow me.+

+Do I know you?+ How did he know my name?

He shows amusement, +I was the first one button to disappear. My name is Yisel. I am sure you do not remember me. I was no one.+

+Are you being held here against your will?+

He laughs, +No one is here against their will. We are all free to leave at any time. You will see. You will not want to leave either. I should warn you, it will not all be pleasant. It was not for me and I was a lowly one

button. Can't imagine how you will react.+

+I know about brain washing through torture.+

+Oh my. There is no torture. Never. To Anyone. Ever. The unpleasantness will be generated entirely from within yourself. It is called the truth. We will not harm you in any way.+

Regional Center

"Well Drup, another fine mess we have gotten us into."

"Was not my idea to come here. At least it feels good to be full size again. Don't know how you stand it."

"You were not exactly Hu size you big baby." I laugh.

TK works, but no light. I make a glow ball. Does not seem safe to just use TK. The glow ball will continue to work if TK is shut off, at least for awhile. I think that is the way it works. Should have paid more attention to the journals.

Drup looks at the glow ball, "If TK is shut down we will be dead by starvation or thirst soon enough."

"Looks empty to me. I sense no living thing. All the lights are out. Totally abandoned."

"Best if we look around. There are likely closed off areas hidden from us."

"Too bad we had to abandon our life on Earth Two. I was beginning to enjoy it."

"It was fun, but you knew it would not last. Someone, if not Silver, would have shown up sooner or later. Forty years was a good run. We would have aged out again soon anyway. What was that, our third ship?"

"Third ship and one village."

"That was for less than a year. The Seawisp was the longest stint. I really enjoyed fishing. So freeing."

"No thank you. Too wet." Drup laughs at me. Too bad.

"Rand, this is totally stupid idea to be here. No one knows we are here. The 'thn high overlords have threatened our loss of TK and likely death for coming back. Why are we here?"

"One was to see if it was still here. Silver had the idea they might move it. Two, to see if it was being used again. Silver said it was empty when he left."

"It has not been that long Rand. 'thn take forever to do anything. All the more reason to get out of here."

"What are you not telling me Drup? We have our escape devices. Worked for Puu, should work for us."

"Ah, about that, I might of kinda forgot and left it in our bunks."

"Your bunk was the hold itself. Nothing else would hold you."

"Yeah. Do you think that thing would take both of us?"

"I would rather not try it. Let's hurry it up and get out of here."

"Agreed."

Lichen World

So dark, so cold, I can't breathe.

I come to, but am very woozy. I see sun. There is air at least. Warmth. Oh, thank you gods, it is warm. I am lying down on sand and soft plants. Where is the ship? I rise quickly to look around and fall down and pass out.

Dark. I can breathe, getting cold though. I need to find shelter. I slowly get up this time. Can't afford more hours asleep. The stars appear to be the same. I am no navigator so I can't be sure. I cannot see much of anything. I curl up as best I can to stay warm and wait until dawn. I remember, I saw no water. But, I am not that high off the ground. Could be behind a sand dune.

Orange dawn. That is the same at least. I also know which way is east now too. I am fully awake and standing. No dunes, no sea, nothing. No trees, just some sand, rocks, and strange green, orange and gray stuff on the rocks. I have no idea which direction to go in even. First rule, calm down and listen. I close my eyes.

I hear water! I hope it is water. I walk as fast as I can in my weakened state towards the sound. I am not that steady. Have not gotten my land legs back yet. It is getting louder!

It takes what seems like an eighth of a day. Whoa! That is some cliff edge! I cautiously look over. There is water, but it is a long way down. I need water. I look carefully at the cliff face. Lots of hand holds. I will die up here in the sun. No choice. I carefully start my descent. No one to save me. A fall, even if I survive, will likely mean my death. I used to help with the rigging, so heights are not the problem. Hang on and be safe.

It takes at least an eighth to get to the water. Not cool, but wet and tastes wonderful. I know from crew training not to drink too fast. No where to go anyway. Down here provides some shade from the sun. I won't die of thirst, just starve to death.

The plant life looks better down here too. Guess they did not like the sun either. Ferns I recognize. I dig one up and taste the root. Not bad. I only eat a little to be sure it won't make me sick. There are plants that hug the wall that have some sort of berry. I know from shore leave you have to be careful with berries. Only green, no colors. Probably not ripe.

Actually I do not see any flowers at all. How can that be? Flowers are everywhere. These are not berries then. Fern roots it is. Hope they don't make me sick.

I will need shelter of some kind. I am sure it rains if there is water. I scan the cliff. There are indentations that could be caves. I slowly make my way to the closest one. Only goes in a half meter. Worst case I can come back here, but I would prefer something a little deeper.

I continue my quest. At least with the water I am feeling a little better. Will likely need a nap soon. Second cave is even worse. Of course, the third one will do. I have a home. I can walk into it at least. Easy access to the water. Hope it does not flood during rains.

It will be even colder here than above at night. A fire would be nice. I might be able to get away with snuggling at the back of the cave, but I am dressed for hot weather. All my things are back on my hammock. I have to get used to carrying everything with me like the others do.

I look around. That stone could be flint. I see the cooks striking against other stones to get a spark. I gather dry ferns and mosses and make a fire pit. I try striking the stone against every other thing in the place. Nothing. There is always the stick method. That takes forever though.

It is high sun time. The gorge will not protect me the entire day. It is cooler in the cave though. Never going to reach me here.

Wait, my necklace! It is the only piece of metal that I own. I try hitting it with the stone. Nothing. Remember how the cooks worked. I imagine them starting their fires. One of them rubs a piece of metal across the flint.

My flint is round. I strike it hard against another rock and it shatters. I see sparks! I rub my charm against the flint. Success. I try it again nestled in the dry moss. It takes a few tries, but it catches! I am going to need more wood. I run out of the cave and gather roots, branches, vines, anything dry and haul it back in. The fire has gone out of course. I start a new one and give it more food. Scared it will go out again, probably from my messing with it too much, I leave it alone and let it work.

I have water, possible food, fire for as long as I can find fuel and a safe place to be. Now where the four seas am I? I miss the rest of the crew. Hope they are okay. I was the only one on board while the others had shore leave. Cargo delivered. People saved. Interestingly they were all eating that stuff that Owl was handing out.

Owl was certainly a strange one. First time I had seen a Guardian. Rand and Drup seemed to know him. His skin though, so pasty white. Really ugly. Old and ugly. His sudden disappearance during the battle that never happened freaked everyone out too. What happened there? First Owl disappeared. Rand and Drup put up their weapons. They must

have known what would happen. Suddenly all three ships were gone. No sign of them. Really scary. Did Owl do that? How?

Better concentrate on staying alive. No more day dreaming silly one.

Cat Eden

What's up?

Kitten got your tail.

Not any more.

Coming back.

Does not bother me.

Yeah.

Nice sunny day.

Yeah.

Do this again tomorrow.

Maybe.

Ba Eden

^Nease, it is so frustrating. They are never happy.^

^Then why is your goal their happiness?^

^Huh?^

^Is happiness the goal? We need some frustration and pain to grow. Remember your shredded wings, how frustrating that was? Remember the healing process, how painful that was?^

^Of course.^

^All need to feel this or they do not grow. Growth should be your goal, not happiness.^

^But what direction? I have never been in charge of an entire culture before. A thousand years and all I seem to do is mess it all up. I have tried everything.^

^Try letting go. Trying to fit them into your vision won't help them. They need to learn for themselves.^

^Like you taught me. Must be those eight brains that help you see this.^

^No Alessa, only need one brain to see. I can do more physical things at once as I can assign a brain to each task, but still only need one brain to SEE.^

^But they will kill themselves. They will bully and torture each other.^

^Of course, but not all will do so.^

^Ah, selection. Then you will end up with haves and have nots.^

^What do you keep the have nots for?^

^Eeeuu! Nease. I refuse to use the Ceph selection process. It might work for you, but I was an under branch. Lowest of the low. If I selected me out I would not be here.^

^Depends on what you are selecting for Alessa. Choose wisely.^

^That is not easy.^

Nease shows amusement and goes back to minding the store as customers come in for healing.

It really comes down to why are we, TKs, here? Is it to save everyone and make life easy, or as our training says, to answer THE QUESTION. Don't need happiness or utopia for that, may even be counter productive. Have to wonder if Sauron from the stories was more on the right track. I really hope not. I would send myself into the sun before I would go that track.

Earth Two

"Those Cats are so lazy. They are only doing the bare minimum to set up sunny locations, enough prey and nests to kit in. They should be up to the tree tops in Cats by now."

"Ah Turtle, they do not try and save the stupid ones. Not all are TK, only Owa and Sylvy I can sense. Lots of twos and oh a few TK4s, but nothing higher."

"Top Cat syndrome. No competition. Look how Owa still feels about you."

"Jealous. Been true in every incarnation. If she tried to understand instead of compete she would succeed."

"All she would get is the understanding that it is pointless."

I smile, "Preciously." Turtle laughs.

"What happened on the ship you were on anyway?"

"Pirates. Totally unnecessary. The ship they were trying to seize was actually on its way to their port to off load seed grain for their benefit at no cost. If they have been just a little more patient and trusted the system it would have been totally unnecessary."

"Then why do they exist at all? I am hearing increasing reports of pirates and thieves on the Hu side. Fortunately no armies yet."

"For some reason, some Hu like the adventure, the danger. If they spent as much time working for the good as they do for glory, they would be immensely useful. I can't seem to breed it out of them."

"Keeps the locals fit though. Having it too easy is not good either."

"True. Good point. Let it be and see where it goes. It was clear talking with Randy and Droopy they are close to ballistic tech. They have the gun powder. Rockets with explosive charges would be easy."

"Randy and Droopy would never allow it under their watch."

"They are not on Earth Two any longer."

I can see her concentrating, "You are right. Where are they?"

"Not sure, but they were fascinated by the description of the events at the Center after they left."

"You don't think they would go there do you?"

I shrugg, "They are adults. No one lives forever. We have told everyone countless times to not mess with the 'thn, especially the big ones."

"Could be that now that they know we know they were here, they took off for some new adventure."

"Hope so."

I rub the Cat stone anyway. It does worry me.

"Stop that Silver. I don't need you popping out on me." Okay, okay.

Cat's World

"How do I get back to New Hope?"

"I would not recommend that right now Puu. The 'thn are likely to be still looking for you. You know how they hate being beat by a fluidic."

"If that were true they would be all over Silver and likely Turtle too."

"They would be if they were not afraid of them. You have only thrown one punch from their perspective. You can expect to be tested again at least. Hey, I read the journals too."

I laugh, "Yeah, right, the cheater version."

She gives me a dirty look, "Besides, we are not exactly where they would expect to find us." She grins.

"Okay, spill it, what does that mean? I am not stuck here for good am I?"

"Oh, I know the way home, but you had better not lose me." I look concerned.

She sighs and hands me a red stone, "This one will take you to New Hope, same method. Only in emergencies, will knock out TK for about five meters radius."

"Got it." How does she do this stuff?

Mistress, a Hu fem has been found. A goldish shiny transparent sphere about twenty centimeters appears. What the hell is this thing?

"Thanks George. We'll check it out. Proceed back to observation status."

Understood Mistress. It (he?) pops out. So, TK at some level. I did not get a good scan of it to figure it out.

"What the hell was that?"

She smiles, "George is a little creation of mine. A quantum being of sorts not based on 'thn metal. No where near as strong as a baby 'thn, but useful. He helps me keep an eye on the 'thant traps. Moves between each one looking for any signs of 'thants in or near the spheres."

"Why not use 'thn metal?"

"I am not crazy about the 'thn. I do not trust them. You should not be either. I doubt Silver and Turtle do. The 'thn certainly do not trust the two of them. Good enough for me. I wanted something they would not understand right away. Those precious few seconds could save us."

We are not sorry. "Too much too fast. Where exactly are we?"

"Ah, that is interesting, but shouldn't we be worried about this Hu fem and how the hell she got here?"

"Your secret hangout. I have located her. Not many Hu on this world."

"Exactly three and there should be only two. I only made the one device, well, two, one for each of us."

We pop to the plain above the cliff to the stream. Really empty terrain, mostly rocks and lichen. She must have thought she was in hell landing here.

"We have no idea what language she speaks, if any and TP might scare her if she has not experienced it before."

"You over think everything Puu." She sighs and shakes her head. The Hu fem appears before us sitting while holding something she apparently intended to eat. She is frozen stiff from fear of course.

"She has no TK I can detect."

"Nor I. So how did she get here?"

"Hello, my name is Puu, and this rude one is Cat. We were born on Earth Two, lately of New Hope, and now of course, here we are."

She just stares at us.

"Is she mute?"

Finally she says, "Be Myra."

"Of course, their language has changed in a thousand years. I keep forgetting."

"Well Myra, do you speak Standard."

"Little."

"Great. Okay, how did you get here?" I point to ground.

"Walk?" She indicates walking with her hand moving like legs walking.

"Nope, not possible. Please describe last few days."

"On ship. Others on shore. Found black stone in hold near Drup's stuff. Just curious, not stealing! Be on rat patrol. Then long time in dark. Near death." She points west, "Many clicks that way wake up on sand. Walks, walks, walks, find water and cave. Eat fern roots. Drink water. Sleep in hole."

"Droopy and Randy, it couldn't be them could it?" I ask Cat.

"The stone sounds like someone duped one of mine. That would explain it."

"There is only one person who could dupe it I'm sure."

"Silver!" We both say at the same time.

"Was there an old man wearing a white robe?"

"Guardian Owl. He saved us from pirates. Looked like a ghost, he was so white. Scary. Tiny privates too." That's him.

"We have an unintentional refugee. She can't go to New Hope and I

don't have stones for anywhere else."

"Put a note on her to send her back to Earth Two?"

"Or, we could . . . About time we started our own group Puu." She grins.

"Here? Are you crazy?"

"Not much a baby TK can do to this place Puu. Myra, how would you like to become a guardian? Takes lot of training, years worth unfortunately."

"Mother be capn. Worry."

"She has been here almost as long as I have is my guess. She will already be missed and presumed dead or taken."

"Can't be helped Puu. If we leave now, we are dead and the questions goes unanswered. I really do not want to give the 'thn that."

All this time Myra is looking at us.

"Be guardian!" Decision made. She looks to be about sixteen, same age as me when I started on my journey.

Cat pops us back to her compound and quickly makes a new space for Myra. She will need a bed, clothes, so much we no longer worry about.

"Fud?!" I am stunned and ashamed.

"Myra, what would you like to eat?"

"Curry?" she looks questioningly.

"I got it," Cat says.

I take Myra to her space.

"This is your room. No one will touch anything here. You are responsible to keep clean and in order."

Don't scare her Puu, once she sees my space your thoughts will be undone.

I sigh, *True.*

She lays on the bed, raised from the floor with a mattress of sorts and storage underneath. There is a desk, wash stand, dresser, storage lockers. The walls are pseudo wood. There are lichen trees around here, but in a hurry it is easier to just dupe everything.

"Onri! Forgot Onri! Go back!"

Cat peaks in, "Go ahead Puu. I will have food ready when you return."

I pop us back to the cliff edge.

"In hole!"

I find the hole again and pop us to the entrance. She runs inside.

And comes out with a small creature. What the hell is that?

She proudly announces, "Onri." Petting it's head. A baby sloth creature. They are all over the trees near our compound. Slowest creatures I

have ever met. No wonder I did not see them as animals. They even have chlorophyll in their 'hair' and skin.

"Myra, what about Onri's mother?"

"Onri wash down stream. All alone. Feed and care for." She gives me the sad kitten look. I shake my head and pop us back to her room.

She places Onri on her bed where it curls up and appears to go to sleep.

"Need rope." She looks in all of the storage boxes and spaces. Needy little thing. All the stuff from her world is gone. I guess we were the same way. I make some rope and place it in the last box she has not looked in. Don't want her to think we are fairies that will give her what ever she wants.

I make a knife and offer it to her. She has no idea what it is. I take an end of the rope and cut off a small piece. She takes a ceramic knife out of her short pants and cuts another short piece off. Hers is sharper.

She goes outside and finds a short stick, comes back down, sits on the bed and starts working with the rope. I leave her to it and go find Cat.

"Smells good. When did you learn to cook edible food Cat?" Teasing her. She hits me square in the forehead with a piece of carrot. I pull it off and eat it. Good.

"Be done in twenty minutes."

"Myra is settling in. Onri is one of those baby sloth things. How do you tell gender on them?"

"No gender. All the same. They bud to produce young. Asexual."

"That's not safe. They will go extinct soon." She shrugs. Does not care. Actually given the lack of diversity I am surprised that anything but lichens still exists here. Low green for sure. Good hiding place I guess.

Just as the curry is ready, Myra comes in, looking through the door.

"Smell gud." We will have to implant better Standard on her. Do it at the same time as making her TK2. More for later.

Onri is on her back in some kind of sling made from the rope. That was fast. Once she gets TK she will be a wonder.

Cat hands her and me wooden bowls of curry on brown rice. Grabs one of her own and motions to the table. We all sit down and dig in with our wooden spoons. Can't say the chow since I got here was this good. Cat is showing off. Guess it is better not to scare her off before she has started. It won't always be this good though. Mostly sap chow and water, or take care of yourself with TK. At least that way there is no poo.

"She will need a loo Cat."

"Go ahead, I took care of one end." Eat good food while designing an

outhouse, wonderful.

With a full tummy, Myra yawns. Time for a nap and our first opportunity to upgrade her. It gets really boring here watching the traps.

"Puu, why don't you take care of the first one, don't forget to add Standard. I am going to double check George." She pops out while Myra is nearly asleep on her bench. I take her by the hand and lead her back to her bed. She looks around her room for something. I scan her. Her ship talk is awkward.

"Ah, yes, that had to happen sooner or later. Follow me." I take her to the outhouse. She is totally familiar and comfortable. Does not even close the door. No idea what toilet paper is. I have to show her what to do. A bath might be next. Need to make a shower or tub of some sort. I forget how much we take care of with TK. Going to need more clothes too. Were we that needy when her age? I am guessing that Turtle would affirm that thought. And she had Smith and Jones too.

Hold off on the upgrade Puu, just do the Standard implant. I want her to get used to a routine here first.

Makes sense. She is using the loo now. I will work on a bath of sorts and clothes.

No white robes. She has to make her own when she is ready. Something similar to what she is used to. Can read her during her nap.

Got it.

She gets to her bed and lets Onri out of its sling to curl up next to her. I'm sorry, if a creature can reproduce with or without a male, it is female. Pronouns can be so confusing.

Do we upgrade Onri too?

And get another group like the Cats?

Good point. Hold off on that one. They don't have a recognizable nervous system anyway.

Regional Center

"This place gives me the creeps Drup."

"Me too. There are lots of hidden rooms you can only reach with DS. And of course the different atmospheres and temperature areas. This place is huge. It would take a lifetime to search it all. This is pointless in my opinion."

"Maybe just the earth areas. We were already packed into the newest wing, probably because we are the newest group to come here."

"Just the earth areas still accounts for square kilometers of space. I know the higher 'thn can hide things from TK9s even. If they don't want us to see something it won't be visible."

"Okay, you have made your point. Back to Earth Two?"

"Good a place as any. Can check on the Seamist. Shore leave should be over by now."

"I don't trust the 'thn. Let's make a full enviro sphere. Enough room and mass here to make one."

"'thn metal sphere?"

He shakes his head, "Diamond. It will be a little thicker, but weigh about the same. I want to add some gold quantum elements for shielding too."

"You really are paranoid." It takes us at least an hour before Drup and I are satisfied.

"All aboard. Earth Two here we come. Hi atmosphere would be best. Don't want to scare the natives."

We pop out and come into totally empty space. No stars, planets, nothing.

"I think we will be late coming back from shore leave."

"Back to the center. They have devices that should help orient us."

"Okay."

We pop again. Again empty space!

"Those bastards moved the center while we were there and then moved it again after we left."

"No, I don't think so. I think this is where the Center was when we arrived. They moved it while we were there and now we are back to where we first came to the center."

"No stars smarty pants."

"Think, have you ever been outside the Center while at the Center."

Drup looks shocked, "No actually. Our TK does not extend far to

catch planets and such, so there did not seem to be any point."

"Me neither. Pretend we are now at the center and go back to Earth Two."

"Go it." We pop. The distance is immense, so it take a few minutes. Even without TK there is plenty of air in our ship.

"Whoo-hoo! Earth! Oh, I am so happy to see you again."

So am I. So am I. That was scary.

"The Seamist is still docked. Leave this in stable orbit in case we need it again in a hurry."

"I'll leave a note saying why it is here and any other TK can use it if needed."

"Good idea."

We pop down to a warehouse near the dock and come out in our ship clothes pretending to have had a good time in town. We make our way up the plank to find everyone else in panic.

"Bout tym. Myra miss." Shit.

Drup, where is your Cat Stone?

Shit! Missing. She must have found it. She is intensely curious.

That she is. I really hope she is safe. Do we go after her?

My fault. Hand me your stone. I will go after her.

No, I'll go. I will be missed less if I don't return. He nods sadly.

"Chk shore," I announce and make my way back down the plank. She could easily be on shore. Our captain, her mother, has been harsh on her since her father was killed in a pirate raid. Drup and I can't save everyone, nor should we. Life has consequences. She could easily be in town somewhere. She had all day to hide. That is quite an area, but nothing for a TK9. I make quick work of it and as suspected, she is not here. Darn. This thing scares the shit out of me.

"Okay, here goes. Hope this works and I don't end up in a star somewhere." I hope I am far enough away to not hit anyone with the TK kick.

So dark, so very dark. Not the center of a star anyway.

Ku Eden

+I am guano. I am worse than guano. I should be force fed guano, cus that is what I am.+

+I am on dirty straw on a stone floor. There is no door. Anyone can walk past and spit on me if they so desire. That would be a blessing. I am not worthy of even being spit on. I am guano.+

+How long has the Commander been going on like that?+

+All night and most of the day. Refuses a seed bowl. Not even water.+

+Hmm, give the Commander a moldy seed bowl. Nothing harmful.

Might as well get the self pity out while we can.+

+You still intend to raise the Commander? Is that wise?+

+No more than a two, ever. True believers when converted do not cease to be true believers. Could be real trouble with too much power. We need the Commander to be able to defend and protect though. There will be tests by locals.+

+You are sending the Commander back to the Red Vests?+ She nods.

+I would love to be there to see that.+

+You will, you are the Commander's trainer from now on. Not an easy path for either one of you.+

+I was only one button. No one will pay any attention to me.+

She clucks again, +Until you have to correct some behavior. You are a TK3. I can't have the Commander loose without a leash. Maybe never.+

+Missionary work might be good. Some distant location?+

+You have read the Hu stories. Remember Paul? He went over zealous and ended up causing thousands of years of chaos. We can't have that.
+

+They only had one Watcher back then and he abandoned them after a few months to take care of themselves. Where is he now? Do you know?
+

+He combined with Susan again and s/he is on Earth One I believe. Last place I saw them.+

+You were trained by Silver Owl then.+ She nods.

+I will never complain about my training ever again.+

A chuckle, +Since when have you ever complained.+

+I might after this assignment.+

+That you might. You are ready though. Sit outside the Commander's cell and just be there. When things are ready, they will happen.+ She leaves me to my fate. Being an empath is painful. I have already picked

up on the Commander's pain. Oh well. Everything changes. Everything changes. A learning opportunity.

Cat's World

I am on a dusty plain. Lots of sand. The few rocks visible are covered in lichens. Is this a brown world? Low green at best. Why would Cat send us here? Er, Puu I mean. I don't think the rest of us were expected. That was some trip too. Must have taken days. Captain is going to be having a shit fit having lost both of us. Drup can take care of himself I am sure.

I scan further out and sense a ten meter 'thn sphere. What the hell is that thing doing here?

I pop closer. There is a ring on the ground all around it. Trees of sorts at least. I reach out to touch the ring.

Danger, don't touch.

What the? I am staring at a small goldish transparent sphere suspended at eye level.

"What the dickens are you my little one?"

A George. Please follow. It takes off like a rocket. Guess it knows I am TK too. Not 'thn though. No moving parts, but it can TP and TK. That is a trick in itself.

We come to a settlement of sorts. Three Hu fems and some strange creatures in the trees here about.

"Well, look what the George dragged in. Good to see you Randy." Puu is the first to come out.

"Nice to see you too Puu. We all thought the 'thn bullies had gotten you for sure. Well, Silver did not of course, but it was scary. They have totally abandoned the Regional Center and moved it. No idea where any more. Nearly got stuck there. Oh, and all earthers are banned from the Center and will have their TK taken away, though that has not happened yet. Silver said it is unlikely as he would just undo it anyway."

Puu laughs, "Yeah, I bet they don't like him."

Cat comes out, "Shit, how many are coming? Is the entire gang going to be here soon?"

"No idea, Silver was handing them out to all the regulars in case of emergency."

"What is your emergency? You look fine."

"Drup, ah Droopy, had one of your stones and left it in the hold of the Seamist when we went to the Center to check it out. When we finally got back, it was gone, along with Myra. Came looking for her."

"Uncle Randy!" Myra comes out and runs up to me to give me a big hug.

"You said my name correctly, and you have grown. How can that be? It has not been that long. Maybe a few days given the travel in the stone thing."

"Uncle, I have been here at least a year. I am going to be a Guardian! I am already TK2. Watch." She concentrates and a few pebbles rise and twirl around in a circle, then loop around each other in increasingly complex patterns.

"I sense Cat's influence on your training. No way it has been a year. I would have noticed that. Your mother must have given up on us by now."

Puu turns to Cat, "Yeah, Cat explain that? Oh, and where the hell are we!" Puu is pissed.

She turns to me, "How long after I disappeared did Myra disappear?"

"A few days maybe. Silver turned up on the Seamist and told us, we set sail to Mussel Point, docked at the stream, pirates attacked, next morning we arrived at Mussel Point. All but Myra had shore leave. When we returned from a day in town, while they were unloading the cargo, she was gone. Yep, a few days max."

"I was here a few months before Myra showed up and few days later George found her. Now it has been a little over a year before you showed up." She is looking at Cat when she says this.

"Okay, okay. We are not really in our universe. Think of it as an out pocketing in the 13th dimension. More like a bubble from the 3D sense. Time runs differently here. I wanted to solve this problem before I returned and did not want to take a thousand years to do it. Also, makes a cool hiding place from the pesky 'thn overlords."

I ask, "And the problem is?" What could possibly be worth this much trouble. Though I understand from the stories, that is Cat's middle name.

"You tell him Puu. You are the better story teller." She leaves to go talk with George.

Puu sigh, "It all started on New Hope when Cat was accused of helping 'thants invade by not being careful with 'thn metal tech. She got pissed, because of course she was being ultra careful. She understands this quantum stuff almost as well as Silver."

"Actually better. Sorry to interrupt. Silver could dupe the stones, but still hasn't figured them out. Coming to this bubble would explain why. Sorry, go on."

"Meanwhile I was at the Regional Center asking questions of the library, who turns out to be able to be physical and is hot for TK White. Another story. I was asking questions when the library shut down and I was taken to the hall to be surrounded by seven one meter 'thn and about

to be executed. I am not prey! I squeezed the stone and ended up here."

"That was one hell of a question. I thought knowledge, when you became high level TK, was freely given."

"Nope. I asked if the 'thants were sentient and wanted to know more about the dimension parasites. You heard about the White Cloaks on Ku Eden?" I nod.

"Strange question, but I have met 'thants. Nasty creatures. Absolutely relentless. They never give up. We have to keep watching for their gates and shut them down as soon as they start to form. There is no reasoning with them Puu."

"Have you ever tried not killing them on sight? Have you ever tried to com with them?"

"Shit no Puu, they are vermin. No one coms with them."

"Why is that Randy? Why does no one even know of any one or any story where someone has tried?"

I sit on the ground, "I have no idea. It is like we have been brain-washed to not question it."

"That would explain it. It has something to do with the pesky 'thn. They are the only two 'thn metal life forms."

"And the parasites? Better fit Myra with a shield, they are going after twos now as well."

"Only theories so far. There has to be a connection, but I want more information before saying anything. Last thing I want is a new false rumor going around."

"We are boring Myra I think."

"I doubt it. She is so used to being left alone on the ship I would not be surprised to have heard she jumped ship just to get away from the constant chores."

"Her mother was rough on her, especially after her husband was killed by pirates. We were the newest crew, so could not interfere. She is better off here I am sure."

Cat comes back to us, "Actually it might be better if you took her back. It is about to get dangerous here. George has found signs of 'thant activity at three of the traps. No gate yet, but there are disturbances at the quantum level in the 'thn metal spheres."

"Shit, do you need my help?"

"We need you to take Myra home and finish her training. I think we may have found our James. She loves puzzles and games. Learning Kung Fu too."

"And how do we go home? I was completely blocked from seeing the

dimension passage and have no idea where we are, bubble or not."

Puu hands me a red stone, "This will get you to New Hope. You should know the way from there, or get one of the others to tell you. I am sure they want to know what happened to the two of us anyway."

"Are you sure you want to stay. I can't take your only escape stone."

Cat, "Oh, I have more, but only to New Hope. Did not not think I would need a collection of them."

"How about I take Myra home and come back to help?"

"We will come get you, if we need more help. Likely need the entire group if that happens."

"But I like it here. Want to stay with Aunt Puu and Aunt Cat."

"Your Standard is quite good Myra. A year makes for a lot of changes."

"We implanted her. Ship speak was annoying."

"Onri. I will not go without Onri."

"Onri can't go dear. She does not need a male to make babies and we can't have her kind taking over another world."

"I can watch her. Never let her make buds." Buds?

They reproduce by budding. Slow, but eventually there could be millions of them on a world.

Do they taste good? Every place I have been there are predators who would take out a slow moving creature like these.

Hmm, could be right. No defenses either. No predators here. Only limited by food and time. This world used to be covered in a lichen forest is my guess.

"Onri can come with us, but you have to take care of her." She immediately rushes into a building and comes out with one of the sloth things in a carry net on her back.

"Oh, forgot my tools. I can take them too?" She looks at Puu and Cat.

"Of course dear. They were freely given to you. Hide them well though, others will want them."

She pulls a sad face, "Mother will take them from me. Better to leave them here." She holds them out for Cat.

Cat laughs, "You could beat the pants off your mother now Myra. She will never bully you again. You are not prey!"

"I am not prey!" She holds up her arm in salute. I am sure Puu and Cat taught her that. Good to know though.

Puu tells me, "It is really boring here. It will be easier not trying to entertain her all the time." If that is how you rationalize it. I think you two would be perfect actually. May have to come back.

"We will be busy dealing with the 'thants once they emerge anyway."
Cat reminds her.

"How long is that likely to take?" I ask.

"Could be years yet. They are slow, patient and relentless as you said. I can hardly wait." She grins. Given the time dilation of being here, she really means centuries.

"Would you let me have another black stone, just in case?"

"Sure." Cat hands me one looking concerned. That I would need one, or that I would come back and mess up their project?

"Best be going before anyone changes their mind. Ready Myra?"

She double checks her bag and Onri to be sure she is secure.

Then she remembers something, "Little air or water during trip. Almost died."

"Oh that will not be a problem dear, Uncle Randy is a TK9. He will take care of you."

Her eyes go wide.

"Uncle Droopy too." I nod. I would have thought she would have made the connection to us and Owl. Not just friends with a Guardian, we are Guardians.

Dark, so very dark . . .

New Hope

"Where are we Uncle Randy?" She clings to me. Everything is strange. I have never been here myself, just heard stories.

"Did they teach you how to shield yourself Myra?" She nods.

"Do it now, we have incoming." We are bombarded by every imaginable creature and a lot I would never have imagined. Do those flying things really have big tits? Myra thinks they are cute of course, but they are nearly bashing themselves to death trying to get to us. She almost drops her shield to rescue them.

"Don't. They are poisonous and painful. They are not your friends, at least not yet. I am scanning to see where everyone is."

They are hiding their TK, so I scan for structures.

"I am going to pop us to where I think they are." She nods. I am sure Puu and Cat took her everywhere with them.

We come out in what looks like ruins. The plants have taken over everything. Takes a moment for the locals to notice us and then they too try to attack us. Not as populated as where we were at least. Semi arid. I scan the world. There are arctic regions, but it looks like we have life right up to the edges of the ice and even somethings on the edges that jump into the seas when they need to. Greener than Earth Two. A jungle world almost. If they ever get a warm period it will be for sure.

May we help you? Two males appear before us.

"I am Randy and this is Myra, Cat sent us. She says hi. I hope you are locals and this makes sense to you."

"Randy from Farout?" I nod.

"Oh are we pleased to meet you. We have heard all the stories. Was the world really pink?"

"More magenta and purples, but basically, yeah, pink."

"We have been stuck here forever and want really badly to get out and see the multiverse."

"Most of it is boring as shit. Only a few bright spots. You should see where Puu and Cat are now. Nothing but lichens, lichen trees and these sloth things. Myra has one on her back. Her name is Onri. She is sterile, so no worries of an invasive species." At least I hope not. Life has a way of circumventing our hopes.

Myra comes out from behind me and offers to show Onri. The two pet Onri and she makes a funny trill sound. Great. No everyone will want one.

"It was not that boring. I am training to be a Guardian."

"A TK2, yes we noticed. Congratulations or condolences, depending on your state of mind." They smile when they say this. Are they twins?

The other one finally speaks, "My brother is so rude. He is Smith and I am Jones. Not our original names, but we have long ago forgotten those."

"You look so much alike, how do people tell you apart?"

"We are usually together and are referred collectively as Smith and Jones. We are used to it. Don't worry. Come, you need to meet the others."

"We need to get to Earth Two ASAP."

"We are forbidden to go there under penalty of loss of TK."

"Myra was born there. Need to get her back to her mother and crew-mates on the Seamist."

"Wait, you are from Earth Two, somehow ended up with Puu and Cat, wherever they might be, and now are here, trying to get back to Earth Two. Aren't you taking the long way around."

"Long story. Cat ..." They laugh.

"Say no more. All of us have been hit by one or the other of her creations. Ask Marie why she will never touch anything Cat made again."

"I like Cat. So does Onri."

"We love Cat and Puu of course. We grew up with them. We were born on Earth Two also."

"You are part of the great Hopi migration? This is where you ended up?"

"Yep. Home sweet New Hope." Smith waves his hand around.

"What you see around you are the original colonists, adapted to their new world."

"Tell me, who made the ones with the, you know?" I pantomime large breasts.

"Either Green Man or Silver. We are not sure which. Drives the ladies nuts at first. Now we just see them as annoying. Warning, they will steal anything then can get off the ground. Insanely curious. Oh, and they work together and are strong."

"Annoying is what I would say. Anyway to tell them to stop attacking us?"

"Oh, sorry. Take one of these. Cat created them for visitors, but we have tried them, so we know they are safe."

Jones comes in, "At least we hope so." Cue evil grin.

"You can drop your shields now." He hands one to Myra in the form

of a collar. "For Onri, in case you get separated. They would shred him if that collar ever comes off." Myra really looks scared.

"They are so cute!" Myra has one resting on her hand. "What do they eat?"

"That is complex. Best to just stick with any mushrooms you find. They also eat dead creatures."

"Eeeuu!" She waves it away confusing the little thing who flies right back to her.

The place is littered with mushrooms. I pick one off the ground and hand it to Myra who promptly feeds it to the thing.

"What do you call them?"

Smith grins, "We call them tit fairies to annoy the fems." Right. Not a good way to make friends guys.

Jones, "There are long scientific names too, but none of us bothered to learn them."

Smith, "More of a Silver and Turtle thing. Though I think Puu knows most of them too." They nod to each other.

"We still need to get to Earth Two. Anyone remember how to get there?"

"We remember, but I would have to show you. Not going there. No way. I like being TK. Not going to risk that."

"Well come on, show me anyway. Myra, stay here for the moment. I will be right back."

We move into DS space. He TPs me the location. Had to describe in 3D terms, but he is an eight, so I get it good enough. We pop back to normal space.

"Ready Myra?"

"Can I take one with me?"

Both of them shout, "ABSOLUTELY NOT!" Myra quickly lets go and hides behind me again.

"Sorry, but we are under orders not to let anything leave New Hope. Do a spore sweep before emerging on Earth Two."

"Standard procedure guys. We will be fine. Thanks for your help." I offer to shake their hands. They don't know what I am doing. Guess the Hopi did not do that. We wave goodbye instead and they wave back.

Earth Two

The ride from New Hope was not as bad as the first ride to Cat's World. I nearly died that time. This time, with Uncle Randy it went much easier. He made a light globe and we talked about a lot of things. Especially on how it was going to be different from now on. As a Guardian in training I was not to use my gifts in front of norms unless it was an emergency. We are their protectors and helpers. We serve them.

The 'popping' from New Hope to here made me throw up. I don't know how they get used to traveling this way. Uncle told me it gets easier as I become more trained. A TK9. I can't imagine. I want to meet a baby 'thn too.

I never want to be a bully like my mother. I am not prey! Aunties Puu and Cat told me about what happened to them when they were near my age, before they started their training. If someone had gotten caught raping me when on the Seamist, the form of death would have been unimaginable. At least in that way my mother protected me. On the other hand, I was given all of the shit jobs. By the crew I was treated much better, just like everyone else. Sometimes others would help me when my mother was not looking. They had to be careful though. She could be mean to them as well.

We arrived above Earth Two.

"I can see the entire world!" All of the oceans, land, ice caps. Amazing! So beautiful.

"Down there is where the Cats live. NEVER go there. They will not hesitate to kill and eat you. Not a nice way to die."

"Why are they so mean?"

Uncle has to think about that question, "I think it has something to do with the rivalry between the head Cat Owa and Silver. Owa is always jealous of Silver and calls all Hu 'stupid monkeys' when in fact we are apes, not monkeys."

"I have seen monkeys, but never an ape. I have heard they will eat people if they catch us."

"Not true, they are vegetarian."

"What's a veg a tar ian?"

"Someone who only eats plants, not meat."

"That sounds stupid. Not even fish?" He nods.

"Ah, but they will pull your arms and legs off to protect their group. They do not trust Hu. Hu used to hunt them and kill them. Just stay away.

They have a right to their own space." I nod. The world is getting much more complex than I ever imagined. Life aboard the Seamist was easy by comparison.

"Okay, I can see Madagascar."

"Mad a what?"

"Madscar to you. Its real name is Madagascar. At least in old Standard."

"Madagascar. Interesting."

We come down closer. Going below the clouds was neat.

"I can see waves! They look much different from up here."

"Over to your right you can see a tropical storm. Would be good to warn the others. Should be okay if they stay in port." There is always such a mess to clean up after a storm.

"We are coming into Mussel Point harbor. I can going to pop us down to an empty warehouse. Can't have norms see us flying in." Nope, I heard the warning. No showing off.

The warehouse is dark, but I can scan now and don't worry as much.

"The alley is clear, let's go." He leads me out into the sun. I shield my eyes, then remember I can see around without opening them.

"Ah, none of that. Someone catches you doing that and they will label you a witch." Shit. I open my eyes and let them adjust to the light. Uncle is patient.

"The dock is that way." We start walking towards it.

"I don't see the Seamist." I am looking for it. There are seven other ships tied up. I recognize the harbor master and lead us towards her.

"U be gud!" She exclaims.

"Be gud. Rand get." She gives me a hug.

"Be craz luk u."

Uncle Randy asks, "Seamist be?"

"No wyt. Be gon."

Uncle whispers to me. "I remember where she was supposed to go next. Best if we get there."

"One of these ships might be going there?" I offer. He looks at me like I am being silly. We head back to the warehouse, only there are people there now. He ducks around a corner and we pop to another dark space somewhere else.

"Stop it Uncle. Please tell me what is going on. I get sea sick every time we DS." Though it is a bit less being TK2.

"And I clean it up every time. I hope this is the last time for now. Once you become a TK6 you will be taught to do this yourself."

"I know the levels. Aunt Puu taught me." I am not a little kid. Onri squirms and I reach back to pet her until she settles down again. Uncle laughs.

This time we are outside a tavern. Uncle proceeds to go inside. I tug him, "I am not allowed inside." He smiles.

"Things have changed Myra. Please do not call me Uncle in there. Rand will do. You are one of us now. No titles any more." I smile and strut next to him as we enter. Dark inside of course. Not many people yet, still early.

"Que be Seamist," he announces to the few present.

"Doc, num 3" Rand flips him a copper in thanks. Money is illegal, but there is still an under the table trade that goes on. Oh, just little things. Not entire castles like Puu taught me. So much violence back then. Hard to believe this world was this way.

We hike out to the docs and there she is. Why are ship fem? They have no privates to tell what gen they are.

About time you got here.

"Who is that?" I ask. I can't always tell when someone TPs me.

"Drup of course. I don't sense Owl at the moment, so he is likely off world."

Drup is waiting at the top of the ramp waving. I wave back. The rest of the crew are starting to show up at the railing, cheering and waving too. I did not think I would be missed at all, well, except for whomever ended up with my chores.

Rand shouts to the captain, "Myra be!" She nods back and disappears, probably into her cabin. Shit, I can scan that far. Yep, she is in her cabin. Two more mouths to feed again. I have to stop being so negative. I am TK now. I am not prey!

"I asked Drup how many days we were gone. He said three."

"I was at least a year on Cat's World." I am stunned.

"She did warn us it was different there. You are bigger and stronger too. All those Kung Fu lessons will come in handy when you can't use TK remember." I smile my best evil grin. Oh this should be fun.

"Let's report in to our captain." Randy does not look happy about it. I have mixed feelings. It is good to be home, but it can't be the same way again either. Best get this over with.

When we get on deck, my mother comes storming out like she wants to flog the entire crew. Everyone backs away. I hold my ground.

"Ma," I say.

Surprisingly she hauls off to slap me. I instinctively use my training

and easily put her on the deck flat on her back. She is stunned. So am I. The crew is silent. She slowly gets up.

"Go!" She shouts at me pointing to the ramp. Okay. I am old enough. At seventeen I am a free agent. Of course she does not know I am that old now. Actually I am relieved. She throws a sack at me as I turn. I scan it. My belongings. I leave them where they are. I will not need them and walk down the ramp to the doc.

I hear footsteps behind me. Once on the dock I turn to be sure it is not her trying to hit me again, but it is Uncle, I mean Randy and Droopy.

"We needed to leave anyway. Gets suspicious when we do not age like everyone else." Randy nods to this.

Droopy leads the way. I do not get shore leave much and do not know my way around. We find an outdoor tavern and he orders food for us. I did not realize how hungry I was.

"Good. Sap chow is horrible. They made me eat it all the time."

Both of them laugh, "We remember. We can make more if you ever miss it."

"Onri needs her diaper changed and I need to find food for her as well."

"We will walk out of town soon, for privacy if nothing else. We have the whole world, well except the Cat space, open to us now."

"Madscar speak is not the same as Standard. How many languages are there?" I ask.

Drup shrugs and Randy says, "Probably thousands. Each community tends to come up with their own words. This allows them to talk to each other without strangers understanding. Most people know some Standard, as we do exchange food and supplies with others from time to time. You will notice if you listen that the dialect here is a little different."

"Yeah, I have been here before, just not on shore. Trade?"

"Technically trade is not allowed. People get around it of course. You just won't see it in the open. Not enough coin to pay for a shipment. That slows it down some."

Randy adds, "And as TK, it is really not needed, especially anything five and above when you can pretty much make anything you need."

I nod. I pull a diaper out of my sack and proceed to change Onri. She is curious though and wants to walk across the table to smell whatever we are eating.

"At that rate it will take her a year to reach the other side," Droopy laughs. I shrug. I am used to it. Compared to the ship cat she is easier to take care of. No more catching rats to feed him.

"She has lost her three best crew whether or not she realizes it." Both nod.

"We all make our own soup as Turtle would say. That is, we all make choices. All choices, ALL CHOICES, have consequences. Especially as a TK. Whole worlds can change on our actions."

"That is why you did not save my father?"

Droopy looks sad, "Even I cannot be aware of everything at once. You won't either. An army coming at you is easy, but the chaos of battle is too unpredictable. He made his choice to give his life so you and your mother would be safe. He succeeded."

"You could have cured him of his wounds though."

"No, not without giving ourselves away. It is not easy being TK. You will see people die that you could have saved. But remember every choice has consequences. Think what would have happened if we did raise him from the dead. Even if no one knew who did it."

"If they knew who, then everyone would have been afraid of them and if not, then they would be trying to explain it, especially your father. Either way, more questions than could be answered. Rumors would travel, people might have thought your father was a saint or Guardian himself."

"Then he would be tested again by someone who did not believe or was jealous and this time one of use might not have been around. End result would have been the same." They nod that I have gotten it.

"Why was my mother so mean then?"

"I tried to explain to her that you would never abandon ship. Never. But she was so convinced that you hated her and would skip the first chance you got. Especially now that you are of age. She did not tell you, but are actually eighteen, nineteen if you count Cat's World."

"Gee, why would she think I would skip? Could not have been because she beat me and gave me all of the shit tasks."

"She could not help it. Once your father was gone she was so worried about losing you she freaked out and became overly protective. You weren't going to get into trouble staying on board. People do strange things when stressed out. We all do. You will find yourself doing things you wish you had not."

"Like throwing her to the deck. But, that felt so good." I finish up Onri, but let her roam the table.

"Que be?" Oscar points to Onri. I turn to face him.

I see the rest of the crew coming towards us. No mother though.

"Shit, she will lose the ship now. No crew to support you means you can't do the job. Someone else will be appointed captain."

"We could not take how she treated you. Treated you for a long time. We all saw what happened."

I am shocked, "You speak Standard Oscar? I never knew. You could have taught me ages ago." I gently tap him on his shoulder. He pretends to be socked good.

"Most of us speak Standard, but Capn forbid it on account of you. And here you learned it anyway."

"So I would not escape her wrath." Oscar nods.

"None of you knew my father. All of you are new since when he died twelve years ago."

Renee says, "I was there, so were Rand and Drup. But we needed the job and did not want go looking again. We were old then and even older now. Not easy once you get old."

Cara says, "Most of the crew is old, including your mother. That is why we always did near shore runs."

"Storm is coming, you know that?"

"She insisted we go out anyway, to get away, so you could not come crawling back. We did not want to die because of her ego." I can understand that.

She has left the ship with her belongings. She knows she will not raise another crew. This happened because of her choices. The crew would have left anyway if she insisted on going out. You would have died with everyone else then. Shit.

"There are nine of us. I fancy being on shore for a bit. What say you all?" says Algiane.

"Aye! Any place away from her."

"I have been accepted for special training. Not sure I can go with you."

"Actually Myra, there should be no problems with being with others." Randy says then TPs, *Need to learn how to work with and around norms. Baby TKs are very weak in that skill. Shit.*

"What the hell is that thing Myra. I thought it was stuffed, but it just moved."

"And it has a diaper?"

"Long story."

Randy comes in, "Got it off a merchant in Mussel Point. She had it when I found her. Kinda grows on you after a bit. Warning, she will never abandon Onri."

"A name even. Cat did not get a name. Bet he is jealous now."

"He has an entire ship to himself without out all the noisy monkeys

pounding about waking him up from his precious sleep."

"Not exactly." Ungee holds up the cat.

"Name, name, name!"

Droopy thinks, "Well, he is gray. How about Ghost?"

They think about it and look at each other. They all nod.

"Ghost it is." Both Randy and Droopy are smiling like they swallowed a bird.

We will explain later. Remember, everyone else has to sleep and we do not need too any longer. I had forgotten about that.

Ghost sniffs Onri. Way too big to take on and definitely does not smell like rat. Goes on to take care of the rest of our fish lunch. Much better.

"Speaking of food, Onri needs lichens to eat."

"Look around Myra, it is all over the trees here. Especially on the north side." Which is away from us of course. I scan and see it. Two of the crew are ahead of us and run to get some.

A stranger comes up to us, "Speak Standard?"

Droopy answers, "Yes, how may we help you?"

"All of you together?" He nods.

"Ever run a library and an inn?"

"A library inn?" I ask. Never heard of such a thing.

"Myra, scholars come from all over and need a place to stay while they do their studies. It makes sense actually." But Crab Cove is in the middle of nowhere.

They like the seclusion and quiet. "At least three of us cook well enough, given good supplies. I can fish to help out."

"And move the heavy stuff." Someone teases him. He must weigh four times what I do.

I add, "And several of us can wait tables and cleanup." God I hated saying that, but it is a skill I know.

Randy comes in, "We are all former crew on a ship. How about a nautical theme?" That gets a good laugh. Why not.

"As long as I do not get stuck with rat patrol every time." More laughs. Looks like I have a new life. Peace be with you mother. I hope you find your way.

Ku Eden

+This is too good for me.+ I hand the moldy seed back to Yisel. +I have seen much worse in the people's coops. If you must feed me, then I should be eating what they eat.+

+Seeing as how you ate your red vest, buttons and all, shat it out and ate it again, I think we can call it even.+ Yisel shows amusement about my misery.

+You saw all that I saw. How come you are not in such misery?+

+Ah, but I was only a one button. I gave no orders, only followed them under penalty of flight school. It is called transference. I can blame you for all that I have seen.+

+You must hate me so much then for causing this pain in you.+

+At first I did, but then I realized you were just following order too. How far up I do not know, but surely our leaders know.+

+We hid a lot from them. They refused to see how things really were. We were under orders all right, to keep things from boiling over. By whatever means necessary.+ I want to regurgitate, but have nothing left in my stomach.

+True, but they benefited from your actions. You have been here three luna now. We need to get you cleaned up. We are going to visit some of these 'victims' of your actions.+

+I am not worthy of anything but soiled rags or none at all. Let me be a peasant, a poor peasant, an untouchable.+

+That would draw too much attention to us. The smell alone would alert the entire coop. I promise, it won't hurt you physically.+

+I no longer fear the physical. I fear the nightmares. The daymares. I fear breathing or seeing.+

+You will live. I will help.+

Yisel takes me to a bird bath to clean up. Several others are there. I am offended for them to have to smell me or see me. I expect them to leave immediately. Instead they come towards me. I am expecting to be killed on the spot. I deserve death for all I have done. Yes, give me death.

They lift sponges to strike me, but gently wash my feathers over and over. They trim my beak, toes and claws. I am brought a new robe, not white. The dirty gray of a peasant. Yisel changes into a similar one.

+Thank you.+

Yisel shows amusement, +I did not know you knew that word Kiley. We will make a good birdie out of you yet.+ I almost show amusement,

then the thoughts come back and I lower my head in shame.

+Bad birdie. Very bad birdie.+ That is my new mantra and meditation.

+As you have seen most of our people feel the same way. They have been put down so often they now believe it. You will fit right in.+ No amusement now. I want to die on the spot. I am led outside. Overcast. No sun for bad birdie.

+We might actually be too clean, though that felt good. We have a dust bath over here we can become more like others. Very few birds can afford a real bath.+ Yisel strips off his cloak and sets it down on a rock, jumps into the dust and kicks up a storm. I can't remember the last time I have had a dust bath. I take off my cloak. As a five button I would never been seen naked by an inferior, but now I am the inferior and I feel ashamed for Yisel instead.

+You need to kick a little higher than that birdie.+ Yisel throws some dust at me and rubs it in. I try to do a better job.

+Dust baths are important. They kill all the parasites, fleas and lice, that are everywhere in the no perch areas. Without the dust you would really stand out.+

Yisel looks me over, +That will do. Come.+

We walk through a passage that leads to the other side of the wall. This is what I remember from my previous tour. Bad birdie. I lower my head.

Yisel whispers, +Duck in here. Red Vests coming this way.+ We go into someone's coop. There are five chicks and two adults who show no surprise at all. Yisel hand signals Red Vests and they nod and motion us towards a back exit. We come out between coops heading away from the Red Vests.

+I noticed that the Red Vests lack discipline. They would never pass morning inspection.+

+A lot has happened since you came to us. The Red Vest coop is gone, burned to the ground. Some came to us, some are now gang members. The gangs came back as soon as the coop fell. Some of the new Red Vests are ones who took the vests off of the dead. In a lot of ways, they are even worse. No rules, just take what they want. And whom they want. + I can't imagine worse.

+Whoa there birdie. We can't go out there.+

+We need to do something. This is not right.+

+Alone we can do nothing. Together we will prevail. That training comes later.+ I nod. Not happy, but at least for a few nods I was not living in my thoughts.

We travel by foot from the wall area through back streets to the better areas and are admitted in the back entrance to a very well off coop. Servants are present and pay no attention to us once they see we look like they do. Everyone wears a gray cloak and has specks of dust in their feathers.

A large bird comes up to us, +Are you two the temps?+ Yisel nods, but keeps his head low. Mine already is. I recognize the higher pecking order.

She points to another, +Take these two to the kitchen and get them prepped for table service.+

+Food or slop?+ The bird asks. She gives him a dirty look. Guess that answers it. We clean the tables off after they are finished. I have been to enough high functions, but surprisingly I never paid any attention to the help. I really do not know what to do.

+I will help you and work along side you. If someone argues or bullies you, just take it, no matter what. If you see something you don't think is right, say and do nothing. This is an observation learning lesson only.+

Things move quickly after that. We are shown the main table and perches and are told what we are to do. No one asks if we understand it or even think we can do it. There are three others in our group. No one exchanges names or greetings. We all hold our heads low as all of this is explained. No ballistic level thought required. This should be easy. There is something I am not getting.

I know you can hear me. Have you done this before?

Yes, many times. Pay attention to the high perch birdies. That is where today's lesson lies.

Got it. Of course that won't be that easy while working as fast and silent as I can with my head down.

A high perch bumps me to the wall going past. There was plenty of room, so I know he did it on purpose. Then I recognize him. A rich merchant I used to dine with occasionally. Glad he did not recognize me.

When you did not come back from the forbidden area, everyone presumed you were dead. Besides you have lost a lot of kilos and really do not look like you did.

And no one sees the servants. Yisel shows amusement quickly and briefly.

We watch the servers go in as soon as everyone is perched. The room is very light and airy. Our area is very dark and dusty. Makes it hard to adapt to the light changes.

Look into the room. Once we get things back to the kitchen someone

else will take it from us so we can return as quickly as possible. Follow my lead. The timing is critical.

The head of the table is richly attired with expensive fabric and jewelry and is chirping up a storm. Just small talk and gossip, but everyone is paying attention.

Okay, here we go. Take the soup bowl even if they are not finished. In order. Start with the person in the blue bonnet and work to the right until there are no more bowls. Do not spill the soup. Come back if you have to. No stacking. One in each hand. Watch me. I will start.

He goes gracefully over and carefully reaches around the bird to scoop up the bowl and go for the second one. I jump in and get my first two and bring them to waiting hands. I am not as graceful with the first two and get slapped by one of the birds. I nod apology and continue without a sound. Soup bowls are soon all gone. I am the last to finish, but not by much.

The second course goes in. A few minutes later we go back to collect the bowls. I can't believe I used to eat and enjoy this stuff. I want to regurgitate at the smell and sight.

Someone drops a bowl. Silence, then a kitchen staff comes in to clean it up, hitting the bird who dropped it repeatedly in front of the guests. None of them pay any apparent attention. Strange. Did this happen the times I was here and I did not notice?

I am bumped by a server, my being in the way. I am expecting to be hit too, but only a hard bump.

It seems like forever, but we make it through the meal. We are all back in the kitchen. There are some birds in a closed room next to the kitchen. I can hear what appears to be mating? No one else pays any attention. A rich bird come out. I know him too. A moment later a young hen comes out and rearranges her feathers and gray cloak. I never heard her, only him.

Was she just raped?

Yes.

How often does this occur?

Most meals. She is a favorite. Horrible server, but she is kept for her willingness to be raped. They take turns. Four meals, four times a day. She is paid with extra food, which keeps her attractive as well. She will be replaced in a few luna as some new interest catches their attention.

She is bigger than the males doing this. I know most of the guests that I saw. I never knew. I never did that.

We are paid with a small sack of left overs scrapped from the tables

all mixed together. I hand it to someone else. I can't eat it.

Don't do that again. They will think that you think you are too good for them.

That is NOT why I did not take it. It makes me sick to smell it. I would rather have my moldy seed than the stuff the rich eat now. I used to love this stuff, but now . . .

I understand, but they won't. You are a very lucky bird to be able to work here. Take it and we can give it away near the wall. They won't know where it came from and will be happy for the calories.

We make it back to the forbidden zone in silence. I am happy to get back to my cell, but instead we go to a communal eating area. Everyone is eating and talking about their day. I recognize a few of the former Red Vests who served under me. Not sure they recognize me.

They do, but are being polite. No one here is proud of their pasts and do not want to be reminded. Just pretend you have never met them before and introduce yourself as such. I nod.

The obvious cook comes up to me to hand me a bowl.

+I understand that you only eat fermented seed. A digestive problem? You should see our healer, Kaaf.+ She points out a bird with a few red feathers on the left side of her head. I nod a thanks.

+I thought I was getting moldy rotten food. This is specially prepared?
+

Yisel smiles, +We try to accommodate every taste. No one else can eat it. It does smell bad.+

+I find I actually prefer it now. A lot less digestive issues as the cook commented. Never felt better. That was not my intention though.+

+Beats eating partly digested red vests I suspect.+ I show amusement.

+Oh my! Kily just smiled. Amazing. I thought those muscles were permanently damaged.+ Very funny. I give him a sour look and he laughs.

+Do we go back the same coop tomorrow? I think there is more to see than I missed, concentrating so much on not making a mistake.+

+We are scheduled for a full quarter luna. Today was a party. The next few days will just be the extended family, about fifteen birds. We will work in the garden and yard. Much more physical, but outside at least. You have lost a lot of your color being in your cell for three months. At least your muscles have atrophied enough now to pass as a poor birdie.+ I did not notice. I could not bare seeing myself in a reflector now. I hope I never see myself again. I used to be so obsessed with how I looked to others. Training for a Red Vest seems now to be more about appearances than truth.

+So much to learn. I feel like I am starting over.+

Yisel, +Very good Kily. You may work out after all. Many were betting you would not. You did really well today not reacting to the abuse you clearly saw. In the old days we were also called Watchers. We did not act quickly, but built up an air tight case before coming in to fix things. No birdie is perfect, not matter how hard your previous life tried to make it so. Look around you.+

I take a moment to look. Every item and person I can see has something out of place. A bent feather, a nick in a bowl, a spot on a glass pane, dents on perches and tables.

+Absolutely nothing is ever perfect. Nature just does not work that way. Only we and the Hu are obsessed with perfection. Almost makes us ineligible to be called sentient even.+

My eyes go wide, +You have met a Hu? I thought they were just stories.+

+They are real. Part of your training is to spend time in another world, seeing how others have solved problems. I was stationed on a Hu world.+

+Where will I go?+

+That will be between you and Flor. None of that happens until you have had more training. I was here for years before I got to spend a few weeks there. I had just come back when I was assigned to you. + Who is Flor?

+Wait, the disappearances did not occur until a few months before I came here.+

+Oh, no. They have been happening for years, but none of the birdies under you wanted to admit they had lost a bird who had gone awol. They would just report to you they have shoved them off a cliff and it had been taken care of. If you had ever counted the bones at the base you would have figured it out. They sometimes threw roq bones and rags down there too, to hide all this. + A lot to think about it. Was it all a lie and illusion? We hurt so many birds thinking we were doing the right thing, all the time just causing destruction and suffering instead.

I wake in my cell. How did I get here?

+You fainted. I brought you here to rest. It has been a lot to take in at once, especially after your self imposed disciplines that went beyond what was necessary. + He smiles.

+They were necessary and I don't regret them. I have seen the abuse inflicted by the Red Vests and the high perch 'citizens'. I have seen the state of the majority of our flock, the 99%. This is totally unacceptable. I will fervently strive to lead as simple a life as possible, devoting myself

to making amends and helping in anyway possible. + He looks concerned, but says nothing.

The White Cloak I met on the first day looks into my cell. I have not seen her again until now and am surprised.

+You almost sound like a Hu monk, a religious zealot. They took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.+

+I accept poverty without question. I could never be sure I did not coerce a potential mate by virtue of my position. So, chastity is definitely certain. I am not sure I could ever trust authority ever again. I have been fooled my entire life. I don't intend to repeat that mistake.+

+And we could be fooling you? Do you doubt what you have seen? Has anyone told you what to think about what you have seen and experienced?+ She looks at Yisel when she says this. He lowers his head.

+I have seen what you wanted me to see. No one has told me what to think of what I have seen. I would like a beat up satchel of food, a simple robe and permission to investigate for myself. Only then could I be sure.+

She nods, +Excellent idea. Wish the others had thought of this. We had to suggest it to them. You are the first to see this for yourself. You have come a long way. This will be the next lesson and test. One that you place on yourself. Always the best way to proceed.+

She smiles, +Give Kily what has been requested with a list of safe locations to stay at after dark. You remember how to get to the high perch coop?+

I nod. She nods to Yisel who leaves to get what I have requested.

+We will not tell you just yet how to find this location. Leave word at any of the safe locations and word will get back to us. We will find you. You understand that others of this flock are already outside. Don't assume someone you meet is a member, but don't assume they are not either. Best to find your own way in your own manner and learn what you need to learn. If our ways part, there is no shame in that and we will assist you in any way we can.+

+I understand.+ I bow deeply to her, she raises me up.

+I am no high perch saintly bird either. I have made a lot of mistakes too. The stories I could tell you . . . + She leaves.

When Yisel comes back, +What is the leader's story?+

+You mean Flor?+ He smiles, +She was here when the original Black Vests were disbanded. She has had some experience with oppressive thugs as she would say.+ Guano, that would make her hundreds of years old. At least. How is that even possible? Yisel just smiles at me as he sees it sink in. What is the back story? How much could they teach me about

the Red Vests and the Black Vests before them? Is that even important?
Maybe it is more important to just do the right thing. That calms me.

+Follow me and I will take you to the outside.+ I pick up the satchel
and Yisel hands me a staff too. Somehow it seems right and I take it.

Ron of Mars

I could DS in a couple of hops easy enough but it feels better to fly using sputter DS so I can see with physical eyes the journey. Still takes me less than an hour.

In orbit I can see all of the greenish areas in the lower basins they have been working on. They have really done a lot.

Ron, ping me to let me know where you are.

Welcome Turtle. I am in a meeting at the moment. I will meet you in the garden in a bit. A bit in Mars time could be hours.

The air, even at the bottom of the basin is thin and cold, about what it would be at 5000 meters on one of the earths. It falls off rapidly. High CO2 content to trap heat of course. Would not be breathable to normal Hu. There are a few others already present, but no one pays any attention to me. Ron does not hide his TK, so it could be they are used to it.

This is like no flower garden I have ever seen. None of the flowers are larger than a centimeter. Most are only a few millimeters. How do they pollinate? Not much flies at 5000 meters on earth. There are very tiny little beetles crawling among the plants and flowers. They have storage sacks on their backs. No, actually what were wings have been modified into storage sacks. They are stuffed with pollen to the point of being overfilled. Ah, so these are the pollinators. Ingenious.

The soil has a good amount of moisture, but not right at the surface. A few tens of centimeters down. Evaporation must be a problem. The leaves are all waxy too, just like evergreens on earth.

A few clicks away I sense a lake of sorts. Not more than a pond earth side. I reach out further and finally come to the largest body of water in the basin, a small sea.

"The sea has lots of salt." I say to myself.

^MWhen we removed the oxygen from all the perchlorates we ended up with sea salts. Saltier water does not evaporate as fast either, so it serves as a storage. Mostly visual though.^M

I do not recognize the young lady speaking to me. At least two meters tall and very thin. One third gravity will do that.

^MMost of the water is still in underground storage I presume.^M

^MCorrect. The Ron will see you now if you would follow me.^M

^MHow did you know it was me?^M I tease her. She looks at me incredulously as if am being stupid and walks on.

Quit teasing the staff Turtle. You are currently the shortest person they

have ever seen.

No fun at all. Actually I am short even by Hu standards, never mind Mars.

The buildings are proportional to their heights, single story, but tall. The doors are vapor locked to retain moisture inside and less than two meters tall. Strange. Most of the Martians are taller. Ah, she opens the door with a hiss and stoops to enter. I of course can walk in without ducking. She closes the door behind me. I think I was supposed to have done that.

^MSorry, have not been here for a very long time and do you know your customs and procedures.^M

^MI was warned to expect 'differences'. Do not worry yourself.^M Got it, I am a stupid earthling tourist. Hey, we feel the same way about tourists on earth and most are Hu to begin with. Ask Ron about his experiences on earth sometime.

She guides me to a sparse office with a stone desk and chairs. Ron comes in and gives me a hug. The assistant leaves without a sound. That had to look strange. Martians are not very affectionate normally.

I remember from the Regional Center that Ron does not remember Standard very well, so I stay in Martian.

^MLooks like things are going well. The garden is beautiful and I love what you did with the beetles.^M

^MWork with what you have. They used to be flour beetles that were a real pest. Turns out they love pollen and being spread out more than in a sack of flour it keeps their population down. So, what brings you all the way out here?^M

^MWe did not get much time to talk at the Center. I wanted to catch you up on ideas about a problem all of us are trying to figure out.^M

He nods for me to go ahead.

^MFirst, have you had any problems with 'thants yet?^M

^MYet? We are careful not to ever use 'thn metal. We do not even get visits from 'thn of any size. My guess is we are small enough to not be worth their bother.^M

^MYou are not wearing a gold torque. You are TK8. The parasites have been attacking even TK2s. Get your people protected ASAP. They are spreading rapidly. They killed all TKs on Ku Eden while Flor was gone with us. When she returned, they were gone. Only forensics told us what killed them.^M

^MRarely have any need to DS here. Everyone knows I am TK, so no need to sneak around and pretend to be norm. We started with a fairly

high tech. You will have noticed the satellites in orbit. They are our communications network. We decided to go that route rather than underground. Never have to worry where you dig on a project. All of our water and sanitation is sustainable at the building level. If one house goes down, it is the only one.^M

^MAre you expecting an invasion? You do not have to worry about earth. We are purposely keeping the tech low there until they learn to behave themselves.^M

^MUnlike earth, we do not ever want to get in an ecological death trap. Being self sustaining means we are very hard to kill and can shut ourselves off from others in the event of a plague or other disaster.^M

^MThe religious facists did a number on your culture.^M

^MWe will never forget that mistake. There are no leaders at higher than a village level now. We make up our minds and solve problems at the local level and though we freely share problems and solutions, we have no right to impose on others.^M

^MI do not wish to insult you, but you have come originally from Hu stock and genes. Unless you have edited all our bad points out, and that would be difficult given the cross connects of everything, you must still occasionally have to deal with trouble of the political kind.^M

^MWe have no predators. No need to 'hunt' anything. Even our knives are only ten centimeters in length. But, yes, murder still happens, though rarely. I do have work to do here. I do not sit on my butt all the time. I am not even the leader of this community. Our current leader is an excellent administrator and an excellent choice. We have no rich or poor. All resources are shared. Even this room is only mine for this meeting.^M He smiles when he says this.

^MHmm, sounds like you are still living in a monastery.^M

^MBut without the bishops. The lifestyle does have some advantages.^M He laughs.

^MI wonder. Without problems to solve how to you keep your minds active and alert? People need some problems.^M

^MYou will have noticed we have not colonized the entire planet yet. There is plenty of work to do. Our problems are best seen at the edges. Care for a field trip?^M

^MI would love that. Silver will be very jealous that I got the full tour.^M

He laughs again, ^MHow is Silver doing? Still act like a wise one in a mountain cave?^M

I nod yes and sigh, ^MCan be very annoying at times. Granted no one, not even he, knows what TK level he is any more. I would imagine he an-

icipates most things. That alone would make one appear all knowing. He was surprised by Puu's disappearance though. Oh, she has reported in via Randy who ended up on Cat's World. Long story.^M

^MI'm glad. I worry about her. A little too high stung as you say.^M I nod.

^MShe is important to keep Cat in check though.^M He nods with a sigh and a smile.

We go outside, bubble up and rise. We are very quickly above most of the atmosphere. It still has a reddish color which I also noticed coming in. We head over the nearest mountains and down the other side. There is a smaller basin there with fewer green patches. We go over the top of these to the edge of the settled area and then set down.

No gardens here. A lot of dust still. There is a building that looks like a large termite mound and not much bigger. No windows. I scan, ah, 99% is underground. This is only the entrance. We go inside and down a spiral staircase that descends very quickly. Meant for the long Martian legs. I give up and TK instead.

^MNot designed for Hu. I'm sorry.^M

^MDon't be. You have to live here. If you made it short enough for me there would be a lot of bumped heads and sprained ankles.^M He smiles.

^MIf the tourist trade keeps rising we may have to make a Hu settlement.^M

^MRight, how many non TK Hu tourists do you get anyway?^M No earth I know has the tech to get here without TK.

^MYou are the first Hu visitor in a thousand years, TK or not, White did visit once out of curiosity and to say hi.^M

^MHold off on the hotel then. Only TKs can get here.^M No way could they fit a full sized Di here.

We reach the bottom and proceed horizontally for some distance. I hear activity as we get closer. Lots of pounding and words. All activity stops as we enter.

There is a large model with about a dozen people surrounding it. It looks like an amazing series of pipes and structures.

^MCarry on, we will be quiet. This is TK Turtle from Earth One.^M They nod to me and go back to work.

This is the proposed layout for the eventual settlement. It will take three hundred and twenty eight years to complete if all goes as planned.

How long did it take to come up with this model?

One hundred and sixteen.

Shit, you guys really plan long term. I thought only TKs did that. That is a lot of generations that will never see the results.

Not unlike your cathedrals of the middle ages Turtle.

Touche. What is the scale? How far does this map extend.

You see the far edge away from us. That is the ocean you saw when you came in.

This is hundreds of kilometers wide then. He nods.

I place a gold shield around Ron's neck and pop us back to the garden.

^MI think I have seen enough for now. I should get back. Just stopped in to see if you had any 'thant or parasite activity. Really Ron, get everyone with TK ability to wear a gold shield. Please. I really do not want to lose anyone. Over three hundred, at last count, died on Ku Eden. Does not have to be external. You can make a thin layer to coat the spine itself if you do not want something visible. Or coat it with paint. Anything. Just wear one please.^M

Earth Two

"Myra, have you tried to read any of the books here? They could put a raging elephant to sleep. Why does the library exist even?"

I hand him the History of the Crab Cove Library & Inn. He sighs, but takes it from me. I have already read it. Never read anything before and it is still exciting to me. Must have been implanted the same time as Standard. Droopy was right. A nice quiet place to study hard. We have three in residence now even and we just opened this morning. They were very anxious to get in. Apparently they were all staying at the Tavern's inn until we took over and the storm passed. It was loud but almost no damage to the inn. All the ships staid in the harbor and survived with minimal damage. Hate to think what would happened to any ship at sea.

We are a half kilometer outside of town, nestled in the trees. Trees covered in all kinds of lichens. Onri likes the pale green ones the best and there are several varieties of those. Ghost greets each visitor and overs to keep their lap warm free of charge. Droopy gives him fish for his meals and he is free to catch anything else he can find. No more rat duty at least. Cook keeps the kitchen spotless. Easy access to wood and water have made a huge improvement.

The scholars appear to be brain dead. They are so clueless. They leave three books open at once and fall asleep at their cubicle, a little alcove where they can be isolated from the others. I am cleaning up food scraps constantly. I don't dare touch any scraps of paper that fall to the floor. If we did not force them to go to bed at night, to abide by the fuel laws, I would never get a break.

Still all in all, it is not bad. I have been on land for over a year counting Cat's World, so I already have my land legs. The others, I guess because they got shore leave at most ports, did not take long to adjust. Everyone has found work to do without asking. Everyone really enjoys not having my mother bossing them around. Puu was bossy, but never nasty and incredibly patient. She said it was from mothering Cat for so many years. Cat did incredible art work though. A genius. She did a lot of other things that only Puu seemed to understand. Some day maybe.

Corey comes to the front of the inn with a large gang of men carrying a large tree trunk. I can 'see' this from the inside. Freaks people out that I know when they are coming. I open the door in anticipation of his knocking. His hand is already raised to open the door.

"Stop that Myra." No way. Too much fun. I smile an innocent smile.

"What's the log about?"

"I thought, given our nautical theme, it would be fun to have a crows nest. That way we could keep an eye on conditions in town and harbor."

"And have a quiet place to hide from the scholars." He smiles and nods. There will be a lot of competition for that space.

"Make the 'nest' as large as possible. Someone should be able to sleep up there on a warm night."

"All nights are warm Myra, we are near the equator."

"And we get rain every day too." It hardly ever rained on Cat's World. He goes around the back, then comes back out front. I am still waiting.

"What do you think of it being in the front?"

"We would need to rig it and add spars for effect." He nods in agreement.

"No sails," he adds. Yeah, that would be a real problem in any wind.

"Get Drup to help." We have started calling them Rand and Drup again. Easier and what everyone was used to. Three of them grab shovels and start digging. It will look great.

The rest of the changes are coming along. Rope designs on the walls and as stair railings. Lots of cubby holes for storage. The scholars love it. They have taken to putting paper tags on the ones they have claimed. Gets some of their mess off their desks anyway. Problem is, they want to leave stuff there until they come back next time. May need a room just for storage.

Drup comes up from morning fishing carrying a large sack. Ghost comes out meowing up a storm. You would think he was starving to death. Drup hands him some tasty bits and the purr can be heard across town I am sure. Simple pleasures. He stops to see the pole and the hole.

"Crows nest. Will add to the 'decor' of the place." I smile at my new vocabulary word. Drup rolls his eyes and laughs.

"I can guess my part in this plan. Better get these to cook and clean up. Smell like fish guts."

"You always smell like fish guts. That is how we know you are coming." He laughs.

Ah, my TK studies. I have a room of my own. They put a bed in there and I asked why. They said it had to look like I slept even if I did not. We still have one person on watch. Drup, Rand and I split the night. I take the early morning shift so I can also get ready for morning meal. So, I ruffle the blankets when I remember, but otherwise night is time for my learning.

They have me doing all kinds of things in the dark. They will hide stuff and tell me to find it. I am timed. Became a game. I even have to be able to read books, several pages in, without opening them! That is hard!

And of course there are the glass dye balls. I think I have done thousands of these. I only succeed about one in ten now, which is way better than when I started with none in ten. They of course showed me how to do it, ten out of ten. Ha-ha. Then I was told, this was the easy set and went on to explain how I would have to handle more and more of them at one time flying complicated patterns without the dye touching the water or breaking the paper thin glass containers. I have smashed more than one out of frustration. My bedroom walls can attest to it.

I am told that once I am a TK3 I will have to clean the walls at the microscopic level. I had no idea what that meant until they took me to the library lab and showed me a microscope. Bamboo tubes and glass lenses. Pain to focus. I could spend all day there just looking at different things though. More fun than the balls at least. Of course the scholars get first chance to use it. Rarely leaves me a chance, what, with all the duties.

Still, it is way better than rat patrol in the wet dirty stinky hold of a rocking ship with your mother screaming at you because it is never good enough. I hope she is okay, but I really never want to see her again. Rand tells me it is easy to get in her trap and she should not be blamed entirely. I have also learned we all make our own choices and we hold ourselves accountable for those choices. Almost easier when someone else was keeping score.

We are part of a greater community and have duties there as well. One day in seven we walk to town and join the line of volunteers. Some days I am doing garbage, some ditch digging for the ever present rain overflow, some times sorting stock in a supply outlet. Never alone, always with cheerful people happy to be part of the village. I was already pretty muscled from working on the Seamist, but I am getting even stronger now that I am also eating better. Something about making my mind work harder is making me stronger overall. Not a bad life all in all.

Di Eden

I ask Tia, "How did Squeak's lecture go?" We are back in Hu form. Not as much fun, but White says everyone needs to have experience with Hu as well. Raps and Di look pretty close to the same if you account for the size. We look and move totally differently.

"She did fine as we knew she would. Has become quite the young lady. Being an alpha seems to come to her effortlessly." All professors are referred to as alphas even though there is a hierarchy among them as well. I was never crazy about eggheads, but everyone is different. The baby Rap is all grown up and I need to accept it.

I see Tia turn and greet someone coming in, "Hello Turtle. How was your trip to see Ron?" I can never sense when either she or Silver comes in. Creepy when I can sense everyone else. I think they do it on purpose to keep us awake, not that we sleep. I guess I really am attentive. Whatever.

We both give her a hug, sit down with tea and wait to hear her tale.

"It was interesting. Very different than anything we have set up anywhere else. Much more careful and well thought out. One project I saw has taken over a hundred years already and they expect it to finish three hundred years from now."

"Earth years or Mars years?" She looks shocked and surprised.

"I forgot to ask. I am losing my touch. I am usually much more on it."

"Hanging with Silver too much will do that." She laughs and agrees.

"Six hundred earth years is a very long time. What were they doing?"

"A planned community expansion. They are super perfectionist about being energy efficient and sustainable. They have to be. Not as easy to patch things if they get a cascade failure. It has happened before, so they are extra careful now."

"What happened last time?" I ask.

"Thousands died and they lost hundreds of Mars years of effort." Shit.

"New Hope pretty much runs itself at least."

"So far. Don't grow complacent. Is Squeak safe to leave here now? Can you two get back to spell Smith and Jones. They looked pretty upset not to get to go to the Center."

"She has gotten through her first Luna of giving lectures. Full house and a room full of stomping after each one."

"Hmm, that won't always be true. She is the novelty now, but once

others learn what she knows and start teaching it elsewhere she will become a dusty old professor like happens to everyone else."

I laugh, "I can't imagine Squeak being old and dusty. She will get bored and go onto another project. Remember, she was raised by Cat."

Tia humfs, "Mostly by Puu and the rest of us. Cat was always on a project." True, very true.

"Randy went to Cat's World, as they are calling it to rescue a crew-mate from the Seamist who accidentally used a stone. They are both back on Earth Two now and settling in. There is apparently a time dilation effect of about a hundred to one. Time goes a hundred times faster on Cat than here or any other earth. Strange. Wish I could understand how Cat did that or found this world. From Randy's description it is a low green, high brown world, covered in lichens from microscopic to tree size. Only one animal, a sloth like creature with no predators and a very slow repro fortunately. But, all are well. Puu is staying to avoid the 'thn for now and helping Cat on her 'thant project."

"Speaking of 'thants. Anything new there?"

"I am not sure yet, but something is strange, I think it might be that 'thants only attack earth worlds. Is Library still here?" She should already know of course, but it is fun to engage in conversation.

"That might explain why we were forbidden from the Regional Center, especially if it is contagious."

"Good thought. Never thought of them as contagious, only annoying."

"Colds are annoying, but contagious too. Not that I have had one in a long time. They get an infectious skin rash here that makes you want to scratch your affected part off your body. That is annoying." Tia is shaking her head that I am getting off topic. I do that easily. Sigh . . .

"Find White and you will find her. I don't think they have been out of physical contact since getting back. Just teasing, but it seems that way sometimes."

"Very rare for a high TK to get the love bug. Hope it never happens to me."

"Here, here!" Both Tia and I come in.

"Come with me Tia and Sam. Three minds is better than one. You know your way around here. I don't want to make a social mistake."

"Hu are immune from that possibility. Everything we do is wrong, so I have given up trying. We have both gotten used to it anyway. They cut us a lot of slack."

Tia scowls at me, "Basically bow to the alphas and ignore the others."

"That is kind of rude. Everyone is deserving of respect." Turtle is up-

set.

"Different culture. Not our problem. White has been around and knows how other cultures work. He says he has to pick his battles and the sense of hierarchy is too firmly ingrained to change easily."

"Too bad. Hu have that problem too, but at least we are trying. Earth Two is doing pretty well there. We removed all money and concentrated metals from the equation. No property either. The locals decide resource allocation. No one rich or poor."

"For now." I add.

She sighs, "Yeah, for now. Silver is there dealing with a new pirate problem. It always seems like some group feels they have been left out somehow."

"Or feel entitled because they are more deserving." Tia adds. Yeah.

"We are coming up to the Hall of Heros, basically the faculty lounge."

Squeak sees us and comes running up undignified. She hugs Turtle as well as she can in Rap form. Looks like she is about to eat Turtle. She is wearing her medallion indicating her position. No longer on probation, though still low on the faculty list. She will rise.

^RHello Professor Squeak. How are you?^R So formal. Hope this does not go to her head. Turtle's Rap is pretty good, given she is in Hu form. A lot of the guttural sounds are hard for us.

^RI am well Mother Turtle. How are you?^R

"Okay you two stop it. Be friendly. Turtle is looking for Library. She has some questions about 'thants."

"She was with White last I saw." Squeak speaks excellent Hu of course. And that answer is not useful.

"Can you take us? We do not want to interrupt anything ah, important." Tia says. Squeak gets it and shows amusement in Rap form, which is a funny sort of neck feather ruffling. Gets me every time. How did she learn about sex? She was born in the wild, probably saw it a lot.

They are in the next open room and just talking over a bowl of food.

White gets up, "Welcome Turtle. You remember Library of course."

"We only met briefly at the Regional Center. Nice to see you in solid form. Are you settling in alright?"

"Oh yes, very nice. Di was my original form from over a million years ago. Of course I had to update the look to be more modern. Weaker jaw and smaller teeth mostly. We had it pretty much like this for a long time." She waves her arm around her. That I did not know. That is one slow evolving species. I guess if it works then why mess with it.

"This is just a quick in and out. What can you tell me about 'thants

now that we are gone from the center. Specifically, do they only attack earth versions?"

"Not just earth variants. I am no longer connected to the system, so cannot access what I don't remember, but I did try and get as much as I could when I saw what was happening. How much do you know about the 'thn?"

"A lot more than they want us to know. They are not all powerful GODS that they make themselves out to be."

She laughs, "Yeah, Silver and you scare the 'thn metal out of them. Good for you. They are bullies for sure." Turtle nods.

"Okay, I much as I can figure from cross correlating 'thant sightings with TK growth. It appears that when TKs get to a certain concentration the 'thants start to show up on their worlds. "

"We know they are attracted to 'thn metal, could that be it? When TKs get to the point where they figure out how to make it the 'thants are attracted to it."

"Not enough. If you put 'thn metal on a world set not associated with TKs they never show up, no matter how much life is present. Experiments have been done behind the 'thn backsides. They are not just looking for food and space."

"Think. A lot of different TKs are present at the Center. How many suffer from 'thants?"

She smiles, always creepy with that many teeth, "When we left the Center, only earth worlds were affected. And there were several hundred other sens present at the time. Only earthers have shown any interest in more knowledge about 'thants."

"Historically?" A million years is a lot of observations.

"There was one tidally locked world with insect like creatures where they appeared also."

"That was Silver in another incarnation. They must remember from past ones as he was born on Earth One this time around."

"Incarnations are not that different each time, so this would make good sense on their part. But, hmm, maybe only TKs who know about the incarnations are affected."

"The 'thn do not like it when we find out do they?"

"Not at all."

"So why pick on Puu specifically?"

"They are not worried about Puu, but her friend Cat. I have to take minutes at council meetings. Cat was and is the real target. But apparently Cat fooled them with her transport stones. No one has ever made

one of those before. They have no idea how they work."

"You knew it was a transport stone, but you have never seen one before?"

"I listen even in this form Turtle. I did not stop becoming a librarian because I breathe now." She smiles demurely. That is scary.

"Why ban earth sens from the Center and threaten taking TK away?"

"Ah, to contain the infection of course."

"The 'thants or the knowledgeable TKs?"

"Take your pick as I believe you Hu say." Turtle nods smiling.

Be careful what you share with Library and White. I am not convinced she is not still working for the 'thn. Turtle pops out.

I reach into my pocket. The black stone is gone. This is real then.

Earth Two

"We need to collect and hide all the black stones Cat and you made."

"What's up?"

"Library said that the 'thn are trying to contain the infection."

"What infection?"

"Not clear, could be the 'thants, which seem to attack high TK concentrations and earth is the highest at the moment. Or, it could be the 'thn themselves and 'thants are a way of doing that."

"Where can we hide something that the 'thn can't find? They could be watching us right now for all we know. I am sure a high 'thn could hide from us by just being in another solar system. They could already have a copy to study."

"Shit." Yeah.

"Well one location would be better than many locations. Cuts down the odds they find one."

"Also cuts down the odds we can use one in an emergency, even if just to rescue Puu and Cat."

"Shit."

"No win situation."

"Yep."

"I have an idea. What if the stones were subtly changed. Can you do it? Do you understand them well enough?"

"Oh, that is evil. Unless you know the secret code you end up some place nasty. It will be done. No point in handing back the ones you have already collected. Best not to have any live ones, live or not, near Library. I agree with your assessment. Even if Library is not in on it, she was their pawn for a very long time and may not be able to stop herself."

"My thinking exactly. And it was going so easy till now."

"Not Cat's fault. They clearly were looking at us before she made the stone."

"True, she just lit the fuse."

Cat's World

"This is my station #1, where I expected them to show first. Once they make an entrance here they will try the others. Even if they do not succeed here, they have the coordinates for this world now and will try the other stations."

"And if that does not work, they will make their own."

"Correct. All that you have learned from the library confirms this as well."

"You can almost see the shape of one near the edge of the sphere. Fascinating Cat."

"If you look at the quantum level it gets better. Make clockwise spin blue and counterclockwise red."

"Oh my, almost the entire sphere has them! They do not mess around. None of the other spheres have this?"

"Not yet. George is still monitoring them as we speak."

"How long till break through? Looks close. This appears to have happened in one day max."

"Depends on how much time they think they need to set up shop. Once they come through, things will go much faster."

"How the hell did they even find this place. The twisted route here, the time dilation effects. Is this even in normal space?"

Cat smiles, "Of course not. At first it was just to stop all of you from shutting down my experiments, then when you arrived I figured it helps keep the 'thn out. Now I see it really slowed down the 'thants too. Just as well, we are much, much better prepared now." Like the Cat who ate the canary.

"Oh, look, one has emerged and is crawling on the outside of the sphere."

"Our first scout. It will report back in a moment and then the rest will emerge. Our primary defense is still the knock out rings. We will use the more physical defenses if we have to. Good idea of making the last ring out of gold. We know they don't like that. One of the reasons George is made from gold/carbon quantum foam."

"Would give them indigestion." She nods.

"Do you think they would attack 'thn?"

"Only if the 'thn was incapacitated somehow." She grins.

"The library said they can eat almost anything to make more of themselves. That suggests at least TK6 to have DS and subatomic abilities."

"But I am not sensing any TK coming from them. Might be a different frequency?"

"It is not just solidic vs fluidic. We can sense TK from 'thn normally."

"They seem to be a mix of both. We were told the 'thn date back to the beginning of the multiverse. I wonder when 'thants first appeared?"

"I did not get enough time at library to ask all my questions. Not sure anyone knows the answer to that question Cat. The one on the outside certainly scans like the models I was given." I pop the model I kept in my room to us and hold it up.

Cat looks at it, "They did a good job modeling it. I am assuming the differences are due to the variation in 'thants themselves and not inaccuracies in the model." I nod agreement.

"Strange, it is not leaving the sphere, just keeps going round and round."

"Did you notice that it stopped at precisely the same time you popped the model here? I am guessing it can sense TK use. I am going to try something."

Cat makes a tiny sphere of gold. About three millimeters in size. She then TKs it to the sphere in front of the approaching 'thant. Sure enough the 'thant turns in our direction waving its antennae.

"Can't see well. Just like regular ants."

I offer, "Covergent evolution. Similar problems have similar solutions."

"Right. Never did get all of that in class. Whoa! Did you see that? It literally jumped back when it touched the gold particle. Look, it is running back to the exit point."

"Did not think they could run. The library never mentioned it. Just that gold could stop them from coming through if placed over the portal."

"And they can sense TK use."

"How long do we wait now?"

"No idea. Might be time to activate the rest of my herd of workers."

"Herd?"

"You did not think George was the only one? I have a Henry, Issac, Jacob, Kevin, Larson, and Martin ready to go."

"I assume A-F were the rejects?"

"Hey, it was not easy. I will place one at each sphere. They might see this one as unsafe now."

"We will see. Hope we do not have to wait another hundred years."

"We can always go to a slower time, just have to be aware enough to respond to a watcher if one comes back here with a report."

Ku Eden

+It has been two lunas. Might be time to check on the Commander.+
+She was never raised to TK status. How much trouble can she get in to?+

+You would not ask that question if she was Hu. True believers can get into a lot of trouble very quickly. Do you remember the historical texts from your training?+

+That was a very long time ago. I have been busy of late. If you are worried about her, go ahead. I had forgotten how much time is spent running the Watchers. I did put a tracker on her and she has not moved the entire time. An old abandoned fabrication coop east of here in the poor district.+ She shows me the link.

+You are basically the good equivalent of the Red Vests now. A gentler version, but still seeking out the bad birdies.+

+And taking down the high perch birds a bit. Surprising how tenacious they are in hanging onto their privileged status.+

+Hey the 'pecking order' is not unique to Ku culture. Look at the other bird cultures here. The rocs, shlys, redbies. They all have hierarchies.+ I do not mention the hierarchy she has set up in the Watchers.

I change my appearance. I want to appear as one of the untouchables. Someone no one would notice or pay any attention to.

+I'm sorry Khéya. Do please keep me informed about what you find.+

+You need to delegate more Flor. It will drive you crazy otherwise.+

+You want me to go Cat and take naps all day?+

+Works for them.+ I show amusement, bow and pop out.

I see a group of three birds in ratty red vests. Certainly have degraded some. Young roosters full of guano. Universal I am afraid. I decide to follow them.

Are they drunk too? Guano, they also have knives and I don't think it is for their work, unless you see being a bully as a profession.

Other birds move out of their way or hide. So, their rep proceeds them. How come the Watchers don't know about these three?

One turns around to see if anyone is following, but I anticipate this and do not need to look at them to keep my 'sight' on them. I pretend to be down and out leaning against a wall begging. My Cat instincts kick in and I am on the hunt. Being an ambush predator I need to catch them in the act. I get surprised looks from some of the birds. Why would a bum hunt bullies?

The area gets even poorer if you can imagine. This place is really bleak. Open areas of waste, feathers everywhere. Lots of weeds and broken structures and debris.

The bullies chirp at other birds seemingly at random to see them cower. I hate bullies! They seem to find amusement from this activity and escalate to scratching dirt at some and accidentally bumping others.

We come to the abandoned structure I have pinned the Commander to. She is inside with other birds. Lot of birds inside.

The three go in, slamming the doors as they pass. I slip in behind them and blend with the wall. There are others like me present so I fit in well.

There is a food line of sorts and they bully their way to the front. They are offered a bowl without question. One indicates they want more. It is given. They take their bowls to a table and kick the occupants off to take their places. These three are really pissing me off.

+Welcome honored bird.+ I turn to see a really old bird of indeterminate gender (unless I scan of course, but the point being the appearance, not the reality).

I bow, +I am hardly an honored bird old one. Just heard about the place and decided to check it out.+

+Get in line if you are hungry. There are baths and healers over that way.+ He indicates a direction. They never charge. +All are welcome.+

I point to the bullies, +What about those three? Is there going to be trouble?+

The bird shows concern, +They are new as of about a week ago. Annoying, but so far it has not gotten any worse than this.+ He is wearing a blue bandanna around his neck.

+What is with the blue neck thing?+

He waves his arm around in a full circle, +We are the Poor Birdies of Ku. This is our refuge for all who seek shelter.+ I notice a scattering of others now with the blue. Each is serving others in some way.

+How does one join? I can't do accounting or other such fancy stuff, but I can wield a shovel or broom or soup ladle just fine. I am not a mooch and gladly work for my needs.+

+Are you mated?+ I nod no.

+We are a celibate order. We take vows of chastity, charity and obedience to the cause.+

+Not to a particular bird?+ He shakes his head no.

+Of course there is a probation period. Follow me and I will get you set up with a task.+

I am taken to a latrine and tasked with helping to clean it out and put fresh straw down. Seen and smelled worse and dig into the task easily enough.

An hour later a blue bird comes up to me, +You are new here. What do you think?+

+Good idea. Ku could use a lot more places like this.+ I inadvertently glance to see what the bullies are doing. They are playing some sort of game at their table, laughing and punching each other when someone looses that hand.

The blue bird notices me watching them, +How do you feel about birds of that ilk?+ Fancy words from a poor birdie.

+How come the Watchers have not found them?+

Surprised, she asks me, +So you know about the Watchers?+ I nod.

+They rarely make it this far out. Their numbers are still low. Until then, we fill in as we can. We are not as fancy as they are. No special talents, just strong backs and a willingness to work hard. If your desire is to join them, then you best seek them closer to the center of town.+

+Are the three really Red Vests, or just stole them?+

+They are tattooed with the symbol. All one buttons, from the special squad.+

+Guano! And this is the limit to their trouble?+ They did the nastiest of the atrocities.

+So far. We are a non violent order. Do not think of taking them on. If they hit you, let them.+

She looks at me again, +You know a lot for a down and out bird. What is your story if I may ask?+

+Wanderer. I have been in ten cities and up and down the rails all along the coast. I have seen much is all. Nothing special about me. Poor as dirt, not a coin on me.+ I open my shirt and show I have no pouch or bag.

+Can you handle yourself in a fight if you have to?+

+I am good at running away,+ I offer. She smiles and relaxes.

+So, hypothetically, how would you handle these three?+ Strange question to ask a poor birdie.

+I am hardly an expert on anything ma'am. I think that I would try the truth. I have met some Watchers. They never use violence either. It is the strangest thing, but the most effective method seems to be just introducing the subjects to the truth. If that does not work, I have no idea what to do. Nor do I have any idea what this truth means they talk about.+

+You are not what you appear to be gray feather. Most do not come to

these incites easily.+

+As I have said, I have seen much. Seen birds killed by other birds for silly reasons. Seen much suffering from circumstances, chance and force. I have seen the high perch taking advantage of many for no reason I can fathom. I have seen some eat their own waste from severe hunger while others waste food any other bird would have been happy to eat.+

+So, what do you do about the inherent unfairness of life?+

+What would happen, if as the Watchers do, introduce the high perch to the truth? Do you know, does this work? Do they change?+

She sigh, +Some do, most don't. Can't get past their revulsion. Our founder used to be high perch. It took months for her to see the truth.+

+That must have been hard. To fall from high perch to see the truth is a long journey.+

+Indeed. Would you like to meet her?+

I show shock and surprise and bow deeply, +I would be honored. Anyone who can do this much with so little is a saint.+

She laughs, +Not a saint. No saints here. We are all fallen birdies here. Everyone of us has a story of shame. None of us is alone either. Without each other we are nothing.+

I wave my hand around the latrine, +This was some kind of test.+ Not a question.

+Indeed. We can't have birds who are not willing to do the worst tasks.+

+A wise one once told me, 'Everything is a test'.+

+Wise words. Might have to use that one. Some think that once they get their collar they can relax.+ I shake my head in disbelief and smile.

+May I ask how long your order has been doing this?+

She waves her hand around, +We now have five locations and hundreds of birds. Two lunas.+ My mouth opens in total shock.

I finally comment, +Right time and place. Birds are ready for this change. Hope this lasts and is not just a counter reaction to the Red Vests.

+

She points to the bullies, +They are outnumbered hundreds to one. They know they can only push it so far before they will be locked out of the free food and shelter. We can move our locations easily. We only use abandoned areas. Once labeled no one will help them.+

+Surprised the vests and tattoos did not already do that.+

+You really need to talk with her. She can explain much.+

I follow her to the corner the Commander is in.

+Kily, this is a wanderer who might be interested in joining us.+ Ah,

her given name, no longer Commander. That is good.

+I am very impressed with how much you have done in so short of time.+

She smiles, +In my previous life I was good at organizing. Each of us has talents that can be useful.+ Then a frown as she remembers the horrors too.

She continues, +Management style is totally different here. There are no leaders in the bullying sense. We work by consensus. The lowly ant is our model. Since we recruit by those who ask to join, we have no need for a queen even.+

+I am impressed, all the same.+ I look toward the table of bullies.

+Ah yes, the hard acorns. There will always be some. They cause no lasting harm and are outnumbered. They may still come around.+

+I would not count on it. Let me know if you need any help. I have access to resources, people I have met on my trail.+

She laughs, +I am sure you have Watcher.+ She waits for that to sink in.

+Do they know you were their former boss?+ I can play the game too.

+They know. They like to test me to see if I will revert.+

I laugh at this, +They will have to wait a very long time then.+ She smiles too.

+When all you have known is violence, it is hard to conceive of alternatives. Oh, we are still learning too. We do have healers on our staff for a reason. Some of the blues have had run ins. Some of those coming in for help are injured as well. Even one death.+

+You are still a very young group. It will take time to figure it out. Just be prepared for changes. Those who cannot change will not last. I am not saying resort to violence, but more subtle changes.+

+We are called the Poor Birdies of Ku. That is the only thing set in rock. We serve. Too long have most of our birds been neglected.+

The young bird who brought me to Kily asks, +Are you really a Watcher?+

+Actually I am not a Watcher. I was born a Hu, like to spend most of my time as a Cat, but am helping Flor out for a time, so the Ku form works best.+

Both of them stare at me. I sigh and pop out. Proof I am not a lying birdie.

Crab Cove

I wake up in the dark. Not my room. Smells horrible here. My hands and feet are bound. My head hurts like hell. I was ambushed, but don't remember how.

I must have made some noise as I hear a shuffle and a match is lit to light a candle.

"Mother," I sigh.

"Daughter," returns to me like an insult.

I scan and know I am still in Crab Cove, near the docks is my guess. I can just barely perceive water nearby and a small slip tied up outside.

"You destroyed my life you bitch."

"And you were trying your hardest to destroy mine. We are even." I use TK to remove my knots without letting it be seen.

"Oh, we are far from even."

"Indeed." I smile. This makes her nervous.

"You got away from me once, it won't happen again." She snaps her fingers and two thugs come in the door.

"You thought your life was bad with me, you have no idea how much worse it will get. No idea at all."

She turns to the two, "Take her. She is all yours." And walks out the door.

This should be interesting. I gather a few small sharp stones with my TK and get up on my own. The ropes fall to the ground. The stones float in the air in front of me.

"And you think that will stop us?" They remove their hoods.

"Rand and Drup!" I am so happy to see you. I run up to them and give them both hugs. Mother comes back into the room totally confused.

The stones fall to the ground. I pretend not to notice.

"You are loose. Knew I should have bound you tighter or have been done with you completely."

"Be free ma. Bu shr agin."

"Oh stop the ruse, I know you know Standard. Who taught you I do not know, but I will have their heads." She turns to the two. "You two can go now. I will deal with this myself."

I sigh, raise the ropes in the air with TK and bind her hands and feet.

"Oh I forgot, you need a headache too for us to be even." I raise a larger stone in the air.

"Myra," comes a concerned call from both of them.

She turns to them, "Well untie me."

"We work with Myra dear, not you. Just needed you to see this."

"Then out of my way, I will find others to help. I am still respected around here." Wow, she has totally lost it. Any other norm would have been totally freaked at this point. She really believes she is still in control.

I nod and we all pop out to an empty forest clearing. She is still not impressed. Shit.

"Let me go you bullies!" I think she may even be foaming at the mouth.

I ask Rand, "There is something wrong. Can you scan for health problems?"

"Already have. Nothing I can find. High levels of adrenaline. Blood pressure and pulse are both elevated. Could afford to put on a few pounds. I don't think she has been eating well the last few months.

My head is killing me, then suddenly disappears.

"Thanks." Drup nods. I untie the ropes she immediately reaches for a stick to attack me with. I use TK to stop her, wrestle the stick away from her and toss it out of reach.

Rand makes some food and offers it to her. She bats it away. Birds have lined up to take it once we leave.

"Everything is a test," I say as a curse. They both smile, but don't offer any suggestions.

"What do you want mother?"

"I want to see you rotting in hell!" She screams.

"Did you two find out what happened to her when we all left?"

"No one would offer her a job. She has lived off garbage since then."

"Sounds like you were pretty much in hell yourself then."

"It was all your fault you bitch. I would not have lost my ship except for you! I had a good life till you came along."

"I forgive you mother. You are free to go."

She looks around, "Where the hell am I? I can't live here." She sits on the ground. I watch her. I am sure she is still thinking of hurting me some how.

I shrug, I have no idea either and look to the two of them. "Well? Where are we?"

"Right now, we are off the coast of Cat world. Oh, don't worry, they don't bother with the smaller islands. She is safe here. There are freshwater streams, lots of fruit and nut trees, small game. But no ship will ever come here to rescue her, ever. No one would ever take that chance."

"As I see it mother, you have a choice. You can stay here, where you

can't hurt anyone but yourself, ever again. Or you can go back to a prison cell chained to a wall with no chance of ever being released. A small prison cell. You are not safe to be around others. I can't be watching for you for the rest of your life either. I can't risk you hurting others, ever again. Of course, you can also jump off a cliff here if you so desire. Your life is your own, but you have no right to take anyone else with you into this personal hell of your own making."

"She will go mad here all alone."

"She is already mad. As you tell me all the time, we all make our own hell. I am certainly not proud of every decision I have ever made, but I don't intentionally hurt others, even if they feel I have, or I think they deserve it. I just hope this is not genetic."

Rand looks surprised, "Where did you learn about genetics?"

"Hey, I can read. A lot of those articles the scholars leave out are very interesting." Rand laughs.

"We should probably get back."

"How long was I out?"

"Only a few hours. We keep tabs on you and were watching, but don't count on it. Many a TK have gotten into trouble because we can't be everywhere at once."

"We saw your mother lurking about at the market. When we saw her hit you when you passed by an alley we jumped in and offered to help her. Being old ship mates and such."

"You could have released me sooner."

"We all needed to know her intentions. As you noted we needed to be sure this is where she should be."

"How about setting her up with a hut, utensils, fishing gear, etc."

"Don't do me any favors bitch!" She yells, but we ignore her and set to work. I have never lived in a place like this, but I know housekeeping. Clothes too. Can't have her running around naked or in skins like a savage.

We finish quickly, pop her into her new home and pop back to Crab Cove.

"We will check on her occasionally." I nod.

"Do the Cats need to be told?"

"We have an arrangement with them. They occasionally have anti socials too. I would not recommend visiting any small islands, just in case."

I shudder, "Got it. Would not want to end up in a Cat's belly."

"After being tortured to death. They like to play with their food."

Drup adds. Shit.

"Imagine that, anti social Cats. Who would have known." Everyone laughs. Ghost makes an appearance and meows. I pick him up and pet him as he purrs loudly. At least you are not antisocial.

It is a hard lesson that there are people who cannot be fixed. Who are we to judge anyway. I know, I have read the histories along with the journals. This time will be different, maybe.

Cat World

"Don't you ever worry about the 'thn finding us?"

She laughs, "Puu, you of all people should have figured it out. The 'thn like us to think they are indispensable for holding the structure of the universe together. They are neither. In fact the highest number of large ones I have ever even heard of being together in one location is the seven who attacked you. Never more. And that was so they could completely surround you."

"They are networked? Oh, they depend on psiotic energy to survive and the big ones take a LOT of energy just to exist. Too many in one place literally starves them. That explains why they did not just take me out instantly. Took them quite some time to assemble together. Like protons in a nucleus repelling each other."

"Enough time for you to press the stone. No way I would give any enemy that much time. Nor should it have taken seven of them. They are real scaredy cats."

"They can't explain Silver's offspring, so to speak. We are an unknown to them. And your stone only reinforced their fear of us. So, how come they can't find us?"

Cat smiles, "In my travels trying to hide from all of you to think, I learned quite a bit. Actually it started some time ago with all my art projects. Surprisingly the 'thants gave me a clue. They have a very unique quantum signature."

"And they found us where the 'thn did not." She nods.

"Do the 'thn use the 'thants as bloodhounds?"

"Maybe. But we still have nothing to worry about. We are in a pocket universe. There is not enough psiotic energy here to support even one large 'thn, much less seven of them. They could do it at the galactic center because the center is not even in our galaxy. It can't be too close to all those worlds sucking psiotic energy. It is enough outside the plane of the galaxy to be able to draw enough energy to support the 'thn keeping tabs on us."

"They lied to us. They made it seem that visiting the center was a huge honor and we should be very grateful. Instead it was a way of studying and scanning us so they knew what they were up against."

"Precisely. Or so I think. Could be totally wrong of course. They may just be wanting to see what we come up with here."

"There has to be a reason why my question elicited so much fear."

"The 'thants are a way of keeping us distracted, fighting them instead of watching the 'thn. They only happen where there are high level TKs or 'thn metal, meaning high level TKs were around. When a TK8 'mates' with a 'thn, it is the TK8 that makes the physical form of the baby 'thn. All they contribute is the programming to make them work."

"They can't make 'thn metal? The journals say otherwise."

"Do they? We know 'thn metal is formed and removed at the center, but we do not know they are the ones doing it, do we?"

"No we don't. 'thants can make 'thn metal and can manipulate it. They are the workers for the 'thn when they need something done?"

"At the center it was probably just other TKs. Lots of nines there at any given time could easily have done it. I think the 'thants are more at the edges. New frontiers. Searching for emerging TKs."

"Don't you think it is strange that with seven 'servants' and the two of us we have not seen any more activity?"

"Not at all Puu. Remember they exist at a much slower time scale. I suspect that even given the high turn over for such a life pattern, individual 'thants likely live for thousands of years. They can wait."

"That tiny gold particle really spooked them. Is that why you made the servants using gold?"

"George and the other servants came from Silver's amps, batteries, glow balls, etc. Just used what we already knew. Lucky side effect is the 'thants are unlikely to be able to attack them. I have grown fond of George."

"He is sort of like a puppy dog, no offense."

"One you don't have to walk, clean up after or feed, you mean." We both laugh.

"Are we talking men or dogs?" She looks so innocent. That gets us laughing again.

"Cat, am I gay?"

"Puu, we don't have those feelings, thank goodness. Would it matter?"

"Na, just curious. You have definitely convinced me most men are slime balls. Guess that is enough." This is not a happy subject for Cat.

"Silver is okay, full of himself, but okay. Without him and Turtle we would not be alive." I nod.

Ku Eden

I have been told I need to keep a journal. I have no idea why, but it passes the time.

I used to be a much desired pretty bird expert. I did the complete bird, from toe decorations to feather repair and beak art. Birds left my place totally different from when they came in, drawing much attention from anyone who saw them. Males wanted my help more than females of course, but lady birds sought me out too, just more subdued in their expression.

It was glorious. I was at the top perch. Rich birds from all over sought me out, but I also attended to the lowest perch birds. Everyone should be allowed to feel good about themselves.

All gone now. Someone got jealous and sic'd the Red Vests on me. They took everything from me and put me in a labor camp mine for two years before my previous clients convinced them they had the wrong bird. I nearly died so many times I have lost count. Camp was brutal. The Red Vests are very nasty birds. I am amazed that so many went along with this. Guess no one cares if they take a neighbor as long as they themselves are left alone.

When I came out I was naked as a blue jay, feathers all matted and dirty. Beak broken, claws broken, limping and nervous as a hummingbird. Every sound set me off into a fit of cowering. Friends tried to help, but even I knew it was a lost cause. I was a broken birdie. I was never going to return to my previous life or anything like it. It took me years and years to gather all that I needed for my work and now it is all gone, to birds who did not earn it or deserve it. Most was likely thrown on the trash and burned.

I am reborn as a low perch, below low perch, a no perch. Other birds cross the road to avoid me. Most pretend I do not even exist. Bullies like to hit and kick me for fun. I have taken to hiding in the sewers in the day time. Even they will not venture here.

The sewers were designed seemingly at random. In reality I am sure it was just added to as needed and likely no one else knows the full layout. Having nothing else to do I have memorized the entire system, for this city at least. Once in a while a crew of low perch will come in and clean out some small area to appease some high perch whose water is not draining fast enough. This of course does nothing more than flush it further down the system to plug up the low perch drains. No one cares about

them and there are constant instances of overflows causing all kinds of nasty diseases and malaise.

For some reason I do not get sick. I guess because I have been exposed to everything for so long I have developed some resistance. What else is down here you may wonder? Pretty much everything no one wants. Sewage of course, but left over food, which I harvest for my own needs. Anything small enough to fit into a drain shows up down here. I have an amazing amount of high fashion gold and silver objects some drunk male lost on their way back to their perch no doubt. I could easily sell what I have and live the high perch life again if I wanted. Never again.

I have come to like the quiet, the privacy, the time to think, to do art on the walls that I know no one will see and judge me for. We are taught to aspire to high perch positions, but freedom exists only at this level. Being high perch means constantly having to defend your position. No one wants my place. A lot less stress.

I do have friends. A new creature has shown up the last few lunas. I used to have a very fancy name, but now I just call myself Tink and my new friends Tinkers. They are only about a spread hand width long and nearly transparent. What they lack in size they make up for in numbers. I am truly impressed with their ability to work together. If birds could ever work this well, instead of fighting each other for position, we could reach the stars.

They com with a rapid high pitched clicking language that I have learned to understand and speak well enough to make myself understood. They accept my presence without animosity. I understand the above, which they avoid during the day, and I know the layout for the entire below. We make night raids for anything we can't already find or make below. They have given me a new purpose and I am really enjoying working in a positive way.

The Tinkers are impressive builders and have already built filter systems to filter out anything useful from the running waters here. This has the side effect of concentrating materials that make a fantastic plant food, purifying metals for countless uses and cleaning up the water that exits the end of the pipe. What impresses me is that no one has noticed any of this. We even leave these out for anyone to take and still no one questions it. I suppose because we leave everything in a low perch area no one dares squawk anything that might get them into trouble.

They have some peculiarities. There are certain metals they will not touch. I help them out by collecting these and putting them into a sealed

off cavern created for this purpose. Means nothing to me and happy to help. I thought about leaving it above, but precious metals and jewels are poison. Why would I want to hurt others with them?

Another side effect is that not even the low perch come down here to fix anything any more. Not needed. Never worked better. The Tinkers have recently started to reroute a lot of the pipes for efficiency and their own needs without attracting attention. The disease rate has gone down significantly in the low perch areas, allowing them to have more viable chicks. Rumor has it that the Red Vests are gone and some new birds have taken their place. Hope they are nicer, but not really a concern of mine. I am in paradise and have no intention of returning to the coo coo nest above. I never understood how insane it was above until my new life started here.

Time to check in to see where I am needed today. My feathers are bright and clean, I am healthy, well fed, have purpose. What more could I want?

New Hope

"When is everyone coming home?" I look to Smith who agrees with my question.

Sam says, "Squeak is now a professor if you can believe that. Hell, she lived the old life so is the obvious choice for medieval studies as we would say."

Tia adds, "She also grew up with Hu TKs, so can offer that information as well. Years of TK experience helps train the new ones. She even does the glass ball trick to annoy the newbies."

"Don't forget Marie's Kung Fu Rap style. They are fighters at heart and that really impresses them." Marie nods a thanks.

"Nice to get back into Hu form though. Can't run as fast, but a constant diet of meat and tasteless vegies is boring." Tia laughs at Sam's comment, but likely she agrees.

"Ah, you miss our cowboy stew?" Smith smiles at them when he says this. I roll my eyes. I am sick of cowboy stew, but as long as someone else is willing to make it, I'll eat it.

"Any word on Puu and Cat? Can't believe I am actually missing them. Want a pain those two are. Puu is so anal perfectionist and Cat can't stay on chores for the life of her. We end up doing them instead." I ask.

"Randy and a new one, Myra, were there briefly, well sort of. Apparently Cat has set up some sort of bubble world that operates at a hundred times the time line ours does. Myra was there for over a year before Randy rescued her and to him it was only a few days. She is now TK2, but likely to advance quickly. I believe they are on earth two somewhere near former Madagascar."

"Any sign of the TWO?" Marie asks.

"Not really. They collected all of our Cat stones and disappeared immediately. Something about the 'thn hunting us and the stone could prove to be a liability."

"They did that here too. Parasites and 'thn and 'thants oh my. Does not have the same ring to it though." The others look equally glum. Not nice to be on the prey end of the equation as Puu would say. I swat a tit fairy away from my face. They know better than to do that. Must be a new generation.

"Well, what are the chores for today?" Tia asks. Sam looks away like he would rather find something else to do.

"Your farm has been neglected. Hey, we had our hands full running

the place all by ourselves. Suck it up." Smith is not happy. I am glad to share the chores and see others though. Even we get tired of seeing only each other.

"On it. Will feel good getting dirty again instead of chasing my food around." Sam makes a joke of it, but even I smile.

"I will get the kitchen in order. I am sure you two made a mess of things as usual." We look innocent at each other and laugh.

Marie says, "I am going to check on the spot Squeak was so curious about to see if there is any more activity. I assume neither of you two did." We look up at the sky pretending not to have heard her. She sighs and pops out.

"Well Smith, this is another fine mess you have gotten us into."

"Speak for yourself Jones. I am going to check out those caves in former California. I feel something is not right about them and I have not been there in years." In other words he needs some alone time. Guess that means I am spending time alone too.

"I will check out the arctic edge. I feel like it is getting colder up there. Wonder if we are due for a new ice age? That would certainly change things up a lot."

"Yeah, if you are willing to wait ten thousand years for it to happen. Any change would be welcome though. This place has gotten so boring."

"Can't argue with you there Smith. Have a good time spelunking." He nods and pops out.

I make some winter gear so I look the part. Leather and furs, gotta love it. Don't need it with all this TK, but I have to have some fun. Some fairies have shown up wondering what I am doing. I don't think they have ever seen this outfit before.

"No, you can't come with me. VERY cold. You would freeze your tits off." Always wanted to say that. I pop to the far north. Well, to the first settlement first. Can't hurt to see what has changed there.

Still the same run down adobe structures. The wood supports are all gone, which means the roofs of course. Just a few portions of walls remaining. Oh, and a few pieces of broken pottery that must have fallen when the wood tables rotted away. In other words, no change. Did not expect any.

Still, I have a sense of nostalgia. Being on the Rez was my life. A lot of people complained, but I enjoyed it. Coming here and setting things up a new, without limits, without the white overlords, was exciting. The fifth age. Now, except for the TKs, nothing here is recognizable from the past. It is better in a lot of ways. No accumulation of wealth or power, but al-

most no art, nothing that feels spiritual. No ceremonies or costumes. No Kachina dolls to remind us to be good and of our obligations to others. No clans, unless you count each new species pair as a clan. Not the same.

I pop to the arctic. Definitely cold. No polar bears of course. None on the Rez either. Really empty, bleak, barren. Nothing but ice, wind and snow. I scan, no polar ice caps yet. A lot of ice on the shore line and some of this extends into the ocean, but nothing I would call permanent. It is winter too. In summer likely all of the ice will be gone. I scan below me. Nothing I would call tundra yet. There are plants frozen below the snow and ice, but likely they will come back in the summer and are definitely rooted in the ground. Okay then.

I sit on a rock and stare at the landscape, or snowscape, whatever you want to call it. This all makes me wonder what I am doing. Why am I here? What is my purpose? Nothing new. I am over a thousand years old, well, over three hundred in normal time. Nothing changed that much. Same questions I have had for a long, long time.

I have only seen 'thn once, when Br'thn and Pr'thn came to visit with Silver and Turtle respectively. They are no longer babies, truly sentient and spend very little time with their Hu mothers/caretakers. We were once all called Guardians of Br'thn, but that has not been true for some time, and never true for me. TKs work fine for me.

I think I may even be missing the white devils. I mean, at least there was variety, culture, music, sports even. Playing games with Smith is not the same. At least Squeak liked to play, especially if it involved running. Even being a much lower TK did not stop her from beating me most of the time. The hunter instinct runs true in Raps.

Okay, I admit it. I am bored. Really bored.

I sigh and pop back to home base.

Tia is in the kitchen, Sam in the field. Guess I was not gone that long. Marie and Smith are still gone. Mike has shown up.

"Mike, you missed the morning meeting."

"I know. I can't shake the feeling that I am responsible for this whole mess. I was bad to Cat. She took off and this whole cascade started. If only I had destroyed the brewery a thousand years ago before slow time."

"We were all at fault. We all knew it was there. We all saw the wreckage. Hell, Smith and I saw it for hundreds of years while all of you were still in slow time. We never thought it was a hazard. Always felt it was not our place to remove your 'art' project. Even Marie left it alone. Can't blame yourself. We just did not know."

"Yeah, but I did. I read the journals. I knew the 'thants were attracted

to 'thn metal structures. I saw the beginnings of the changes in the quantum configuration indicating they knew of this location. But attacking Cat only made things worse."

"Mike, I have known Cat almost as long as you. Believe me, no one tells Cat what to do. 'I am not prey' is her mantra. Good odds she was planning this for some time. You just tipped it over, but it was already set up."

He waves his hands around, "So what is all this about? The 'thn and 'thants did not attack us in previous incarnations. Hell, we were all over the universe last time. Whales in space. To the edges of existence. Now we get one set banned to Farout. Puu barely escaping a death sentence. Have you ever heard of 'thn killing TKs? No, you haven't. The new improved parasites that you do not even need to be able to DS to get infected. And the 'thants. Why are they not just invading, but attacking?"

I shrug, "They are called incarnations for a reason. Each one is different. Someone or something is tweaking the parameters to see what happens. This may end up a total failure, but they won't know until they see it played out."

"The Thirteen or the 'thn?"

"Not about them, it is about The Question. Always The Question."

"Damn The Question."

Marie pops in just as Tia brings food out. How does she do that? Sam comes through and heads to the kitchen. Dinner vegies is my guess. No idea why the two of them take on the mundane tasks. Not fair. They are TK8s same as us.

No Smith. I ask, "Anyone seen Smith?"

They look at me shocked.

Marie answers, "We thought you two were joined at the hip. If you don't know we certainly don't."

"Something is not right. We need to find him. Anyone know what caves he was talking about?"

Sam comes in, "On earth two there were some limestone caves east of San Jose up in the foothills of the Sierras. Pretty cool. Of course ours will not have the lights and spiral staircase, but we have TK to avoid falling a hundred meters to our deaths."

Mike says, "I can't sense him, but we can all hide from each other if we want to. Probably means nothing." He looks worried though. This is not normal for us. I hope it is just a false alarm.

"I am going to try and find him." Everyone sets down what they are holding. Marie activates a fairy repellent box. Gift of Cat. Don't need a

bunch of sick fairies vomiting all over the place eating food they shouldn't. They do not react well to chili peppers which the rest of us love. But, because they do not have the capsican sensors, they don't know until the effects set in. Problem is, it is usually at least a generation before someone forgets to set the box and someone sneaks in. I swear, they watch us constantly.

"Sam take us as close as you can remember and we will go from there. There are six of us, so it should not take long, even if he is shadowed."

We land in a swamp all getting soaked.

"Sorry everyone. Forgot about the inland sea on this world. Hey. I was raised in a city. All freeways and no ocean in sight." We raise ourselves, move to shore and dry ourselves off.

"The sea is huge. It goes north and south of us quite a ways. Yeah, we of the desert are still not used to this either. Ah, middle of winter. In the late summer it is much lower. Shrinks down to just the two rivers. Very shallow. Does support a lot of live though."

"It will get higher soon if those rain clouds are any indication. Best we find the caves and check them out before they flood."

"What is this rain of which you speak?" Tia teases. Just as a flash of lightening followed by thunder happens. Good timing.

"Find the caves, but do not go in. If something is wrong we do not need to add to the situation." Marie is worried too.

Sam points east, "This way. Use TK and follow me."

We proceed slowly. All of us are scanning and one by one we see the caves he is talking about.

Tia asks, *What makes you think these are the ones we want. There must be hundreds of caves around.* The wind is too strong to use speech.

Just a best guess based on what I remember him saying. Need to start somewhere and personally I do not want to be alone if this gets nasty. I do not have the combat training everyone else has. Good point.

We may all be getting a bit jumpy. Likely he just needed some alone time and we are going to feel really silly soon.

Parasites, and 'thants and 'thn, oh my. Not funny Mike.

We land just on the surface above the caves.

"Looks totally different here. On earth two there were roads, signs, and man-made entrances. I really do not want to DS into an unknown situation. It feels wrong somehow. I mean, I am sure everyone can scan the complex. Kilometers in length and more like a maze than anything else."

"Lots of water, but I do not sense any life above the crab level."

"Found a possible entrance a half kilometer away. Do we proceed?"

Could take years to search them at the non TK level and we have not found anything with TK. Is there even any point in going in?"

"I agree with Sam, something does not feel right. I want to go in physically, at least a bit past the entrance."

"You two are spooking me out and I really did not think that was even possible any more." Tia adds.

"Then explain why we can't see the inside at the atomic level? We are all TK8s. Something is wrong. I agree with Jones. I am with Jones, the rest of you stay outside as backup. Get Silver and Turtle if you have to."

"Now you are really freaking me out. Be safe!"

Mike and I proceed to the entrance we have found. I test my TK and it seems fine so far. "When I do scan in front of me I sense straight lines. Have you ever seen straight lines in nature."

"Trees are pretty straight," Mike suggests.

"But in caves?"

"Never and I see the same thing. Like some kind of network. Wonder if this is what Smith was sensing and why he came here."

"Why did he go alone? If he wanted to be away from me a bit, I get that, but take someone with you."

"Shit Jones, we all go off and do things alone. No offense but seeing your mugs all the time gets boring."

I sigh, "I get that. Definitely get that." Going into a cave is the most exciting thing I have done in years.

"This is a cave, shouldn't there be trolls? This is prime real estate for them."

"Probably floods in the winter. Very close to the inland marsh. Ever known a troll to take a bath?"

Mike laughs and shakes his head.

"Whoa, that is some drop. Be careful. I feel a weakening of my TK."

"Who the hell put limiters here?"

"And ones that could effect a TK8. That's scary as hell."

"Maybe we should make ropes, pitons and such."

"We might need to. What is that over there?"

"My vision is not so good here. We need lights, like fire, something that works without TK."

We step back towards the entrance until our TK comes back. It is simple enough to make some good of fashioned flaming torches. The others see us.

"What the hell?" Marie asks.

"Limiters inside. Mike has found something we want to check out, but

the further we go in the worse it gets." She nods but looks concerned. She positions herself closer to the entrance, just out of range of the limiters.

"I have a link to you two. Yell and I will pull you out." I nod.

Mike looks at me, "Yeah, I'm scared too." We proceed.

Without the torches it would be pitch dark.

In a depression we find something that looks like bones, or fragments of bones anyway. I use my knife to sort through the mess. Some fragments of cloth, some bits of metal and bones of course.

"Shit, shit, shit! Get us out of here Marie."

We appear on the surface and put out our torches. I am holding what I found and hold it up.

She says, "Smith's." Not a question.

Mike holds up what he has found, he was a little further in than me.

She gasps, "How the hell did that thing get there?" A 'thant. Fortunately a dead one. Smith must have taken it out. Good for you.

"What happened to Smith?"

"Nothing but fragments of bones and his totem medallion. I am sure the 'thn metal jaws of 'thants could make quick work of anyone defenseless." What a horrible way to die.

I announce to everyone, "I have seen enough and know what I need to do. Evacuate the area NOW." I am really, really pissed. No one messes with my brother.

When the others are back to home base, I TK into space above this spot and get a good feeling for the caves.

"We are not prey!"

Di Eden

I doubt this attack is just New Hope. We were pretty far off the normal evolutionary path. I decide to check out some of the other earths I know of. Since Squeak in on Di Eden I start there.

I pop in orbit, not knowing where anything is really. A lot can change in a thousand years.

I sense a large TK concentration and assume that is where everyone is.

I pop into a war zone. I see White leading some other TKs into the forest and I follow.

White, I have come to help. The 'thants attacked New Hope and thought they would hit here next.

Glad to have you, but we have been fighting them for a week. Any hints how to deal with this would be appreciated. They have overrun the college so badly we evacuated everyone to here. Only temporary. They seem to find us every time we move.

I catch up to them. Squeak is in what looks like full Rap battle gear. Everything shiny gold. Others are wearing a lot of gold too.

Squeak sees me, but instead of a hug, I get a nod. All grown up. She sees me looking at her gear confused.

^RThey hate gold for some reason. We lost a dozen students who were not covered. This colony has a poisonous bite that takes out your TK. Then is is trivial to take you out.^R Definitely grown up. She never talked like that before.

"I'm sorry to report that they killed my brother, Smith." She nods but keeps moving. Clearly they have suffered far more here.

"I destroyed the entire colony at once." I almost whisper. She stops and looks at me. White stops too. They gather around me.

"They come up from the ground true." They nod.

"On New Hope they used a natural limestone cave complex coated in TK shield limiters. Hid their whereabouts and killed the TK of any of us who entered."

!That certainly explains how they have been able to hide from us. So, what did you do?!

"I did a Rooi Sphere and swapped out their cave system for the magma a hundred clicks below it. I was orbital at the time. Some does leak out into the landscape, but far less than a normal eruption."

White concentrates, clearly TPing the others.

!A bit drastic, but I'll take anything at this point. Rather lose some real

estate than any more of us. Good work Jones. Squeak, stay with Jones and you two can take this area. Squeak has been given a field rise in rank to TK7. She can help and I would like her trained, so let her see what you do.!

Someone yells, 'thants coming out one click away, south south west about a hundred meters from the lake.!

"Let's go Squeak. I have them spotted. Get everyone else away from here. Never know what would happen if the magma were to hit a water pocket. Could take out the entire area in a steam explosion." Actually kind of surprised that did not happen at New Hope. The caves already had water in them.

She barks orders in Rap and TP at the others and they rapidly pop out. One young male hesitates, then goes.

"Boy friend?" I nudge her.

^RAnnoyance. Will be the death of one of us if he does not get the message soon.^R

I nod my understanding.

"I will bubble the two of us together and then go up three hundred clicks. Easier to do this from a safe distance where we can see clearly the outlines of the colony and surroundings." How did I suddenly become an expert at this?

I did not know Raps could sweat, smells like wet lizard shoes this close. I am sure I stink too. Been a tough few hours.

"I am going to link us mentally so you can see what I see." She nods.

Of course I see what she sees too, or rather what the last week has been like. Entire dorms swarmed in the middle of the night. Students fleeing and screaming, fires accidentally set that the 'thants are immune to and walk right through. Shit. I hope swapping them for magma does in fact kill them.

^RIt will slow them down if it does not kill them. And will certainly kill their tech. Without the shields we can convert them to gold. That kills them for sure. Works on the surface at least.^R

"Good to know. Okay, watch as I surround the entire colony with the Rooi Sphere precursor. That helps me set it up. Next we open the sphere to the magma below like this." I do so. The colony is transported below and the magma replaces them.

"Then we let go. Even if a few escape or ride the bubble back, they are at a high enough temperature to even melt 'thn metal or at least soften it up enough to mess with their systems."

^RWould be good to monitor to be sure. Find White and help the others.

I will remain here to watch. Any that escape out a side tunnel I can practice on to be sure I understand this method.^R

I look at Squeak amazed.

^RI am grown up Jones. Not a baby Rap any more.^R

"Indeed not. Good hunting Professor Squeak." I pop out.

I find White and pop nearby.

We are floating over what would have been North America with a hundred meters more water at the coasts.

I am not sure what would happen if you took out the planetary portal location. I do not sense anything there at the moment. Not sure we could jump long distances without it.

Survival is more important at the moment. Worst case we would jump to another earth and use its portal, but I will try to maintain awareness. I watched what you and Squeak did and I have instructed the others. Should not be long now before the infection is under control. I will take us back down to the temporary camp we have set up.

We pop out in a large desert area. Can see something coming from a long way off. Good idea. Tall TKd stone composite buildings have been set up with wide stairs inside and out. Telescopes have been set up on the towers with Di watching the surroundings. Taking out our TK abilities makes us a tad paranoid, but an excellent idea. You don't become a high TK by being dumb.

White stares at me for a moment, then makes a uniform of sorts and hands it to me. I make some adjustments and put it on. Heavy. Ah, lots of gold thread running through the entire thing. Camouflaged colors as well. We blend right in to the desert surroundings.

I follow White as we enter a mess area with a lot of activity and sit down at a table. A private or whatever the Di equivalent is appears, stares at me unsure what to do.

!Two meals, make his about one fifth my size.! A salute of sorts and she disappears. A moment later bowls of food and drink appear and are set down before us. White digs in without formality. I do as well. Could use some chili sauce, which I quickly make and douse everything in it.

White laughs so loud others stop confused.

He grabs the bottle and holds it up, !Real warriors put death sauce on their chow.! He douses his with it and holds up the bottle for others to take. I make ten more bottles which soon disappear.

Soon enough they are running for water. White smiles. I smile back and go back to enjoying my food, even to putting more death sauce on it. Actually does taste better with it, not just show. I notice that White has

removed the capsicum from his. Cheater.

He whispers, !Don't tell them. They will figure it out soon enough.! I shake my head, but keep quiet.

I whisper back, "I have been running that one on Hu for ages. Still works, still fun. Nymphs like it though and get sort of high on it. Go figure."

Library comes over and gives me a hug, !Many thanks for arriving when you did. We were going nuts trying to find them out and remove them. Two things are different from before. They are poisonous now and somehow they figured out limiters and shields. That makes them a hundred times more dangerous.!

"Wish we could go back to the RC and tell the others." And get my first look at the place.

!Randy told us they moved it. Probably to prevent us from going there. Forbidden knowledge. Now we know why.!

"Library, any records of this happening to other multiworlds before? Siccing the 'thants on them I mean."

!Not that I remember, but I am cut off from the records now, same as you and I only had time to incorporate a limited amount. Making a new body in a hurry is no simple task either. As I told everyone before, the 'thn have some way of enforcing their will without actually participating in the killing themselves.!

"I am not complaining. Deeply appreciative of all the help you have been. Yeah, never trusted 'thn. Might be good to know if this is part of the 'thn curse promised. Are the 'thants bothering any of the norms here?"

Library thinks about it, !I have been working in the hospital. Most of the dead and wounded have been at least TK2 or above. A few norms, but majority are TK.!

White comes in, !Could be the norms were simply in the wrong place and the wrong times.!

"Collateral damage, as the Hu say, sucks. Not fair to them at all. They did not piss off the 'thn and should not have to pay the price."

!Everyone pays a price in war.! I nod agreement.

Squeak pops in still in full battle gear, ^RWe need to warn the others.^R

!You need to eat first Squeak. Grab some chow, then you can go with Jones.! She salutes and heads for the line. Comes back a moment later. Whoa, she can really eat. Her bowl is nearly as big as White's was. I am guessing White was holding back.

I hand her some death sauce which she returns to me with a dirty look. Can't fool her twice. White laughs. Squeak eats and quickly finishes.

^RWe go now.^R

Ba Eden

Alessa comes into my health center. Good to see her.

^We need to go to the Founders Tree now.^

~What has happened?~ I use Ceph because it is important to keep her language skills up and of course, I am in Ceph form at the moment. We have been getting lax dealing with all the admin tasks inherent in trying to run a world.

She responds in kind, ~A Hu and small Di have shown up asking for us. Both in some kind of battle gear.~

~Why didn't they just TP us?~

~Something about not using TK to get there. Pretend to be a norm. Runner found me taking a bath.~

~We have not had a war in ages. Hope this is not bad news.~ I get my shoe on. Pain. Hate these things. TK is so much easier.

It takes us nearly an eighth to get there, me being the dragging force.

~I am not going to climb that tree Alessa. If this Ceph is going to pretend to be a norm, then I will respect gravity.~

~Not to worry, they are coming down.~ We wait at the base of the tree. They do not appear to be much better than me at climbing trees. The others looking on are climbing all around them offering help. Quite a crowd actually. Most entertainment they have had in ages I guess.

We wait.

Finally they are down and dust themselves off. A small pile of leaves, bark and small twigs appears around them when they do so. The armor appears to snag a lot of things.

The Hu gives me a Ceph bow, which I return. He does a Ba greeting to Alessa. The dino of some sort ignores all this, looking around nervously.

^Forgive me Nease, but my Ceph is really bad. Not much better with Ba, but at least it is oral. I am Jones, Hu TK8 and this is Squeak, Rap 7. I met both of you a long time ago, but not really formally. We are students of Silver and Turtle.^

Alessa comes in, ^You were much smaller then and Squeak I do not recognize.^

^Long story involving Cat breaking rules as usual. Squeak is an adult of her kind and fully accepted TK.^ He then translates what has happened so far so Squeak knows what is going on. She says something in return in a language I have never heard before.

^Squeak is not one for small talk and formality. I am sure Silver or Turtle told you that we are at war with the 'thn because of Puu asking for forbidden information. They are not attacking directly though or we would be dead already I am sure. Rather, they are using a 'thn metal creature called a 'thant to do their dirty work.^

^We read the journals, we know about 'thants. Annoying, but only that. What is the change?^

^They are deadly to TKs now. My brother, Smith, was killed along with a number of Squeak's colleagues. We have removed nests of vast numbers from both Di Eden and New Hope. Squeak and I are going where we know there are TKs on the earths and warning everyone.^

Squeak says something.

^And offering of assistance if needed.^

Alessa looks at me, ~Have you noticed any 'thants?~

~None.~

^Neither of us have seen any activity.^

Jones is not finished. Hu get really nervous when sens do not join their thoughts fast enough. Need to slow down and think more. I have noted a real disadvantage to only having one brain center.

^They can hide now. They have shields and limiters. Their bite paralyzes even a TK8 and shuts down their abilities. They then consume the victim alive. This is not hearsay or conjecture. We have hundreds of examples.^

^Look around you. We are a threat to no one. Very peaceful. We have no wars, weapons, hunger, wealthy or poor. We solve problems in common and accept consequences in common. Our tech is 19th century Hu and we don't intend to go beyond that. You are free to look around. Anyone you meet will help you if you need it, or just answer questions.^

I turn white, our equivalent of sighing. I morph into Ba form. I feel so limited in this form. It is like my minds have been squished into an impossibly small box.

^I will go with you. A guide if you will.^

Squeak does not like being left out. Jones assures her it is alright. I think that is what he is saying at least. Squeak's language. Wait, she is using hand language. I concentrate. Of course. Not as complicated as Ceph of course. She does not have eight arms and chromatophores.

^RIf you keep talking Squeak, I will learn your language quickly.^R

She stares at me. Funny, I would have thought morphing from Ceph to Ba would have been worse. One minds are weird.

^RThank you.^R She does her best to give me a Ceph bow. I bow in re-

turn. We will get along fine. Though the armor still freaks me out. Judging from her claws and teeth she could have me for lunch if it were not for TK and her being civilized. I hope.

Jones asks, ^RIs this the most populated area?^R Looks around at everyone. He does not use as many hand signals and has a bad accent.

^RWhat?^R

^RUse hands more. Nease likes hand language best.^R

^RTo answer your question, our population is spread out. We do not have cities. At best villages such as this one. We are attempting to be good stewards for all life on Ba Eden. Did I show that right?^R

Suddenly we are in a bubble above the earth.

Sorry, but we are in a bit of a time crunch. They could be attacking other worlds as we speak. They hit Di Eden and then New Hope nearly at the same time. Up here they cannot make a portal nor attack anyone. We are safe to use TK up here we think.

Squeak asks, *Permission to scan your world for anomalies. We have seen enough nests now we can find them even with their shielding.*

Or pretty sure. Not perfect, but enough we know where to concentrate our search.

Of course. May I switch back to Ceph? This form is very restricting. Please do. It would be good for Squeak to learn Ceph.

Not really, Alessa and I are the only two who show Ceph.

Ah, we were going to ask how to get to Ceph Eden.

I came from Ceph One or rather my ancestors did. We were enslaved by the Ba when a delegation came. Being many generations removed and not TK when I was trained, I never learned the location of the Ceph worlds.

Jones, do we need to worry about them if our 'infection' never reached them? Might we do more harm by visiting them? They might not even want to be found.

Jones asks me, *You read the journals?*

Yes, of course, required for all TKs above three.

Then you know what a previous incarnation was like. Not that this time would be the same. Rooi has not shown herself yet. Ceph was pretty nasty too. Lots of power struggles and such.

Seems to come with the 'gift' of sentience. We have worked hard to stifle those tendencies in the current Ba. Time will tell if we are successful. This time it looks good, but we have over a thousand years of failures too.

Squeak chirps, *I may have found something.* A TK7 cannot scan the

entire world at once, so it means it is below us. I scan.

All I see are empty caves. Lots of them. Go a long distance. None are near villages yet, but would be if they got larger. Geology is consistent with the area.

Yeah, but those caves are in the exact same spot they were on New Hope and Di Eden. A pattern is emerging. May not hold, but a start.

We can risk it and go down to investigate.

Outlines and clarity are not sharp. We should be able to count every atom, but I can't concentrate well enough. The two of you should try also. Might just be battle fatigue.

They turn and look at me. Guess it is my turn. I concentrate. Having eight accessory brains helps a lot.

My initial scan is the same as yours, but when I put my arm brains on it too, they see a pattern. I will show you. I TP visual to them.

Holy Shit! That is a lot of them. Through you Nease we can see the entire colony structure. This means it is definitely a coordinated attack. Hitting us all at the same time and place.

The only reason all of you are still alive is you do not use your TK much. New Hope was lucky too because none of us set up over the caves. If Smith had not checked it out we might not have known for some time.

On Di Eden, the TK training center was right on top of them. Might have been what attracted them in the first place. Squeak growls when she TPs this.

Jones and Squeak turn to me.

This is your world. We did Rooi Spheres to trade the caves for magma three hundred kilometers below them. Some magma will leak out and a lot of toxic gases and such.

We still train one on one over a long time. I can see the entire structure and it poses no immediate threat. If we do as you suggest and we miss some, then they will know and can plan accordingly.

Likely they already know when the two destroyed colonies did not check in.

We do not make decisions as individuals. I will bring this information to Alessa and the others. We will decide our actions on consensus.

As you wish. Would it be alright to check back in occasionally?

Squeak asks. Very polite for a being that looks so scary.

Of course. They pop out.

I get back to the health center. I have three patients waiting for my help.

No decision will be made soon unless the 'thants escalate or threaten.

It may even come down to wait and see what they do. We have a few hundred TK7s now, spread more or less equally. The ones closest to the caves will need to add careful watching to their duties.

Confrontation often leads to a bad end for both parties.

Earth Two

I am now a TK3. I can see into things like I could never have imagined. I can rearrange the insides of stuff. Extract precious metals from ore with just my thoughts. Uncle Rand tells me not to do this in sight of norms. I could be accused of being a witch. Those ideas are supposed to be long gone, a painful memory of our dim dark past, but when people are afraid, when they do not understand what is going on, they come back.

I am not a witch, I am not a witch. I hold Onri close. She does not care as long as I find her lots of lichens. Can't believe it is getting harder to find her food. I don't sleep at night any more. I make journeys further and further out so as not to strip all lichens from our area. Great, flying around at night will get me labeled a witch for sure. Shit. I won't be able to DS until I am a six. How am I supposed to feed Onri? I hate asking my uncles for help when they have already given me so much.

"Hey, can we get some food here please?" I must have zoned out. I am surprised sometimes that the scholars even know what food is. They certainly do not taste it. I have seen them eat day old stuff as long as it is front of them, not paying any attention to its condition. Yuck. I have never seen humans behave so much like rodents. No, actually rodents are neater.

I sigh. put Onri down, and bring another plate out from the kitchen. I doubt she even notices the food, already back in thought with her nose in a book. I can read backwards now and scan through the book to the cover to read what she is reading. A treatise on ballistics. How the hell did she get that?

I see Uncle Rand and go to him.

"The scholar in booth three is reading a book on ballistics."

"We have another problem. Mr. Jones and Squeak want to visit and they are in a hurry."

"Oh, I have never met a Rap. Can I come, can I come?"

Uncle smiles, "You are not a little girl any more dear. Like I could keep you away. Hmm, maybe if we hold the meeting in a hollow a few hundred kilometers away. Yeah."

"Uncle! Stop that. I need to come. Please!"

Uncle Drup comes in and glares at us for taking so long. I hand my apron to one of the other servers, a norm, but nice all the same. He knows Rand and Drup can call me away at a moments notice. Of course they are

curious as hell, but we have ways of throwing them off if we are followed. Confrontation usually works. They don't try twice.

We do not pop this time, but go out into the local forest to a clearing. I scan around and find no other Hu, much less a Rap.

Okay, you two can come down here. We are alone.

A Hu whom I have not seen and a Rap appear before us. They are in full armor of some kind. I know of them of course. We do have a newsletter or gossip network of sorts. Can be years out of date though.

"Jones and Squeak, this is Myra, our apprentice, a Hu TK3." So official.

I nod to the two of them. "I am pleased to finally meet you both." My eyes are on Squeak though. She is gorgeous in her gold armor. And now I can tell it really is gold. I have already started my box of stuff to help me remember what everything scans like.

Surprisingly Squeak begins, "We have a problem. The 'thants have started their attack. Mr. Smith was killed by them as well as a large number of TK students on Di Eden. I was nearly one of them. They seem to be coming through at the same location on each earth variant. They are on Ba Eden, but have not attacked yet." Her common is very good. I know she was raised by Hu, but all the same, her mouth must work differently. Still scary thought. The stuff of nightmares. Good thing the locals have not seen her.

Jones takes over, "And we have found them here as well."

"Well, lets go then. Where are they?" Rand says.

"That is the problem. You can scan all day and will not find them."

"True, we do scan and true, we do not find them. So where?" Drup is getting impatient. Not like him.

Squeak and Jones look at each other then she answers, "Cat Land."

"Shit. That is a problem. Best if you talked directly with them then. Why come here? You know we are forbidden to interfere."

"Yes, but they know you two. If we show up we will be Cat food in short order. Kind of surprised they did not pull us from orbit."

"They don't care about what happens up there. We make regular trips to be sure they are obeying the treaty, as I am sure they scan us as well."

"Except for the islands. What is all that about?"

"Ah, yes, the islands. We trade small islands for individuals who refuse to be socialized."

"Like my mother," I add. Drup gives me a dirty look. Hey, I am not happy about it, just glad she is there and not here.

"If I remember right, didn't you grow up with Owa Jones?"

"I did, but that was a very long time ago. You two are nines. She and Sylvy only respect power."

Rand laughs, "You mean Silver. No one else. And they do their best to get him any chance they can. A hate that goes back many incarnations."

"Owa hates losing. Especially to a stupid monkey," I smile. I read the journals, I know of their feud.

"Boy is that the truth. Can't tell you how many times she pinned me as a kid. Felt like I was some kind of Cat toy."

"Oh, you were Jones. Toy or meat. Makes no difference. Monkeys taste good, sort of like pork." We all look at Drup in shock.

"Or so I am told." The others laugh. Squeak looks confused. She is a carnivore.

"Why would you play with your food?" she asks.

"Ah all cats, including Cats, like to torture their prey before eating. They have an inferiority complex and they like impressing others with their superiority."

"Waste of time. Which we are wasting now. Maybe Cats are right calling you stupid monkeys."

Jones looks at her and laughs, "You really have grown up Squeak. Okay. Maybe we just use TP. She would not attack us here would she?"

"And risk the wrath of Silver. Not likely. She would definitely want to prepare before risking that."

"I have found her. She is on the plains in former Argentina. Lots of prey there her size. Mostly cattle who have gone feral. Nasty things. We have some up in former Europe too and the steppes of Russia."

"Has she eaten recently?" Jones asks. I can't tell if he is joking or not.

Squeak is getting impatient, "We have other worlds to go to as well. How many will die because we are afraid of a Cat. I know Owa too you know. We did live together briefly. I would TP myself except my range is still lacking."

"Soon enough. I can't raise you to eight. Only Silver and Turtle can do that. Wait, Randy and Droopy can actually. Hmm..."

"Even we are not stupid enough to get against those two. She can wait. She was just recently turned to seven. Give it a few years to get used to."

Owa, we need to talk. Are you available. I mean, I am not interrupting nap time or anything. Jones lets up hear in thank goodness.

"Now what do I ask."

"We wait. Part of the game of being superior."

Jones is not taking it, *You are under attacked by a creature that can*

kill you. Just thought you would want to know. If you don't, that's okay too. Just a courtesy call.

Yawn, no creature would dare. A response at least. Wait, did she broadcast that to everyone? Even the norms?

"She does not care Myra. Just go with it. Everyone will think it is a dream."

'thants are in caves east of former San Jose, in the foothills of the Sierras. I am sending you a visual map. These are different than the ones from the past. They have a poisonous bite that can kill a TK.

You waste my time stupid monkeys. We have known about them for some time. We use them to train our warriors. The ones who do not learn, die. Saving us the trouble. Leave us alone.

"Wow, that's cold. Are you sure Owa is not Klingon?" What is a Klingon?

"I guess doing something good for the rest of the TKs is too much to ask?" Rand asks.

Jones rolls his eyes, "We are an infestation she would be glad to be rid of. Then they could have the entire world, not just half of it."

"Hey, she can have Antarctica any time she wants." Drup teases.

"She can hear us right?" I ask.

"Does not bother. Monkeys talk too much. Chatter, chatter, chatter. Puts her to sleep."

Squeak, "We need to leave. You have been told. You can remove the colony with a Rooi Sphere to the mantle. Will leave some mess on the surface though as the caves do reach the surface in several locations. A shaped portal is best to minimize collateral damage."

"Especially if there are young Cats nearby testing their stupidity." Rand quips.

Jones, "Nease was able to 'see' them by virtue of her eight brains. I suspect if we link we can do the same."

"I don't know. I have a better idea." All turn towards me.

"Squeak, would you attack an enemy you knew almost nothing about?"

She thinks about it suspecting a trick question is my guess, "Depends. If an immediate life threatening condition, best to run away. If you can't then do your best as you are dead already. If there is time, learn as much as you can. Their nesting, eating, breeding, organization, lots of knowledge helps defeat an adversary."

"Rand, what do we know about the 'thants?'"

He smiles, "Almost nothing."

"Granted in Di Eden they were actively attacking, but not here nor on New Hope. Yes, Smith died, but that was because he confronted them unprepared, not because they sought him out. Agreed?" They nod.

"So, we know almost nothing and they are not an immediate threat here at least. Jones, if you need to leave to warn others, you should do so, but what are you going to tell them?"

He sighs, "We know almost nothing and they may or may not be an immediate threat. When did you become so smart?"

"Ah, I have been spending a lot of time with scholars at the library. Their thinking gets in your head." He nods.

"I propose a fact finding mission. What is we all linked together, oh three hundred kilometers above the nest and see what we can see? We try to answer as many of Squeak's suggestions as we can. It should not take that long for an initial assessment and then there can be time to warn others."

Drup suggests, "Hell, we may even find a new way to defeat them, an easier way that is not so destructive."

Rand turns to Jones and Squeak, "A Rooi Sphere to the mantel is a bit overkill. Bet it ruins the area for some time." They are silent.

Finally Squeak nods, "We can try it." Jones seems a little more nervous, but appears to be going along. He is an eight. We can't keep him here if he bolts.

"Technically with two nines an eight a seven and a three, we could scan from here?"

"If we bubble over the site, the seven can be fully engaged. I really do not want to be close enough for Myra to be all in. That might set off the Cats."

Jones laughs, "Oh that would set off the Cats for sure. I have been scanning them carefully, avoiding the Argentina area where Owa and Sylvy are. They are in bad shape. Having taken care of an entire planet with Smith for three hundred years, believe me, I have learned a LOT about ecological balance. They have over populated themselves. The large prey is almost gone. A lot of Cats are eating small rodents, birds and bugs. They are in trouble nutrition wise. A LOT of underweight Cats, fighting over prey."

Rand says, "Oh, we have noticed, but if you try and tell the two grand masters they will growl at you and tell you to mind your own business."

Drup says, "They are seriously in need of birth control. Using the 'thants to cull their stupid ones is only good in the one area. You will also notice the plant life is nearly all jungle where the Cats are now."

"As I said, totally out of balance."

Rand and Drup look at each other and then start to form a large bubble. Rooi Spheres of ocean water appear and then are converted to a diamond gold sphere well large enough to hold all of us and then some. I am just happy I can see what they are making it out of now, even if I can't do it myself.

I have to ask though, "Why so large? We are not going to be there for years."

Jones gets it though and answers while they concentrate, "We don't know how long we will be there and may want to keep someone there at all times. That means feeding areas, data collection, hardening of the sphere in case of attack."

"I have read about these diamond gold constructs. Any possibility we could work out how to 'see' the 'thants without the full link? That would allow anyone there to use the sphere to watch them without all of being present."

Squeak comes up to me, "How would you like to be an honorary Rap?"

I bow to her, "I would be greatly honored." The others laugh. I have a feeling I do not know what I am in for.

Jones works on making us a meal and setting up a stores of food and water for the trip. He can DS it all into the sphere when it is ready. I can see the spot where it will fit.

"Do we need offensive weapons? I mean we are not going to get close I assume. But what if they sense us and attack us?"

Squeak asks me, "What was the first rule again?"

I sigh, "If you do not have enough intelligence on an adversary, RUN!" She laughs. I knew that. It will take a long time to become a Rap.

Linked

"Myra, you are in the center position. You are the weakest TK and we need to keep everyone else balanced at TK7. That makes you the brains of the group. You will be the one who receives all of the information and integrates it."

"Shit, no sweat. Easy. ARE YOU INSANE?" Jones laughs at me.

Squeak tells me, "It is actually. You just empty your mind and let it happen. You will see. Amazing it is."

Sure. I feel like a nut the squirrels are fighting over while a cat is watching. I hope Onri and Ghost are doing okay. What about the Library? Are the scholars behaving? They really are hopeless on their own. Are the others taking care of them or are they goofing off because we are all gone? I really do not want to be here. How did we get roped into this? Maybe it would be better if I asked to be dropped off on my mother's island.

"Okay, load her up. Time to get this over with. We all have things to do. The sooner the 'thants are dealt with the sooner we can get back to laying back and enjoying our TKness." I am not convinced it will ever be 'normal' again. My life swims before me and I nearly faint.

I can't DS yet so someone puts me in the center seat. It can turn around and I can see everyone arrayed around me.

We pop. We are in outer space above the earth. Looks fantastic. Okay, I can stare at this all night. Or nearly so. The sun is rising I think. Yep, here it comes. Shit, that is bright.

"Hey guys, can you turn it down."

"In a moment. Look below while you still can. You should be able to see where our home is. Crab Cove is that tiny little notch along the shore north of Madscar. Well, maybe we can't actually see it."

"What are those little dots of light spaced along the coast?"

"Signal fires so ships know where they are."

"So that is what they look like from above. Tiny."

"We are three hundred kilometers away Myra. Of course they are tiny."

"Popping to over former California foothills. 3-2-1. Now!"

From sunrise to middle of the night. "The stars are amazing!" No lights below. I can't imagine the large Cats being on ships much less running one. In high seas Ghost always stayed below. He is so tiny he would have gotten washed overboard on the first wave. Hope they don't mess

with us. I am sure the top Cats already know we are here, but we are not actively messing with anything, so we should be alright. Right?

"Everything checks out. All systems are on auto while we are linked. Oxygen is cycling. Temperature is nominal. Going black to help hide us from star reflections." The scene goes black.

"Where did the stars go? How will we be able to see the 'thants?'"

Rand gives me a dirty look, "We are scanning Myra, not seeing. You know better. Don't go stupid on us. We need you are the top of your game. Time to close you eyes and empty your mind. You will know when it happens."

Sure. Nothing. How do you empty your mind? I know, I have had training or I would not be able to use any of my new skills, much less do norm tasks. Ssssh mind. Sssh! Hope I don't fall asleep.

TK7 is 10^7 meters in radius, or 10^4 kilometers. We are 3×10^2 km above the caves. We should be able to easily see the entire complex.

Breathe. Breathe.

It clicks! Like a huge light comes on and I can see at ultra high resolution from a long, long away. I can see the plants on the shore of the swamp. All the birds and bugs going about their nightly wanderings or sleeping. I can see every grain of sand. I like this!

When linked the others cannot talk to me, so I have to do this right.

I look under a few meters and move east until I run into the caves.

"Hey guys, the caves are all fuzzy. Nothing like the shoreline."

We come out of link and I am back to total darkness.

"Okay, good control check, lets try again. We need to each modulate a little off the others so we can set up a frequency pattern. Try again."

We try for hours until it finally works. Turns out each level is capable of different frequencies. The higher the level, the higher the frequency. Makes sense. I was really worried we would be here for days or longer. TKs can be amazingly patient. Much more than I am. The longer we are here the more suspicious the Cats will get. They are lazy, but also territorial, especially when it comes to TKs that Silver had anything to do with. I could feel the anger the last time we com'd with them.

"Okay, this is for real. It is now night, we are blacked out, we know what each of has to do and we are practiced at it."

"Let's go already. Myra you are lead, when you are ready."

Okay then. I relax and breathe. You would think this would almost be reflex by now, but I am blown away every time. Is this what it is like to be a nine? Or is this even more. More is my guess.

The view of the nest pops into my mind. Oh, this is much better. I can

see everything at incredible detail.

The mission. Map the colony. Find the queen or whatever they use as an equivalent. How many workers? That one is easy, an insane number of them. Can't assume these are ants. Find the differences. We actually practiced on ant colonies to get a feeling for them and what to look for.

Lots of activity. I don't think they rest ever. I am not seeing any young ones, larvae, pupae or the queen. I do a rough map of the entire colony. It is huge!

I decide to follow one worker and see what happens. It rubs antennae with each one it passes. Can't hear what it is saying or thinking. We might want to figure that one out. Takes time as there are a lot of them.

Then things speed up. Must be a major road. No one is coming with anyone else now, just move, move, move. Still takes time. I expand out some and watch where we are going. We pass through large areas with lots of levels held together with 'thn metal struts. Nice construction. Very efficient. We could learn a lot from their methods.

We go through short tunnels, basically where they have made use of natural limestone to support things. 'thants come and go from the road. Everyone seems to know what to do and where to go. No arguments. No stopping to chat. There is a lot of up and down, around short curves. At the same time, it seems ordered in some way. There is an overall method or theme to everything. Nothing is by accident. I see some deconstructing an area and I see other building up a new area. Constant changing and churning of the design to make it perfect as things change.

This is new. A long tunnel with no ins or outs. We continue for some time. I can 'see' ahead. We have narrowed to two lines, one in each direction.

Suddenly I cannot follow any further. Strange. I can see the ants coming and going, but I can't pass a certain point. I try and examine the area where I am stopped closely. Very complex 'thn metal construction. Amazingly complex in fact. Way beyond my understanding. I back off, it is definitely not letting me through. How can it tell? What does this mean? Is this the only one?

Now that I know what to scan for I scan the rest of the colony. There are more of them. I find nine total. I try to go through a few others and they all react to me the same way. Okay, the 'thants have no problem though.

I back off to the entire colony again and make a mark in my mind where each of the blocked tunnels are. All are at extreme edges of the colony. There is one more tunnel. No 'thants are present. Something else

is there. Something sealed in 'thn metal. I look past it, whoa! There is a solid wall of something definitely not limestone. Lots of aluminum, silicon, some iron and trapped gas. Carbon dioxide and sulfur dioxide.

Rand had me learning how to tell temperatures without contact. The rest of the colony is basically all the same temperature, but not here, this is hundreds of degrees higher. I can see part way into it and at the center is closer to a thousand degrees. Like in a volcano. What is a volcano doing in the middle of a 'thant colony?

I back off to the package wrapped in what looks like strings of 'thn metal. Usual precise 'thant construction. Very well done, efficient.

I scan closer and inside the package.

"SHIT!" I pop out of sync. Others are waking up around me.

"There is a Hu down there wrapped in 'thn metal threads."

"Okay, relax. It has been there for some time no doubt. Not going anywhere. What do we do? If we bring it up here will the Cats notice or care?"

"If it is Hu, it does not belong to them. Could even be a violation of treaty if they are giving Hu to the 'thants to play with."

"Not if the Hu in question are coming to Cat Land illegally. They are allowed to do whatever they want with trespassers. We need more information."

"What are those road blocks that only affect us?"

"And the ball of magma from a volcano? We know they can build portals or they would not have gotten here in the first place. Why would they bring a ball of molten rock to the colony?"

"Portals! That's it. The blocks are portals. A portal would sever a remote scan. Try it sometime. You can't scan past a portal. You can 'see' into it, but not move your mind through it." Squeak is excited.

Rand is not convinced and makes a portal near himself and one near Drup.

"I can scan both sides easily."

Squeak getting more frustrated, "No, not like that. Make a portal at the edge of your range and then try to scan through it. You can't scan past your range, no matter you are using a portal or not."

"Okay, then if these portals are beyond the range of all of us that means they are off world."

Jones comes in, "Or off THIS earth. Shit, the one wrapped in 'thn metal is Smith! Makes sense, I destroyed their portal when I did the Rooi Sphere, and that explains the bit of lava in their chamber. They must have moved Smith's body to this chamber before I did the swap."

Clear a space! Clear a space!

The 'thn wrapped body appears. Rand immediately wraps a diamond gold shield around it too.

"Not here. We take it back to Crab Cove. I want to be on land, maybe not even on earth two. Let's play this safe everyone. We are dealing with 'thants. They would not have kept this if it was not important to them."

"Nor would they have wrapped it in 'thn metal fibers if it was not dangerous."

"Everything secure, prepare to DS back."

I shout, "NO, DO NOT DS! DANGER!"

They all turn to look at me.

"Humor me, just TK instead. Won't take much longer. DO NOT DS. I have a theory but want to get on land before I test it, or rather have all of you test it."

Rand speaks, "Best to do what she says. Amazing intuition. Main reason we raised her to TK in the first place. Been a big plus to our work." I am blushing so red I want to hide under a rock.

But we TK instead.

Crab Cove

Jones is visibly shaking now. He must have been really close to Smith. The stories said they were inseparable. This has to hurt.

Drup confronts me, "Spill it Myra."

I take a deep breath, "Work it out. The 'thants recovered Smith, and I assume it is him, and brought him to a new earth. An earth where they are for the most part not molested. Smith and then the rest of you going into their nest proved they were not safe on New Hope any longer. I have to wonder how many got out before the bubble swap. This before us was important to them enough to save and in a secure manner. As 'thants went past it without any obvious concern, that means there was no threat from one of them getting to it. They can chew through 'thn no problem."

"And what the hell would scare a 'thant anyway. Only thing I know is gold for some reason. We have all scanned, well three of us have, and there is no gold present. Myra correctly noticed the body is still alive. Missing two limbs and naked, but not bleeding. We need to get this outside."

"NO DRUP! NO DS."

"Shit, thanks Myra." He opens a hole in the side of the ship and uses TK to move Smith outside and sets him gently on the ground."

"Okay, why no DS. We use it all the time."

"You all read the journals right."

"A LONG time ago, but yes of course."

"What could have happened that allowed a few 'thants at the entrance of the New Hope nest to over power a TK8. I mean, come on, you guys are nasty, TK Kung Fu trained, prepared for anything. You just said, no gold present. The journals mentioned such an incident involving Silver."

Jones gets it, "Parasite! Shit! Why wasn't he wearing his torque? I never take mine off. Oh, Smith, how could you be so stupid?"

Everyone checks their own torques physically. I wear mine under my high collar. Imagine what would happen if a local saw that!?! Rand and Drup have theirs internal. I can scan and see them now. Present. Jones wears his on the outside, emblazoned with strange symbols. There is a figure that appears to be playing a flute. Hopi maybe? Squeak is back to being fully covered. I don't blame her.

I almost whisper, "The torque like you wear is heavy, nothing ever happened on New Hope. He got lazy. We all have at times. We have been lucky. He was not."

"Stand back. I am dissolving the 'thn metal. leaving the diamond/gold shield." Jones does so. Nothing happens thank the gods. Funny how that survived even though most people do not believe in God any more.

"Now what?" They all turn to me.

"Wait, a lowly TK3 is in charge? All of your know more than me."

They look at each other, Jones answers, "None of us has any experience with parasites. How do we get it off? I don't see anything. Is it internal? I am not scanning anything. It is like he is wearing a limiter but I don't sense one of those either. Maybe their tech is better than ours. There were limiters present inside the cave."

"Slow down Jones. We will get there. Go ahead Myra." Drup nods.

"Great, just gave me more evidence we have a parasite. They act like a limiter/paralytic to their victim. The fact that you are not paralyzed Jones means you are not infected, though it could be a baby one that has not sync'd with you yet. Best to check both of them. They live on our psiotic link. We become their pipe to the psiotic energy source."

"How come we can't see them?"

"Shit, I remember now, they are dimensional parasites. We need to be in DS space to see them, specifically the sixth dimension." I nod.

Squeak has been very quite. Not like her. She looks me in the eye and then disappears.

A moment later she comes back.

"There is a huge lice like creature attached to Smith's neck. I did a very careful search of Jones and did not find anything. The creature is pregnant. Myra was right to be careful in not using DS while we deal with this one."

We all sit down. Jones nearly collapses, from sorrow or relief he does not have one.

"How the hell do we get rid of it?" His hands are covering his lowered head.

"From the journals, we can't. It would just try and attach to one of us instead. Br'thn saved Silver by taking his personality into herself, destroying the body and creature and then later the group made a new body which Silver was placed in."

"We make a new body. Easy enough. We have done that before and we still have the genetic material in front us to make a new Hu form."

"Ah, but parasites cannot attack 'thn. That is why placing him in herself saved them both. If one of us tries it, we would have two victims instead of one."

Squeak jumps us, "I know. The parasite lives on the psiotic connec-

tion. No connection, not psiotic link, parasite starves."

"Okay, limiters can sever the links, but then what? The parasite will need a new host. How long can they live without a connection?"

"We certainly do not want to be around for it."

Squeak turns around suddenly and jumps up in the air just as a large Cat jumps to where she was. What the hell?

"Well, what do we have here? A little bitty kitty cat."

The Cat sits tall with an annoyed look on his face. That much I can scan, definitely male. He is a beautiful gray color with hints of silver highlights. Sort of like a glamorous large Ghost. And just like Ghost one yellow and one blue eye. Are they related?

I am not a little cat. I am Cat!

Squeak sniffs the air and shakes her head. Wish I could smell better than a Hu.

Drup laughs and morphs into his full Di form. I have not seen that in awhile. He is huge. He bares his teeth and licks his lips. Scared the crap out of me the first time.

Cat disappears. I go up and give Drup a hug. The rest laugh.

"scaredy Cat." Rand yells.

"He has not gone far." *Kitty, not safe to DS around a live pregnant parasite. Come back here. We will not hurt you. Walk though, do not DS if you want to live.*

Jones is pissed, "We really do not need this at the moment."

"He is a TK6 just below Squeak. We may have found a new play toy for Squeak. Perfect for upping your skills Squeak."

"I remember Owa. My skills are fine."

You have met the Owa?

"And Sylvy too," Squeak rubs it in.

I am not worthy. He flattens himself and covers his head.

"Four of us here have met both of them. Get over it. They are TKs just like the rest of us. Nothing special, even if they think they are. Hell, Jones here even grew up with them." Cat looks at Jones in horror, trembling.

Jones can't help but laugh, "Poor kitty. We will not hurt you as long as you do not attempt to eat anyone." He throws some sap chow down close to his head. He sniffs them then crunches them down. I did notice he is very thin. Most of the peripheral Cats were in our scan. They are gone quickly and he looks around for more.

Sigh, Jones makes a large bowl of sap chow and a large bowl of water. Both are used immediately.

"He will be busy for a bit. Back to our problem, then we can deal with

kitty."

"Agreed."

I wonder what his name is.

Smudge, your royal highness. Just poor little Smudge. No threat to anyone.

I am no royal. I grew up on a sailing ship as a servant. I love cats. You are safe with us.

"Myra, be here. How do we solve this?"

"Find Silver and Br'thn?" We all turn to Rand and Drup.

"Hey, we are nothing special to him. There is no trans earth com system. We see them when we see them."

Smudge sniffs Smith. Jones gets nervous.

"Not food kitty." *His name is Smudge.*

He has a parasite. Bad news. Can't eat an infected one.

"You know about them? Do you know how to get rid of it, rather than. It is pregnant."

The Great Owa knows. I am not worthy.

Drup suggests, "I have an idea. We trade this escaped prisoner for the answer." Smudge freaks, but does not DS at least. More afraid of the parasites than us I guess.

Please do not send me back. Please, pretty Hu, do not send me back. I will do anything. ANYTHING.

Jones laughs, "Come here Smudge." He slowly walks toward Jones. Jones starts giving Smudge a Cat massage. He is purring so loud the ground is shaking. Squeak is disgusted.

"What Raps do not like massage?" I ask her.

"It is much rougher. He is treating Smudge like he is fragile."

"Actually, he probably is. Very thin. Nothing but bones. After the food and massage he will sleep for hours."

Jones quips, "I am counting on it." Ah, an evil plan after all.

"I have a crazy idea. We can starve the parasite by withholding psiotic energy. Best if we ALL wear limiters if we try that. Then, there is no one to latch onto."

"Except two continents full of TK Cats." Squeak smiles.

"As much fun as that might be, I suspect if Smudge knows about them, likely the rest do too."

"There is plan B. Overload the parasite. Give it so much psiotic energy it explodes."

"Interesting Myra. Could work. But remember rule number one."

"There are always side effects."

Squeak comes in, "Make a portal to a brown earth. If Smith wakes up we do not want him to die, so black earth will not work. Can we set a timer on the overload so we are safely back here before it goes off?"

"Leave food and water next to him. If he is able that will give us enough time to be sure. Would not want to go back when the thing is awake, pissed and desperate." No, that would not be good.

"Who takes Smith to the brown world? That will involve DSing. That means potentially exposing someone to the parasites, the baby ones at least. All babies are stupid and likely to not be afraid of anything. They have not learned anything yet. Babies are the most dangerous is what I am saying."

"Granted it will involve taking a chance. Being Smith's best friend it falls on me to take the risk, no one else. BUT, I am not stupid. I want a full gold/diamond super suit made before I attempt this. I want everyone waiting for my return to put me into status if I show any signs of being infected."

Squeak says, "Agreed. I would be honored to be your second." She bows to Jones. They begin making his suit of armor. Looks similar to hers as they work quickly. I am not at all convinced that Smith will revive. He has been under the parasite for weeks now. Silver was noticed almost immediately and he had Br'thn to save him. I don't dare say anything of course. I have already seen what Jones will do when angry. Scary really. Any TK could go off like that. None of this set have gone rogue. Maybe no one was pissed off enough yet. I could go rogue. Nearly did when confronting my own mother.

Smith, Jones and Squeak pop out. Hope it goes well. They need to design, build and test the fail safe so they can get back before the parasites attack them.

Rand turns to Smudge, "You have been really quiet. I think this would be a good time to hear your story. How did you follow us, how did you become TK, where were you born."

No nap first? We all laugh.

Smudge's Tale

I remember being a kit. It was wondrous. Long days in the sun, chasing butterflies, mother's milk. I had a sister. We played tumble bite all day long.

"Don't fall asleep Smudge."

Sorry, I get lost in the past sometimes.

Cats do not tell stories as I am understanding you Hu do.

"I am not a Hu little one, but go on."

I remember. Please do not go back to monster mode. Please, please, please.

"Drup, you are scaring the poor little kitty." Rand is teasing me. I am a warrior! I am not scared. I stand tall and try to look dignified. This gets them all laughing. They have no respect. No honor.

I have fought the hard ones. I have earned my scars. I can go elsewhere if you will not treat me with the respect I deserve.

The fem, Myra speaks, "Relax Smudge. It is not lack of respect, but lack of manners. We tease each other a lot. Takes some getting used to."

"You are also in the middle of Hu Land. Technically we can eat you whenever we want. Do not assume anything until you have been approved by us."

And you were above Cat Land. If I could see you, so could others.

"That is not a violation of treaty."

But taking your Hu friend from the hard ones nest was.

"He has a point Drup."

"Males! Stop the pissing contest. I want to hear his story!" Fems get that way.

I relax and sit. *Now where was I?*

What is that? Looks like a tiny Cat, but it is voicing greetings.

"Ghost, what are you doing here?"

I smelled a cat and decide to say hello. Ghost, of course that is not his cat name, walks up to me to give a proper greeting and exchange of smells. He is so tiny, but smells like an adult. Strange. I have heard of these from tales of the past when thousands roamed free in our land.

"Wait, you can TP. When did that happen?" The fem turns to the two males.

"It was supposed to be a surprise, then Jones turned up and well . . ."

Sorry great one, but I have to humor my monkey once in a while in exchange for treats. I don't need them of course, but it is a change from

all the fresh meat around here. He only talks to me. We can't have the Hu thinking too much of themselves. I answer that I understand.

"You do realize that for a Cat to tell their story it can take weeks." Rand tells the fem.

"And I have chores to do. Is that what you are saying?" She is not happy. "Fine, how about you just tell us what you know about the 'hard ones' as you call them then."

Rand tells me, *We would be happy to hear your entire story later. From the time we are TK2 as you call it, we are tested against the hard ones. As I was born near them, this was more or less constant. They come out at night when we hunt. They go after some of the same prey even. Small rodents mostly. They hide in the burrows when the prey are out and get them when they return.* Ghost curls up on the legs of the fem. Interesting. It appears to help keep him warm. I will need to try this. Assuming she will allow me. Fems can be very hard to predict. Most of my scars are from them in fact. Just sounds better to attribute them to the hard ones. We males have honor you understand.

I followed you here for a reason. I will gladly tell you what little I know about the hard ones, but first, the reason for my being here. I have their attention. They certainly are a curious group.

Our numbers are too large to sustain. You may have noticed this when you came over. I am sure you scanned below as you are curious, just as I scanned below when I came here. You have large amounts of food in your lands. We have almost none. We are reduced to eating the small ones, which takes a lot of time away from nap time. Also, TK6 is the highest I can achieve in Cat Land. Only the top Cats are allowed higher.

In other words, I claim sanctuary. That is, if you will have me.

"The only way you could have stayed with us is if you DSd along behind us. I fault myself for not noticing you." The scary one.

"We were concentrating on Smith. Even in the capsule, it is scary to have a host of parasites in an enclosed space with you." The male monkey.

"Sanctuary is possible, but it will be decided by more than the three of us. You will need to convince an entire tribunal if we are to risk the wrath of Owa and Sylvy. Another possibility is we could set you up on some nice green world away from everyone."

I am curious. This is a constant source of trouble for me. I want to see more, experience more, be part of more. You cannot believe how boring it is to sit around all day contemplating you next mouse or nap. I mean, I like both, but day after day after day. Too much. I am going crazy. Not

rogue crazy, just that I need more. I suspect that the top Cats will only put up a token resistance to get rid of me. What was that stuff you gave me when we met?

"Sap chow?" The fem asks.

Yes, it was wonderful.

She laughs, "Owa hates it. Or so I am told. You are different. "

"You are suggesting we could trade you for a sufficient quantity of sap chow? Owa and Sylvy can make as much of it as they want. Why would they care?"

Are these Hu that stupid?

It is not what is being traded, but the fact that a trade occurs.

"Ah, of course. Saving face. Of course we have to pretend you have no value to make this seem real." I nod.

"You males are being stupid. Giving them sap chow will only feed them for a short time. It would be better to send breeding pairs of game animals to be held in a reserve long enough for there to be an excess population to be shared. The overgrowth of plants is taken care of. Live food for the Cats and balance is returned to their areas."

"Hmm, good idea, but will take negotiation. How can be we sure they don't just eat them right away and then beg for more? We could have hundreds of these Cats begging to be granted sanctuary. Hell, they could even breed excess males just for trade. I don't even know what we are going to do with this one."

"He has a point Myra. This will take some thought."

The elders were right. Hu overthink everything. It might be time for a nap.

"No, no nap kitty. Another problem. We can't just show up at the library with Smudge. How do we explain him?"

Rand makes a funny face, "Oh, how about a leash or a cage?" I give him a look of absolute horror and hiss at him. That makes them all laugh. Disgusting sound. Ah, they are teasing again. I don't like this teasing.

No leash or cage would hold me anyway.

"They would if we fitted you with a limiter to take away your TK abilities." I pop out. I would rather die by parasite than be contained.

Of course they pop in right next to me. Two TK9s, I do not stand a chance, unless I want to risk getting lost.

"Please stop. You are upsetting Ghost too. Let's go to a nearby earth, set up housing and such for Smudge. He can stay there, where we can consult him on his knowledge and he will be safe from hunters while this is all worked out." Fem are good at making things work. Maybe that is

why two are our top Cats. Males only want to fight.

Temp Cat

I will admit, I really did not think it possible for stupid monkeys to build a place any Cat would like. It has tunnels and high locations, sleeping areas, waste areas, fresh running water, high perches to watch the world. Little buddy goes crazy checking everything out. Of course I can use my TK to do the same in a fraction of the time, but it is good to watch Ghost exploring. I remember when I was little and everything was fun.

"Well Smudge, what do you think? Can you survive here for a bit?" Myra asks. I have to think of her as more than a fem. She is earning her name of respect, even if I outrank her.

You know we can hear every thought you have Smudge. Just so you do not get in trouble, Myra could beat you easily in a fair bout, both of you wearing limiters. If you ever want to test the truth, challenge her. She will accept even though she has never fought a Cat before. Be aware that as the challenger, she gets to choose the location and she is an excellent sailor, as on a boat in rocking seas.

I am getting sea sick just thinking of it. I will be more careful.

"Now that you are comfortable, it is time to give us some answers."

I sit attentive. Now I know they are listening I know I cannot fool a pair of TK9s. I only met a TK8 once and nearly peed myself. That was when I was raised to TK6. She only was near me for a moment and I slept for a week. Totally vulnerable for a week. Out in the open. Predators about from small to large. I am going to pee myself again if I think about it any more.

Drup sigh, "Okay, we will ask questions then." Impatient creatures.

"You lived near the 'thant nest, err, hard ones is what I believe you call them."

Yes. I was born nearby and spent my kit years close by.

"How many fights did you have with them?"

Fights? I do not understand. I did not fight them. Why? They are our friends.

"Shit, friends! How can that be?" I have really upset everyone, but I do not know why.

Myra, "Describe an interaction with them. We did not see any Cats in the nest, so we assume you do not go inside."

We go inside all the time, just not at night. Night is the time of the hunt. Both Cats and hard ones hunt at night. Hard ones underground and Cats above. We eat different prey. We prefer warm blood and a good

chase. They prefer rotting vegetation.

"You have been inside the 'thant nest?"

Of course many times, though there is not much reason to. Boring inside. Lots of hard ones of course.

"Did you ever go through one of the portals?"

What are portals? Even with TP language is a problem.

"Portals are at the end of the tunnels. There are nine of them currently, though there used to be one more. That one was destroyed by very hot stone."

Oh, I know the hot stone. Wonderful to sleep nearby for a short time. Have to be careful not to catch fur on fire. Keeps the entire colony warm and allows the hard ones to work faster. Much appreciated. We do not go down those tunnels normally. Forbidden. In reality, there is not enough room. We are so much bigger we would not fit even if we wanted to try. They opened up the one with the hot stone to take benefit of it, or we would not fit.

"Do you lose you TK abilities while inside the nest?" Rand asks.

Of course. All who enter do. It is a safety precaution so no one hurts anyone else. We are so much bigger and scary. If we could destroy an entire settlement of monkeys with a thought would you let us enter?

"Owa and Sylvy used to live with us. We suffered no harm."

Interesting. We have tales of monkey and Cat encounters. Never went well for the monkeys. I am surprised you are not worried about me being here.

Drup laughs and the rest smile. *I am afraid I am not appearing fierce enough. Story of my life.*

"So, you and the 'thants live together in harmony. No fights, threats, problems."

No. They are helpers. They find sources of water. We have learned to lead water to suitable areas, so more prey survive so we have more to eat. They are very good at building underground tunnels to more water.

"Shit. They are a positive force here. Then why did they attack on New Hope and Di Eden?"

"Maybe because we treated them as an enemy?" Myra suggests.

Better to subdue your prey by appearing to be friendly. SO many ways to analyze that thought. Are the hard ones doing this to us? Am I doing this to these new friends? They have fed me and no one has attacked me. I do feel safe here. I need a nap. Maybe after more of those crunchie bits. Are they getting ready to attack me or my home?

Cat's World

Mistresses we have activity at the expected stone. Many quantum fluctuations and now signs of movement visible on the surface of the stone.

"Thank you Henry. Please tell George and Issac. The others are to remain on watch just in case they decide to come in more than one portal. We will be there in a few minutes."

Understood mistress.

"I do admit they are useful. Why all male names? They really have no gender."

Cat smiles, "This is my fantasy of how I believe males should behave, as servants."

"Works for me. Male Hu are SO annoying." She smiles again.

We finish our meal and I clean up by dissolving everything. Funny how we treat everything as disposable when we fought like crazy on the rez to stop people from doing so. Granted these are all ceramics, not plastics or paper, but still. Maybe we should get back into the habit. We have been here over a hundred years. How temporary is it really?

We had starting living near the portal we thought would be most likely, but not too close. We do not want them sensing our TK and being scared off. They sure reacted badly to the gold particle. We walk the short distance. Last thing I want is a parasite because I DSd in, even when I am covered in gold.

Cat has been sending return boxes to New Hope to keep up on what is going on, but with the time dilation here we only get a return box every few years. Marie has been pretty good about keeping us in the loop. Of course we have TKs spread over several worlds. We need a better com system. I am worried about the boxes telling the 'thn where we are, but no one has seen a single one since I was being executed and earth systems were banned. Maybe they expect the 'thants and parasites to take care of us eventually. Time is on their side. Even with TK, we are very short sighted. Need to learn more from Silver and Turtle. They seem to think long term.

I wonder how Owa and Sylvy are doing. Randy sent a report that the Cats were hungry because they have over eaten their prey. Mice don't grow on trees you two. If their TKs stopped reproducing that would help too. Glad I have no interest in that kind of stuff.

"Let's stay back here just in case. I can easily see them," Cat says.

I take a couple of monocular 10x scopes out of my pack and hand her

one. Hey, without TK we need to make due."

"Good thinking Puu." She holds one up to her eye and looks over the sphere of 'thn metal.

I sigh and do the same. The refraction has changed. Not even any more. With TK we could see it very clearly of course, but as we are hoping for something to emerge we really do not need to see inside just yet anyway.

When in doubt, wait. I make myself comfortable. We had already set up a tent and chairs some time ago in anticipation of need. We have water, but it is room temperature. I'll live and open a jug and pour two mugs. We have sap chow too of course. Not that desperate yet.

It is not until dark, two jugs and a bag of sap chow later that something finally happens. We have no moon on this earth. Something about how Cat set up this world. I am guessing she could not have pulled off the time dilation with a moon present. No way it could go around us a hundred times faster. Just glad it works and we are still safe and not flying off the surface from centrifugal force. I have asked, but she does not know how to describe it. I am guessing she is way beyond TK8 in her understanding. Is this what happened to Silver and Turtle too?

A bulge appears about two thirds of the way up and right of center. I was expecting a normal sized 'thant to emerge, but the bulge keeps getting bigger and bigger.

"Whoa! What the hell is it? There was nothing in the library about different sized ones."

"Warrior ants are bigger than normal workers. The queen is biggest of all."

"They would not endanger a queen by sending her in first. They would send in tons of workers and warriors first to set things up so her highness was as comfortable as possible to fulfill her only role."

"Laying eggs. So warriors. It has to be at least ten times the size of the ones we know about though."

Definitely a 'thant in shape, just huge. Not moving much. Finally it finishes and plops to the ground. It slowly rises to its feet and immediately proceeds to the ring without any apparent awareness of what it is doing.

"This should be interesting. Can't work 'thn metal without TK. We have suspected that the 'thants are pretty high TKs for that reason."

"No evidence that individuals can DS."

"But a collection of them can build a portal. The journals are clear on that."

"If the journals are even valid. They were written in a different incarnation Cat."

"Shhh! You want to get us in trouble again." She laughs at her joke. It was not funny being condemned to death. Not funny at all.

"It is stopping completely on the disk. Still moving, but no forward movement."

"Shit, did it just die? I mean it is totally frozen now. Not even an antennae twitch. It shook all over and then stopped."

"We know they need TK. The disk is essentially a large limiter. Maybe we did kill it. We know the disk works at least."

"Too well. How do we study them if we kill them all."

"We didn't. Lots of little ones are coming out now. They are covering the sphere, but not leaving it. Tunnels are starting to appear. Starting to look like one of those glass ant colonies kids used to have."

"Never had one on the rez."

"I didn't either. We were too poor for silly stuff, but the school had one when I was in the third grade. All worker ants though, so they eventually all die even with food and water."

"They are certainly very busy. We might have to go back to home base and use TK from there. I want some distance if I am going back on line."

"A few are touching the disk and then immediately backing away from it. They know it is there anyway."

"Have you seen those nature movies where they can cross a stream by building a living bridge?"

"That would be one hell of a bridge. The disk is what, a hundred meters wide? You were not taking chances when you built it."

"Also why the last outer ring is pure gold. We know they hate that stuff."

"Now you are assuming none of them fly."

"Don't give them any ideas Puu. Look at the large one stopped on the disk. It has wings!"

"Too heavy to get off the ground. 'thn metal is heavy even if their exoskeleton is thin."

"If they use psiotic energy source it could work."

"Yeah, I think you are right. Forgotten about that. I have to start thinking like a 'thant and not a Hu."

"We can't afford to make mistakes on this Puu. We know they can kill."

"Wonder what the large one is though. No obviously jaws or fangs. Not a warrior. Huge jaws are the most obvious feature on a warrior ant or

wasp at least."

"Shit, Puu, we are so sexist. It is a drone. A male. In ant colonies they were only around for one purpose, to mate with the queen."

"But there are usually hundreds of them so a young queen has a choice. This one does not appear to be healthy at all. It was slow emerging and barely able to go to the disk."

"I am going to take a chance. We did not come all this way just to watch our theories die. If we are wrong, then they will never get from here back to New Hope. If we are right, then the entire multiverse may change."

The drone is popped to just outside the ring. We wait to see what happens. I finally scan. It is alive if that means fluids are moving around in it.

"There has to be a reason it is sick. I can see nothing physical. Check my gold plating for me Puu."

"Is that wise? Right, take chances, get messy as Miss Frizzle would have said." She looks at me confused.

"Never mind. Give me a second." I check her over carefully. Takes much longer than a second of course.

"DS space?" She nods and pops out.

She comes back with a sphere of gold diamond. I did not know you could make things in DS space? I mean, I guess matter should still exist there. That has to have taken a lot of practice.

"Our visitor was covered in these. The sphere should contain them."

I scan and see nothing but an empty sphere. I check my own shielding and enter DS space and immediately pop back.

"Shit Cat! Are you crazy?" The sphere was chuck full of parasites. Nasty looking things. Imagine a louse in six dimensions. One large one and hundreds of smaller ones attached to the large one.

"Did you see any of them moving?"

"Uh, no. But I did not give it much time once I realized what they were."

"They were feeding off our little friend here. Once the food source was removed they went dormant. Dead maybe, but I doubt that would have been instantaneous. They have to be able to get from host to host somehow."

"And the sphere cuts them off from everything. That should eventually kill them. Are you sure you got them all?"

"There was only one connection point, right at the base of the head. Same as with us. We know TK is related to our brains somehow. That would be the obvious place to attack."

"Could you put a few more layers of gold on that thing please. It really gives me the creeps." I turn and concentrate on our drone.

I scan him. Still alive.

"I wonder what they eat. Not much here."

"The ONLY thing here is lichen. They came here thinking they could set up a new colony. It would have been a really good site actually. No way the 'thn or anyone else could have found them."

"And the gold particle did not scare them off? And the fact that there were ten huge 'thn spheres? That has to say TK all over it."

"And what kills TKs?"

"Parasites. The drone was sent here to infect us. Once we were gone, the world was ripe for colonization. Neat. Probably would have worked too if we have been lax about security and not prepared for this possibility."

"Think back to all the other earths. They would not have known what hit them. The ruin of the brewery was there for a thousand years. A scout would have noticed TKs being present."

"And sent an infected drone in to spread the infection to all of us. Nasty."

"But effective. Any TK who came close would get a new parasite friend. Likely since the babies are smaller, would not even notice at first."

I sit. "This is worse than I thought. I really thought the infections were random chance, not planned and orchestrated."

"He is coming around. I really don't like him being this close to an active portal." We all pop to the empty space we had prepared as a fort of last resort before abandoning the world. Hey, we did think about all of this. Kung Fu TKs and all.

Cat sets him down in a bank of lichens. I start to check our defenses. We have had drills before, so this is almost mechanical, though now it is real.

"Should we eject the spheres?"

"The K9s are watching them." She sets about fussing with something. Even after a year I do not understand all of her tools and toys. I have been told which ones not to touch directly of course. I hope she told me all of them, though I could see why she would not tell me everything, in case I got infected and needed to be put down. Shit, this is scary.

"Puu, look, he is eating the lichen!" I turn from what I am doing and sure enough the drone is slowly munching away on the bed of lichen. Seems to prefer the green ones and avoids the red ones. Preference or something in the red ones that is poisonous. Hey, would be good to know.

He could still very well be an adversary.

"Okay, then, clearly alive and doing better. We need a cage then. Till we know more, we need to assume the worst. Both of us cannot be in the cage at the same time. Agreed?" Cat nods. I make her acknowledge again to be sure she heard me.

He stops eating for a moment and looks straight at us.

A rapid high pitched chitter comes out of him.

"Is he going to attack? We need that cage now Cat."

A mess of carbon gold appears as a ten meter cube.

"That should be enough room. We can always pop in more lichen if needed."

"And if he is a TK6 or above? That will not hold him."

"But a limiter would kill him Puu, so what do you suggest?" She looks annoyed that I did not realize this.

I sigh, "We take our chances." She nods.

"Chances are, after the parasites feeding on his psiotic ability, it will take some time to become normal again. Took a completely new body for Silver, not to mention time in a baby 'thn."

"It would appear you anticipated this possibility. The limiter ring was to prevent the 'thants from leaving the area around their sphere, but also to knock out parasites if they appeared too. What made you think the two were related?"

"Ku Eden. Did not make sense that parasites would kill TK2s without being influenced or controlled by something or someone. The 'thants were one of two candidates."

"The 'thn being the other. But the 'thn are forbidden to attack TKs directly. They do not kill, normally."

"I am beginning to think that most worlds have a small 'thant colony. It is only when TKs arise that can make 'thn metal that things get nasty."

"If that were true why haven't they exhausted their food supplies? Our worlds still exist after all."

"There are an infinite number of worlds. Maybe the chain of command gets too long. Maybe they are relatively new to our area. We know they have been around in the multiverse for millions of years, but only recently started appearing on earth worlds."

"Too many questions. Do you think Edwin can communicate with us Puu?"

"Edwin?"

"Needs a name and I refuse to call anything intelligent 'drone'."

"Intelligent?"

"He knows we are here. Has tried to talk to us. Appears to be waiting for a response. I am hoping by our continuing to talk he figures out we are communicating with each other."

"He is cleaning himself now. Sure he is not part cat?" I tease.

"All creatures clean themselves Puu, even Hu occasionally."

"Just don't expect me to lick my own butt." I laugh. That gets Edwin's attention.

"This is going to take some time. We are totally different creatures. Nothing in common except ability to use TK. Wish I had spent more time at the center talking to non-earth beings."

"Wish I had not spent so much time in the library and gotten around more too. So much to see and so little time."

"He is chittering again. Lower pitch this time anyway."

"One of is trying at least. How come we can't TP?"

"Too different is my guess. How many billions of years separate us?"

Safe Place

"Squeak, we know the parasites live on psiotic energy they harvest from us. We have removed the parasite from Smith and he has been fitted with limiters to prevent the parasite from reattaching. So, why is nothing happening?"

"It is possible he is too damaged. We can fix the missing arm and leg, but he was preyed upon for a long time. There may be nothing of him left to awaken."

"I don't accept that Squeak. I can't."

"We will all die eventually Jones. Even us." He shakes his head no.

"Okay, we are both shielded and on a different earth from the others. I want to remove his limiters, repair the damage to his body."

"One of us should monitor in DS space to prevent reattachment of the parasite or a new one. We still are not sure where they come from. The one in the Journals that attacked the original Silver did not appear to be associated with the 'thants. It is possible they are just using them in this incarnation, but no true association."

"I blame the 'thn. We know they have it in for us for figuring out too much. They don't want more Silvers or Turtles being born. None of us has seen a 'thn since we were expelled from the Regional Center."

"They are forbidden to take direct action."

Jones laughs, "We all know how to misdirect and get others to do our work for us. Classic children games. Even adults use it by telling us tales that can't possibly be true to get their children to behave."

"We have no such tales. Life was hard enough in the wild. Mistakes were usually fatal. Problem child no longer a problem."

"Harsh. Okay, we go with your idea. I will stay here with Smith. Enter DS space, count to ten and I will remove the limiter and then repair his body. If you see any sign of the parasites, come back here and we will put the limiter on again."

"How will I know when you are finished?"

"Give me ten minutes. It should not take longer than that. You can always pop back into DS space if necessary."

"Agreed." I pop into DS space. I can see the dimensional representation of Smith and Jones. The shimmer around Smith disappears. I am assuming that was the limiters. No sign of the parasite. Either they do not last long without a host or go hunting for another. Ah, he is thinking correctly. He has placed a gold shield around Smith's neck and head. He arm

and leg are being repaired. Nothing much is happening, but I wait the required ten minutes just in case. He is an eight and undoubtedly has abilities and strengths I do not have. We are all treated as equals at the decision level, but are also aware of the talents we each have in case they are needed.

Time has elapsed. I return to normal space.

Smith is breathing on his own. Good sign. Still laying down quietly though.

"It may take time for healing to occur Jones. We should be patient."

"I will monitor vitals and insure he has adequate nutrition in his blood stream. I dare not risk trying to feed him yet."

"This seems logical." I feel silly saying logical as I usually run on instinct, but as a professor I am expected to be able to back up ideas with facts and logic. Makes my head hurt at times, but I like the respect that goes along with being a teacher. Do not want to go back to being the baby in the group.

We are under a shelter, though the weather is mild. I make food for us both and offer a bowl to Jones. He accepts without comment and eats while keeping attention on Smith. I can't imagine what it would be like if this was Puu or Cat here instead. How would I feel? Emotions seem more a Hu thing, but I still care and would mourn their loss.

He is still alive. We should be glad for that at least. This could take some time, months would not be out of the range. At what point do we give up though? I am sure for Jones that would be never. That would effectively mean the 'thants got both of them then. Even I feel the tug to get back to help the others. What is going on in our absence? Are the 'thants killing more of us? Are more worlds being invaded?

"I am going back into DS space to look around. No surprises." He nods and I go back in. I can see the paths to other earths easily. So many of them. Even though I am a seven I can scan the entire world from here. Turtle said it was something about DS space being smaller. That is why we can use it for travel so easily. If I go to even higher dimensions I can travel faster and further, but I would lose detailed vision of our space until I dropped back down. My duty is here, so I avoid the temptation to explore.

There is no evidence of any other life nearby dimensional or not. Nothing is moving unexpectedly. I drop back to normal space.

"Nothing to report. We appear to be clear. Either the parasite died without food or moved on to better feeding grounds. We are the only TKs present on this world and are all heavily shielded."

He nods." This is going to take time." I rest and scan our surroundings. A light green world. There is life and breathable air, but the variety is low. A plantimal world. Normal. We are the abnormal variation in the universe, but again, most earths are split like we are. New Hope being an exception where there was a closer relationship. I miss being on what I think as my growing up world.

The life here goes on ignoring us for the most part. We purposely chose a sandy area to minimize our impact of course. No surprises. I sense no other TKs, even at the one level, but surprises can happen. What if they were shielded like we have all learned to do? I must keep guard while Jones is concentrating on Smith. I extend my scan our further and further. Except for the lack of prey, it seems to be a nice world. Many would like it here, after adjusting their systems to be compatible of course. We scan our systems regularly to avoid surprises. A tiny virus can take out a high level TK if it is sneaky enough. A Rap can take out a large Di, if it is sneaky enough. Not recommended of course. Safety in the pack.

I know that the other TKs do not like dogs, but they seem alright to me. I have to wonder if Raps are more like dogs that the revered Cats that seem to be more pain than gain. Who wants to be around a species that thinks it is everything and everyone else is lower than they are? They are sneak predators. That part I can accept. Raps are smaller than Di, so we also depended on stealth until the treaties were signed. There are of course squabbles still, but just as likely to be within species as without. The young of every species seem to be susceptible to being stupid.

"I wonder why none of the TK species have settled here." I am thinking out loud and do not expect an answer.

"Get your own house in order before you expand to someone else's world. There may not be sentience worthy of TKness here yet, but give it a few million years. It could happen."

"How is Smith doing? I miss him. The two of you are always together."

He looks sad, "We got into a fight over something trivial. Mostly because we were bored. Nothing ever happened on New Hope. Still can't believe with all of us making regular scans none of us noticed the blind spot. If only I had gone with him, this would never have happened."

"Chance says otherwise. Eventually we will all get into trouble and die. Being TK fools us into thinking we are immortal. We are not. Even Silver and Turtle have died many times."

"Yeah, how do they pull that one off? How do they maintain their

awareness of self through incarnations? Smith and I could be together again in the next one and never even remember all of this."

"Marie says even if you do not remember details, something does transfer. Some essence does come back. We are self aware at least. Deeds done in a past life will affect a future one."

"Don't give me all that Buddhist mumbo jumbo. I am Hopi through and through. We only get one go, even if we are super lucky this time seeing the fifth world and being TK."

"True. Raps do not believe in reincarnation either, but it appears to work for some. Certainly has for Silver and Turtle." He nods.

"Those two sort of creep me out. Should anyone have that much power? I feel guilty even about our being TK."

"Agreed, though they do not appear to abuse their abilities. It is frustrating when they do tend to think much longer term than any of us."

"Imagine what it was like growing up with them. You essentially did once Cat brought you to New Hope. Do you think you missed anything from not growing up on Di Eden?"

"I think I have the best of both worlds. I certainly like the climate and food better on Di Eden, but if that was all I had I would miss all of you too. Diversity is fascinating. I would miss all the different ways of thinking and seeing everything."

"True. I am glad for one that you joined our group. Puu and Cat can drive me crazy at times. It was good to see you confused by their behavior too. I was not alone."

"You always had Smith. I was the only Rap."

"But you were always accepted as one of us."

"True."

We watch several days go by waiting on Smith. Both sad and frustrating.

I go into DS space. Nothing. No parasites. Come back out.

"Jones, we need to take him back. Others can help. We serve no one staying here. We wrap him in gold foil to be sure he and of course the two of us, do not get reinfected. The nines are better at this than we are at least."

"You are right." Smith is golded. We pop out.

Earth Two

"That Cat is going to drive me crazy!"

Drup sighs and smiles, "What did he do this time?"

"He needs a limiter. He pops into town at night, eats anything that moves, including dogs, livestock, rats, okay that is a good thing. The town folk are ready to kill him on sight."

"You tried explaining all this to him?"

"Ghost will still try for a neighbors pet bird, but at least he is not a TK6 and cages prevent him from succeeding. Smudge does not belong on this world." Drup looks at me sideways.

"You know what I mean, on this side of the world anyway. Can we send him back to his safe world."

"He is a six, he will just come right back. DS is their first or second talent. He is good at it. Kinda of surprised actually that all of the Cats have not expanded out from this world. If they are that hungry if is what I would do."

"I have been thinking about that. How many are strong enough to world hop? Anyway to run a scan?"

Rand comes in the kitchen where we are talking.

Drup asks him, "Myra wants to know how many of the Cats can jump earths and why haven't they done so."

"Not that many. And if you can, why bother? You are top of your local area and can get food before anyone else. It is the zero through fives that are vulnerable and they can't jump that far."

"They why does Smudge? Why is he even here?"

"Spy? Bored? He did say he wants adventure. By the way, he is back in his home in the forest, sleeping off another dog kill."

"What is the animosity between cats and dogs? Ghost knows better than to tackle them and gives them a wide berth unless he knows they are safe."

"No dog could take on Smudge. But I agree, he needs to be collared or moved to someplace he can't get back from so easily."

"We could tell Owa and Sylvy we have a stray that won't go home."

"Then he would be marooned. Could you do that to anyone who is not outright malicious? He is friendly enough to Hu." You mean like my mother?

Two Hu and a Rap pop into the garden.

"We need help. Randy and Droopy, please."

"Jones and Squeak I presume. This must be Smith. You found him. Oh, not so good."

"He was attacked by a parasite, we are not sure when. Could have been before entering the 'thant colony. Not important. We have removed the parasite, but can't get him to wake up."

"Hmm, no TK signature at all. He is in a coma. Let us do some digging. Why don't we put into a normal bed so our guests do not get suspicious."

"Oh my, an armored Velociraptor. Guys, come see this. I believe it is even alive." Only a scholar would be exited to be unarmed near one of the most efficient killing creatures the worlds have ever produced.

Squeak pops out.

The scholar turns to me, "Did you see that?"

I look around confused, "See what?"

"It was right there. I wish I had time to sketch it."

I roll my eyes, "Maybe you should get some rest. At the books too long scholar."

"Maybe you are right." He turns to leave, looking back as he does so.

"Nice save Myra. We have an empty room?" I am in charge of booking.

"Upstairs. Third door on the left." Jones and Smith pop out.

"I thought we weren't supposed to do that stuff around others."

Rand shrugs, "Emergency. Best take some broth, etc. up to see if you can help. We will be along in a moment, ah, walking the normal way."

"Thanks." I run off. Smith is already tucked in the bed. I bring stuff up from the kitchen.

"Any wounds?" Jones shakes his head.

"You are the Smith and Jones from New Hope?" He nods.

"Shit, if a TK8 can't help. Sorry, scary. You are keeping his vitals in check?"

"Of course. No offense, but we came here to get help from Randy and Droopy. Squeak pops into the room.

"I am Squeak."

"I know you. I read the journals. Myra, TK3. I assume you can see I am Hu." She nods. How do you tell gender on an armored Rap? I would not know if I had not been keeping up on the journals everyone sends in to us. Strictly off limits to the locals of course.

"Best if you assume Hu form while here to prevent any more locals from seeing you."

"I am only a seven. Best if Randy and Droopy assist from here. I will

return to New Hope to let them know we have Smith back. Then to Di Eden to help with the 'thant war."

"War? Interesting. The 'thants here are actually helping the Cats. Routing water to irrigate fields so herbivores can prosper so the Cats can catch and eat some of them. I wonder why they are attacking you on Di Eden?" Squeak looks at me like she will eat me. Granted, I do not know Rap facial expressions being my first time.

"That may be important information. I will relay that to TK White on Di Eden. Thank you." She pops out. Busy day.

Rand and Drup come in stomping their feet so we know they are coming. They sit in the guest chairs and concentrate.

"Smith is totally lacking in TK ability. It is like it was entirely drained from him. If you have gotten to him any later he would be dead for sure. We need some, TK0.5, just to stay alive."

"I did not know that? I mean I knew all life depends on psiotic energy, but I did not know there was a level associated with it."

"Depends on the life form of course. A bacteria has only a very tiny fraction of a TK unit."

"Please leave Myra so you no longer distract the healers."

Drup growls, "This is her home and she is in charge of arrangements at the library. If you prefer, we can all leave, but Myra stays if she wants to." Two nines beats an eight I guess. Testosterone poisoning if you ask me. Males sure get their hackles up easily.

Smith begins to move on his own.

"I gave him a boost. Sort of a mental shock," Rand says quietly.

He opens his eyes, but appears to be confused.

Jones asks, "Smith, do you know who I am?"

He shakes his head no.

"This is not uncommon for coma patients under normal circumstances. May take awhile for him to get his wits back."

"The bad news is that he may never be able to be a TK again. The parasite really did a number on him at the quantum level."

"Can either of you two contact Silver or Turtle. They will want to know." And being unknown TK level they might be able to help.

I come in, "Feed him with the broth if he will take it. Will need to learn how to be a norm again. At least for the time being. We can move him to more solid food as he improves."

Jones sigh, "Thanks everyone. Please go on with your normal tasks. I will stay with him."

"I will alert the kitchen staff. Walk down to the kitchen if you need

anything."

"Or dupe what you scan them making." Rand suggests. Jones nods.

Drup adds, "No cowboy chili for awhile. Needs bland food, mostly liquid, easy to digest. Remember, his gut has had nothing in it for weeks."

Good point. We leave.

Back in the room where we meet to discuss TK things without guests listening in.

"We get so used to being TK that we forget how to be norm. Wonder if it would be a good idea to go on a norm camping trip once a year. Someplace safe, bring food with us, but have to prepare it, eat it, defecate it, tents, bedding, etc. Deal with all the things a norm would have to do."

Ghost pops in and sits on my lap.

"What the? Okay, who made Ghost TK?"

Rand and Drup look at each other like they have no idea what I am talking about.

"Ghost just popped into my lap. The door is closed. He was not TK this morning."

Ghost gives up a big yawn. *Smudge thought it would be better if I was able to get away from the dogs.*

"Oh god. Two TK cats. We need to do something about Smudge. It was bad enough when a norm cat was trying to run this place. Yes, I mean you Ghost." He struggles to get off me, but I use my TK3 shield to keep him in place and prevent him from popping.

"Yes dear, you are still lower in the hierarchy. Behave and don't tease the dogs. They will gang up on you if you annoy them too much." I let him go and he pops out. Not far, just the next room. I can scan him further than he can pop. Cleaning himself. When in doubt, lick.

"What happens when the guests see this?" I glare at the two of them.

"Okay, we will deal with Smudge. Shit, he just left this earth. I keep forgetting his TP abilities are excellent."

"The hunt is on!" Drup exclaims. I think they are going to enjoy this.

I scan and see Jones feeding Smith the broth. Quiet upstairs at least.

New Hope

"Squeak, you are back! How is Smith? Where is Jones?" Tia comes up to me and gives me a hug.

"Whoa, you are still in full armor. How bad was it?" Sam asks, also giving me a hug.

"We rescued Smith, but it likely he will never be TK again and have to live out a norm life. He just woke up when I left, so I don't know how well he is doing.

Di Eden was under full attack from the 'thants. We were just getting it under control when we went to rescue Smith. I will go there next to assist."

"Been real quiet here. No sign of 'thants, though they were able to hide from us before. They will likely be extra careful now." Marie.

"I will get some nines to come here to check to be sure. We were only able to see them to rescue Smith by combining our minds using TP. A most interesting experience. We had two nines, an eight and myself a seven. It is possible that by combining everyone here, you might be able to see them. You have to practice with the harmonic spread to find them."

"Oh, we found Smith on Earth Two. Yeah, we know he disappeared from here. The 'thants have a DS tunnel system linking worlds together allowing them to go back and forth easily. Appears to be the same location on each earth. When Jones destroyed the colony here some of the lava entered the tunnel on Earth Two. Smith had already been moved from here coincidentally to Earth Two. We were very lucky."

"So, did you destroy the colony on Earth Two?"

"It was in Cat territory. We were not granted permission from Owa and Sylvy. Turns out the 'thants are helping the Cats."

Mike laughs, "Of course they were. An enemy of my enemy is my friend." Old Hu saying. Does not translate to my own experience. All enemies are dangerous.

"What were they doing for the Cats?" Sam asks.

"All of you, let Squeak catch her breath. Everyone to the picnic area. Rude not to offer one of our own food."

"I need to get back to Di Eden."

"You have enough time to eat Squeak. You are still young and need the calories."

"I am older than any Rap who has ever lived Tia." I stand my ground.

"We have cowboy chili, enchiladas, tamarind juice to drink." Oh, I

love tamarind juice.

"Ok, Squeak stay for lunch." We all walk to the picnic area where things were already set up. They set a place for me in the middle and everyone else adjusts. Soon all kinds of food is piled in my bowl and a large mug of juice arrives. I dig in like I have not eaten in days. Don't think I have. Concentrate Squeak.

I belch once I have finished everything. Sam and Mike laugh and do the same. I am becoming a stupid male. Spending too much time with them. Tia and Marie give me dirty looks. I spent so much time growing up learning to be 'lady like'. Never really took of course. I smile and that gets everyone to laughing.

I relate to them the story Smudge gave us about the 'thants.

"We do not have independent confirmation. Cats are known to deceive and exaggerate claims." They nod in agreement.

Marie states, "But the important thing is that the 'thants are not actively attacking anyone on Earth Two. I don't know if this is hopeful or confusing. Why attack Di Eden and not Earth Two?"

"Don't forget our own experience."

"Did they attack us or did we attack them? We don't know what happened with Smith. Very different creatures. Could have been just a misunderstanding."

"True."

Di Eden

!Welcome back Squeak. As you can see we are in the process of re-building. We lost over fifty students and a few teachers. Mostly those who could not DS out of the way.!

!Understood. I have some confusing news. While on Earth Two I learned they are actually helping the Cats. There were no attacks.!

!That is confusing. Of course who understands the Cats.! White smiles. He is right there. I was always wary of Owa when living with her. She even accused me of being an overgrown dog once. Apparently this is a worse insult than stupid monkey. I do not have much experience with dogs though I understand they are pack animals. What is wrong with that? Packs are more likely to survive than loners.

!We need to check in with other Edens to see how they are doing. Jones is taking care of Smith. He is alive and on Earth Two with Randy and Droopy, oh and Myra a Hu TK3. She seems smarter than the others.!

!Males can be stupid. That leaves you and me then. I know we were mortal enemies at one time. I would understand why if you did not want to be alone with me.!

!You are TK9. If you really hated me that much I would not be here. I think we have shown that working together is better for both of us. I would be honored to work with you. The last six months have worked very well.!

!Agreed. Very well indeed. Both cultures are far ahead of where we would be alone. Ah, assuming we can put the university back together.!

!Excellent evidence of cooperation. Both Raps and Di had casualties. Both helped save each other. Hu have this ceremony where they honor individuals who were heroic in times of need.!

!Yes, I know of that. You have been studying the Hu in our library. Thank the gods the library is still intact. When we get back and everyone has settled down some. I have elevated some of them another TK level. Gives honor and lets them help more when we need it.!

!I learned from being on Earth Two it is not good to appear in a new earth as we are. We need to fit in better.!

!The most obvious choices are Ba Eden and Ku Eden. I would rather try being a bird than a bat. Closer to our current form at least.!

!Agreed. Allow me.! White effects the change. I don't think I would have remembered well enough to do it myself.

!Wait, don't they wear clothes like the Hu?!

!Hmm, I think you are right. If I remember, only on the torso, vests and cloaks. Some of the ladies add extra feathers and such.!

!Better to go poor. Less noticeable. Maybe tool belts. Both genders are workers and servants.!

!Good read Squeak. You can make your own tool belt or even use your current one. What about gold shields? The poor certainly could not afford that.!

!Technically only the neck needs to be covered, but their necks are long like mine. Hide it behind a leather piece? Could even make it internal to the leather.!

!Could explain that it is an attempt to help support the neck during our work. Hmm, as painters of ceilings? Or carpenters working on buildings. The neck would be vulnerable to accidents.!

!And if no one else has these?!

!Warriors and police might have them.!

!Definitely not one of the red vests. Last report said they are fewer now. I don't think they have war, only oppression.!

We sort it out and pop to an empty field in the middle of town. We are in a room just under the field actually.

+Need Ku lessons.+ I exclaim as best I can.

!That can be arranged. Lots of Ku about. Just need one who is resting. AH, here we go. Prepare for instant language.! I am nearly knocked out by the embedding of Ku.

+I hope you picked a lower perch bird.+

White looks at me, +Of course, maybe too low even. Our tutor was molting in a room with no actual perches and the floor was real nasty.+

+Molting. I had completely forgotten about molting. Let's make this quick. Definitely do not want to go through molting. I have heard it is horribly itchy.+

+I hear being a Cat is worse. They shed their fur twice a year and it drives them nuts.+

I laugh, +They are nuts without shedding. They think of us as dogs because we run in packs.+

+Safety in numbers. Let's get to the surface and take a walk around. Might be wise to scan for 'thants. If the theory is correct we should be close to the nest on this world.+

+Does appear to be correct. The ones on New Hope, Earth Two and Di Eden were all in the exact same cave formation on each world. Strange, this world does not have a cave below us. Only a large collection of water and sewer pipes. Amazingly intricate actually.+

+We need to link to see them. I am getting ghost images in the sewers.

+Welcome strangers. May I help you?+

Oops. We have been found out.

+We ah, are under orders to repair the tunnel ceiling. Danger of collapse.+ White bows his head low and I do the same saying nothing.

+Nice try. You are both TK, higher than me.+

+How did you know?+

She indicates amusement, +You are wearing disguised gold torques. Only a TK would do that. I cannot read your level, so you are higher than I am. I am called Freep, a TK5 Ku.+

I sigh, +I am Squeak, a TK7 Rap and this is White, a TK9 Di.+

She instantly bows low.

+Please stop. We are nothing special. Certainly the TKs here do not follow perch rules do they?+

She comes back up, +Well we are looser about it, but still wise not to upset a higher perch. We do have to deal with locals too, without risking our covers. Speaking of which, what are you two exactly? Never seen workers arrayed like this.+

+We had to guess. Neither one of us is Ku literate. We were trying to cover the gold torques but still appear to be lower perch.+

+You are in sanctuary here, so whatever is comfortable works. The local TKs wear these white robes to let locals know who we are.+

I show amusement, +As in don't mess with us. But you mentioned undercover as well.+

+Then we wear whatever we need to fit in. Oh, you can bury the gold just under your skin to avoid looking so silly.+

+Yeah, right. I knew that.+ White sighs and makes the change for both of us.

+Would it be possible to meet with Flor or Kheya? They are still the leaders here?+

+TK Flor is here and I am sure she would be happy to meet with you. TK Kheya is on the southern continent helping to set up a new center there. I will take you to TK Flor. Not far.+

We follow her at the same time I am mentally making a map of the complex. They have done a lot.

We could learn from how they have laid things out White. We have similar physiologies. very efficient.

Agreed. Might be a good model for the university. We need to get done here and get back before they set the stones. TKs will help move the

stone blocks cut by other TKs.

We arrive in a large room with TK lamps around the room. Perches are step up in circles. That would not work on Di Eden. The lamps would. Temperature is good. Summer above and that can get hot in the sun. We use stone for the same reason, to help equalize the climate inside.

Freep bows to an old bird and whispers to her. Freep then leaves and the old one comes up to us.

"Welcome Squeak and White. Is this your first time on Ku Eden?"

"Your Hu is excellent Flor. I have been here before, but this is Squeak's first time I believe. We are here on a mission with a time constraint."

"Ah, that would explain the lack of preparation. You two do look rather silly."

"Why look like an old bird Flor," I ask.

"Age is respected here. We all have to blend in."

White shows amusement, "No one likes a cocky young bird."

"Exactly. Annoying as hell. Best to just lock them in a cage and let them get it out before they are good for polite company. Now, why are you here?"

White looks to me.

"'thants have attacked on two worlds that we know of. Many have died on Di Eden. I see you all wear gold. Reports said that the last attack here was from parasites that fed even on TK2s."

"We have seen no sign of parasites. We are instruments of peace here and don't want any trouble. The 'thants have actually been very helpful."

"We scanned the sewer system."

"And were just about to link to be able to see the 'thants themselves."

"They are being especially cautious of late. Two of their tunnels sudden filled with lava for reasons I cannot explain. We are a long way from any sources."

"We can explain that. They attacked and nearly killed TK Smith on New Hope. Jones swapped out the colony with magma to remove the threat. Apparently they had already transported Smith to Earth Two and had attached a parasite to him to remove his TK. They then attacked Di Eden killing many TKs at our university. Again with Jones' help we bubbled them to magma. On Earth Two we saw how the colonies on all of earths are all interconnected."

"But on Earth Two they are getting along fine with the Cats."

"Here too. I'm sorry, but I can't sanction a war on what appear to be innocent creatures. Good to know a method that works if that becomes

necessary though. At the moment they are welcome."

"We need to be cautious. There is a theory that this is how the 'thn exterminate unwanted TK cultures. All of us on the earth complex are under threat of extinction from the 'thn. We were at the Regional Center when this was proclaimed to us."

"I remember, but really, we have had no trouble. Our troubles are all local as we root out the last of the remaining Red Vests and get people to trust and believe in the White Cloaks again. As the Red Vests were also our administration, we are rebuilding that as well. I would be happy to give you a tour when you have time."

"I wish we could communicate with the 'thants. All of my encounters make me believe they are mindless robots."

"That might not be far off. They are a hive mind. That much we do understand. What does not fit, is that we have only seen one type of 'thant. Most ant colonies have several castes, workers, warriors, drone, and of course the queen. Nothing like that here."

"They may be more protective if a queen was on site. That might explain the difference."

"Or past experience with Hu and Di TKs. The Regional Center seemed to indicate other non earth cultures have problems. The library there never indicated anything but bad."

"More annoying than outright evil if I remember right."

"You could be right. Best not to jump to conclusions as the Hu say."

"We best be off then. Keep us informed if anything changes and we can arrive quickly to assist." She nods to us and we pop out.

Cat's World

"A Cat Box just arrived. The 'thants attacked Di Eden, lives lost. On Earth Two they are under protection of the Cats and seem to be helping them with irrigation and habitat restoration. On Ku Eden they are helping with sanitation. No one has seen anything but the small 'thants."

"How is Smith doing?"

"Woken up from a coma, but has no idea who he is and lacks all TK abilities."

"I was worried about that. Basically starting over. Has Silver and Turtle been called in? They may be able to help."

"Does not say, but I am sure they are trying. Jones appears to be going nuts. Best watch out for him. No one has gone rogue yet, but he came close with the magma bubble."

"He was lucky Smith was not still there. How is Edwin doing today?"

"Eats like a horse. He will strip the planet bare. I tried duped lichen, but he can tell the difference and refuses to touch it."

"Duped lichens lack a psiotic signature. Maybe he is eating the psi and not the material substance."

We both watch him. He makes all kinds of chattering sounds with his mandibles, but all attempts to TP with him do not make any sense. I am convinced he is sentient, but I have no proof he is. At least he appears to have gotten over the parasites and we have not seen any more evidence of them.

"This is new. It looks like he is writing something in the dust."

"I have to wonder if the limiters we have him on are affecting our ability to com with him."

"Duh. Puu, we need to take a chance. We are never going to find out if we don't. What was the point of my making this 'safe' place for otherwise?"

"Okay, Cat, but I want to be a click away when you remove the limiters. There is a chance we won't get both of us that way."

"Scaredy Cat. Go ahead." After checking my gold shield, I pop away.
I am alive! I am alive! I can feel again!

Come on back Puu, he is only a three. I am not convinced, but do anyway. At least it will be quick.

The cage is completely gone. Not sure I would have gone that far. Cat is sitting down in front of him.

What is your name? The 'thant stops what it is doing and faces Cat.

Knows where the TP is coming from.

*This unit is designated H4^vGx89c*9769okahbl0y6KBg8ymmnl,h.*

We have been calling you Edwin, after a famous ancestor of ours. Is it okay if we call you that?

I would be honored. Could you com this using normal channels of your kind?

I think he means speak Cat.

Cat points at me and says, "Puu" then herself, "Cat" and finally at him "Edwin".

He chatters for a bit, but using TP we know he is trying to vocalize the names we have given him. Going to take some practice.

Is there anything we can get you Edwin. We know you like to eat lichens, but know nothing else about you.

Please make soundings when com so I can learn. I am lichen expert first class. I study and classify what scouts bring back. If you have more kinds to classify. Best if I see where they grow.

"You want a tour. Okay, we can do that."

I interject, "This a low green world dominated by lichens. Even the one mobile form we call a sloth is essentially a lichen. Apparently they make nice pets. Their purpose in the ecology is to help spread the different kinds around."

That was a lot at once Puu, keep it simpler. He knows what a pet is?

Understood. He chitters at the same time. Not going to learn his language easily either.

"Edwin, you appear to be sentient. The workers we have seen and heard about are not."

Workers only do what set up to do. Minimal responses.

"Dumb as rocks then. Got it."

He pauses, *An apt comparison. Even a rock knows how to roll downhill.* Did he just make a joke?

We walk for kilometers at a slow pace. He 'tastes' all of the lichens we encounter. So many look alike, but he is apparently sensing a difference. He has pouches on the side of his abdomen that he occasionally stuffs some into.

While in route we learn a lot. They have encountered and classified thousands of worlds and cultures just in the time he remembers. Explains why he was not distressed to see us and interact with us.

"Okay, stop I have to know. Edwin why were you infected with dimensional parasites?"

To kill any TKs present on this world. I thought that was obvious. All

males who have had a chance at the mating are so honored in their deaths.

"But we are TKs. You wanted us dead?"

Personally, no. I did not know you. It is cultural as you say. All serve the colony. It is a simple way to remove those who could harm us when we encounter a suitable world to colonize.

"But even a simple beast can crush a worker 'thant."

One yes, simple. But millions at once? They can come out of every tunnel simultaneously. The TK killers are only deployed on worlds where they know TKs are present. Any world that has 'thn metal is my definition a TK world and marked for TK killers. I will not be the last.

"But all TKs know how to protect themselves from them. Simple actually. This knowledge is known at the regional galactic level at least."

Good to know, but the multiverse is vast and it is no longer my concern. I was free from all colony obligations when I arrived. You saved my life actually. Thank you.

"Okay, good I guess. The colony cannot expand forever though. The universe would eventually be all 'thant. What happens then?"

No one knows. We only know we need to expand. Most species follow this rule do they not?

"He has a point there Cat. We follow this rule."

"I want to know why you are sentient when the workers are not."

Workers do not need to be sentient to perform their tasks. Waste of resources. Takes more energy to maintain sentience. Less physical work can be accomplished. Males need to be sentient to help in logistics and to woe the queen of course. Workers are sterile. There are similarities to your ant, bee and termite life forms.

"None of those are here. How do you know about them?"

You are Hu are you not? Hu worlds have ants, bees and termites do they not? Or at least something similar to fill that ecological niche.

"You know about Hu. Have you been to our origin world?"

Personally no. Part of our training.

"Were you told about attacks on 'thant colonies on two of our worlds?"

Not colonies, outposts. Nothing but workers present. We were told to avoid these worlds. Pointless to put any more resources into these worlds. Other worlds have accepted our workers because they have proven mutually beneficial.

"We have asked a lot of questions. Do you have any questions of us?"

What is this world? It is not part of the normal progression. I was sent

partly because unknowns are dangerous and this location was considered very dangerous.

"Shit, what will happen next?"

They will send in scouts at some point to determine the TK status. Once they see you are still here they will seal this world off from all dimensions.

"They can do that? How?" Cat would be curious about that.

This is normally what happens. Not sure it would work here.

"Yes, Cat made this world the way it is. She placed it in this special place outside normal existence."

"The colony can do this to any world they don't like?"

We cannot do this. Our rulers determine when and if this happens.

"Okay, who are your rulers?"

He turns and looks at us, *Same as you of course, the 'thn overlords.*

"Ah, that explains a lot. We and the 'thn do not exactly see existence in the same way."

You disobey the overlords? He is visibly shaking.

Cat smiles with an evil grin, "We do not fear the 'thn. I know how to kill them."

That explains the attention they have give this world and the reason they do not come here themselves.

"Sounds like the gig is up Cat. The 'thn know where we are."

"The question is, are we safer here or back in the real multiverse?"

"As long as we are here and they know we are here they will keep trying different methods to remove us. I suspect that Edwin was only the first of many attempts."

"If we go back and spread the knowledge as far and wide as possible, it might save us."

"Or make a target of everyone else. Not what I intended."

Three Georges pop in, then two more, then two more.

Mistress, 'thants at the spheres.

Mistress, a 10x 'thant at sphere two.

"Shit, what is that? Edwin, what 'thant is ten times the size of a normal one?"

A warrior 'thant. High TK, ruthless, does not stop even when half dead. More coming. RUN!

"Edwin would you object to being an orphan?" Cat asks.

He looks at her clearly not comprehending. I feel a large earthquake.

"I made this world be where it is. I can move it too. Ah, just as I thought. It broke all the 'thant connections. I did not move that far, so all I

really did was buy some time. They will find us again shortly. Time to bug out, no offense to Edwin."

"Edwin, do you want to come with us or stay here with your kind?"

The warriors kill everything. No exceptions. Anything with TK dies.

"Except another warrior of course."

Even other warriors. They space out the arrivals so they do not immediately see each other. Gives them a chance to kill the threat before they self destruct. I have only witnessed it once. Required training. Scary, even for us.

"You certainly received a lot of training. You will have to tell us about it. I turn to Cat, your devices sent us to New Hope. If Jones is there he will freak out if he sees Edwin."

"Oh, we will not go to New Hope. Too obvious. I have another location in mind. None of this means anything if we don't get it beyond earth space. We will be destroyed and no one will know what we learned."

"Cat, just a crazy idea, but what would happen if we went to the Colony?"

Edwin, I would be killed on the spot for having failed my mission. You two would be the proof that they need. Then you two would be killed.

"He has a point Puu, as much as I would love to see their home world."

"How about this. You have closed the gates and we have only one warrior. You mean that two TK8s with all the advanced TK tech you have cannot take out one warrior." Edwin looks to Cat for an answer.

"I am calling in all the Georges and deleted the gates. Can't have more coming in without a lot of effort. That buys us a little more time."

Edwin, They are attracted to the 'thn metal, but do not need them to make a new gate. I do not understand your concept of time, so cannot tell you when they will arrive, only that they will.

"No more good kitty then." Cat sighs and suddenly hundreds of Georges appear.

"Are you going to talk it to death Cat? Georges can DS, can they bubble too?" She has to teach me how to make some of my own. I have got most of it, just can't figure out the personality programming.

"Oh, Rooi spheres. Yeah, that would be interesting. Last ditch effort though, most certainly lethal."

"Cat, you can't be serious about capturing one alive? That is insane."

I agree. Kill it before it kills us. Edwin is practically jumping up and down.

"The spheres are gone, except for the one with the warrior emerging."

"It is on the disk and seems frozen in place. The limiters worked on Edwin, should work on the warrior right?"

"Dissolving the sphere itself. Don't want more coming in."

The thing is huge. Many times the size of Edwin and armored up the wazoo. Even without TK, it could take out a Hu tank without thinking. I am sure the 'thn spikes could puncture most armor.

It is walking around the ring, sensing the edges, gold edges. Seems to be containing it for the moment.

"Recording it so others can recognize one if encountered."

I laugh, "Cat believe me, the oral description would be enough."

"It is stepping over the edge Cat, do something!"

"Kill your TK. It will be attracted to it."

I don't know how! Edwin exclaims. The warrior looks straight at him.

Cat reaches over and attaches a limiter. His TK light goes out.

"Spread out." We separate and walk about thirty meters to each side of Cat. The warrior is completely off the disk now. Waves of TK hate seem to emanate from it. I am sweating and sure we will die. We are all motionless.

A George pops in and immediately attracts the warrior's attention. Then several more pop in. Soon it is completely surrounded by them.

It DSs outside the sphere they have formed and starts attacking them.

I whisper in TP, *George to me now*. He appears next to me. Stay with me.

Yes Mistress.

There are bits of Georges all over the ground.

"I get it now. It is still only using a tiny portion of its resources. It will use more as the threat escalates. The brain portion is exceedingly tiny. Edwin is right. It is entirely devoted to destruction."

She sighs and waves her hand. The Georges go into attack mode and George size pieces of the warrior start appearing a few meters away from it at a huge rate. It is still trying to take them out and succeeds better than I would have thought.

"Down to ten percent of internal structure and it is still fighting. Edwin was right. Don't mess with them. Just kill them. Okay guys, finish it." A moment later they is nothing left but piles of bits on the ground.

I dissolve them all the same, first by converting to pure gold, then to pure helium. Not taking any chances. Cat looks at me and laughs.

Edwin is looking at us shaking.

"Relax Edwin, you are one of us now. We will not eat you just because some of your relatives are nasty."

You have saved my life twice. I do not understand.

"Sentient Cats call us 'stupid monkeys' maybe there is nothing to understand. Cat and I have gone through a lot of pain at the hands of others. We have vowed not to do the same to others unless provoked."

"A better question Edwin would be, why are you nice to us? We are your species' mortal enemy, yet you have never tried to attack us. Why not?"

To my kind I am dead, worse than dead. There is a death sentence on me by any who find me.

I shake my head, "That is really stupid. You now know more about some of the two top TKs of Hu kind than any other 'thant can know. If you reported back to 'thant headquarters your information would be worth a thousand warriors."

That is not the way we think. We are a very old species. We have worked out everything. No more of this knowledge is needed. Only action.

Both Cat and I laugh. So stupid. 'thants are worse than Hu.

"Shit Cat! It is reforming!"

All the spheres cut out of it are moving towards each other and joining up again.

"Bring Edwin back. We need to think."

I smile and DS him back in front of us.

Run, Run, Run! he keeps saying. Even the click language seems upset and loud.

I confront him head on, "Think Edwin. They must contain them on the other side of the portal. How do they do it."

"Good idea Puu, otherwise they will kill the entire colony without thinking."

War 'thants do not think, just kill. They are in cages.

I sigh, "What are the cages made of Edwin?"

He stops and thinks. *Bad tasting metal.*

"Like this?" I present him with a piece of gold.

YES, BAD METAL. Please do not make Edwin taste it.

Cat nods and surround the debris field with a gold sphere and then collapses it down to a smaller size.

"Might I suggest we do not leave it here. Would not want to find out they can eventually get of that." I reinforce it with spun diamond fabric.

Cat shrugs, "Up or down?"

"How fast can we get it to the sun here?"

She smiles, "A few seconds in dimension space Puu. You know that."

"Is it safe to do that given how hard they are trying to get us?"

A hoard of Georges surround the sphere and both disappear.

"Duh." Cat gives me a dirty look. She is not that stupid.

A minute later the Georges are back safe and sound.

"Now we need to clean up and remove all evidence we were here. Especially the portals. I can already sense activity in a few. They have found us again."

"Wonder what they were offered to delete us Cat." Not a question.

Earth Two

"Silver! Thank god you are here. How is Smith? What can I do. What do you need."

"Jones, we need to talk." He pops myself. Smith sitting a chair looks amused.

He leaves me lone with Smith for a moment.

"What's wrong? It is like there is no one home."

"Pretty close. His memory is gone. His basic personality is intact as this is largely genetic. He will not remember you or anyone else in our group. And before you ask, there is no way for him to ever have TK again."

"That narrows down the choices. I am staying with him of course. I will protect him. I can keep his body healthy and young. He can live a long life."

"Totally dependent on you. That is no life Jones. It would be hell in fact and you know it. I have another alternative. There will be no TK for either of you, but it will be a good life."

"I am listening. If I ever see Puu or Cat ever again, I will kill them you know."

"They are not responsible. If anyone is it is me. I let their experiments go on too long. I could have stopped it. Blame me, not them."

"They are adults, they have to take their licks too. Can't tell you how many times growing up with them I wanted to get them."

"Keep thinking that way Jones and this won't be a choice. Shake it off. If you accept, you will never see them again. They will never interfere with either of your lives. You will live a long time, by non-TK standards. Your only responsibilities will be to those around you."

"Okay, out with it. What are you proposing? Smith and Jones slime molds?"

He looks at me confused, "You know about slime molds? Never found in the desert."

"Tons of them in the tropics remember."

"No slime molds. I can tell you or show you."

"Best if you show me so I have less time to think about it." I grab Smith by the arm and bring him to a standing position. "Ready."

New Hope

Request permission to land.

What the fuck?

Who are you?

There are three of us in stationary orbit above you. Under limited TK to avoid detection.

You nailed that. WHO ARE YOU?

Puu, Cat and a new friend.

Why are you asking permission? Of course you can come in. I will tell the others and we will be waiting for you.

Any 'thants, parasites or 'thn on New Hope?

Have not seen a 'thn since Owl and Turtle had Br'thn and Pr'thn with them briefly. That must have been a thousand years ago or so. Hopi time is not so precise. The 'thants were all taken out by Jones after they got Smith. That was months ago and boy have we been watching. Nothing coming back. Just in case we overlaid the lava with a knuckle worth of gold. Way overkill, but we did it to keep Jones from going off again.

Add a layer of quantum carbon to both sides of the gold.

Gee I thought Jones was crazy. What do you know?

Better to show you. This is important. We are bringing in a friend. DO NOT ATTACK.

Got it. Will let you know when we assembled.

Yeah, that could take a few seconds to a few hours depending what everyone is up to.

"Where's Mike and what's up?"

"Find him please."

"Got him. He was snooping in Cat space and got stuck in a Cat Trap."

His head is held low as he comes in. Nothing needs to be said. We all know better, but she was amazingly crafty at hiding those damn things.

"Clear a space in our meeting circle." We spread out evenly spaced. Myself, Mike, Tia, Sam, and fortunately Squeak is here giving us an update. I think she needed a break from being a fancy admin now. Not so easy on the other side of the maturity curve. We talked a lot, which was surprising as we were not that close before. The others are not so much into keeping things organized outside their own spaces.

Come on down. We are all here.

They appear all facing outward.

"Holy Shit is that a 'thant? They get that big? What do we do?"

"Do not hurt Edwin. Friend! Got it? Friend. He will not hurt anyone. His is not a fighter, more an intellectual actually."

"Not eat Squeak?"

Cat rushes up to Squeak to give her a hug. Squeak steps back. Not so sure about affection any more.

"Squeak, it is me, Cat, you mother? Am I that different?"

"No Cat, but she is. Squeak is a full professor and part of the Di-Eden governing council. Hero of the 'thant war."

Puu comes in, "Oh, sorry. I remember the cat box saying all that. Edwin is different. What you fought were workers. Easy to kill compared to their War 'thants. Those are really nasty. Edwin is a male drone. Like in ant and bee colonies bred to mate with a queen, but as they are the most heavily trained in order to prove their worth, they also do most of the background admin work, historians, biologists, etc. Edwin is a lichenologist. A lot of them can use lichen as a food stock. Guess because they are so ubiquitous on our worlds."

A few dozen small spheres appear, shiny golden sort of. Hard to describe.

One comes forward, *All clear Mistresses. No 'thants, 'thn or parasites detected.*

A chittering comes from Edwin which sets everyone on edge.

Sorry, it is not possible for my body to produce your sounds. So, TP okay? Thank you for not killing this worthless one.

"Don't believe him. He is a gold mine. Yes, at least some of the 'thants are sentient. The workers are dumb as door nails. The Warrior only know kill anything that moves. Here, I brought a holo of the one we killed."

A HUGE heavily armored 'thant at least five meters high, not even standing up appears. It looks like the worst nightmare of all time. Several people draw in breath, Squeak growls.

"Squeak if you ever get this close to one, you are already dead. You cannot fight these alone."

"Cat sic'd the Georges on it to Rooi sphere the hell out of it. You would think that was enough. A few minutes later it started to reassemble itself. We converted it to gold carbon quantum form and sent it at 10 light speed to the sun."

"We need to get this information out to the others. ASAP."

"We have received reports of worlds where the 'thants are helping and not hurting anyone."

Edwin comes in, *This is the preferred arrangement. We are an old species and very patient. We will defend ourselves. Remember the work-*

ers are really stupid. Puu called them robots with no AI. You will need to show me one so I understand.

"And the War 'thants?"

You are correct in your assessment that we work under the 'thn. I thought everyone did until I met Puu and Cat. Parasites are tried first as these are the least destructive. War 'thants if that fails as a last resort.

"Excess males are used to deliver the parasite load, a pregnant female carrying a least a hundred offspring."

"That is how we came to meet Edwin. The traps Cat set up killed the TK connection fast enough that he was not destroyed by it. If we had gotten to Smith fast enough we could have saved him as well. We are talking less than a minute though. Speaking of which were is Jones?"

"Long story, but he is with Smith, yes, Smith was found, brain wiped. They are no longer TKs. we are forbidden to try and find them. Owl and Turtle REALLY mean this. Just know they are okay and happy. Best thing for both of them. Jones was really close to going rogue. He knew it too and accepted his fate."

"We are really rude. Bet you have had nothing but sap chow for years."

"Years, ha! Try hundreds of years. Cat made her world so hidden it was in it's own time zone. Can Edwin go looking for lichens?"

"Have you forgotten the local wildlife Puu? We have been holding them off, but out of sight they will eventually find a way to get to him."

Puu turns to Edwin and TPs something. He starts looking around rapidly.

I laugh, "Definitely not a warrior ant. Relax everyone. This is going to take some time."

"What about the execution order on Puu and presumably Cat as well?"

Cat smiles an evil grin. "Oh, I am ready for them. Let them try. Would be fun for me. Very bad for them."

"She is not kidding. I have been learning her tech. Almost succeeded at making my own George. Last one lasted almost an hour." She smiles.

"You made those things? They sort of look like 'thn, but no 'thn metal, just gold carbon."

"She has hundreds of those things. Spread all over New Hope currently. An early warning system. Nothing sneaks up on us any more. Only TK4 so will never be a threat themselves. Oh, remember what happened at the Center when I pressed the 'button', well they have that too."

I laugh, "We are not prey!" Everyone joins in, even Edwin. He certainly got the raw end of the deal.

What happened at the Center? Edwin asks us.

Earth Two

"Hey guys a Cat Box as arrived."

"Be right up."

I think Onri does better with more sunlight. Being inside is not good for her. She seems to like the window sill, which I have made larger. Room for water and some nice crunchy lichens. If she eats more of the orange ones he will turn orange herself. Best to leave those as treats.

I know there is no one home in Onri. Basically a bag of lichen mush. Still, she was with me in my time of need. I will not abandon her now.

I so much want to push the button. You have to be at least a TK4 to activate it. I recently turned four, but still shaky in my abilities.

Smudge yawns and rolls over. He sure sleeps a lot. At least his weight is good now. He has a collar on so the locals know he is a kept Cat and not feral and dangerous. He really hated that till Rand offered to make it a limiter collar. Don't mess with the nines kitty.

"Okay, open her up Myra." Rand and Drup have arrived.

It is not just the obvious button on the top, but some very tiny switches underneath that have to all be done at the same time. Believe me, I have the pattern burned into my brain waiting for them. Early boxes did not have this, but there was a danger someone not of our group would steal a box when we were out.

"Okay, here goes." I press the button and activate the micro switches in the order I was taught. The lid pops open and I look inside.

"Nothing! I'm so sorry. I must have done something wrong. Now we will never know."

"I don't think so Myra. This box is different. We both watched what you did and you were perfect."

The box suddenly pops out.

"That's weird. Why make an empty message box and when opened, it disappears?"

Everyone waits for me to go on. Smudge snores. Think, it takes a TK4 at least who knows the proper sequence to open it.

"It was not a Cat Box, but a Cat Back. It just reported back that at least one knowledgeable TK is currently present."

A knock at our door. I nearly jump out of my skin. The residents know better than to disturb us in a meeting up here. I look to the others, but everyone is confused too. I scan the other side of the door.

"What the hell is that thing?"

My name is Edwin mistress Myra. May I come in?

"Back me up you two. I am opening the door. It knows my name."
And is polite. I am a sucker for beings being polite.

I open the door slowly and back out of the way. A very large ant like creature comes in. It is nicely dressed in a suit of some kind and a proper top hat which it removes and bows to me.

"You are so cute! Please come in."

"You realize what he is Myra?" Drup asks.

"You mean the fact that Edwin is a male 'thant? Of course. The males are not warriors. Would even make Smudge look courageous. Look at those mandibles. Tiny. Didn't you read any of the last three boxes?"

"Myra, you are one very hard TK to punk. Most would have hit the ceiling or be on the way to the equator by now."

A male Hu in white robes appears at the door.

"Are you satisfied now?" Clearly talking to Rand and Drup. They sigh and nod.

"Come in Silver. Can I get you anything to eat or drink after your journey?"

He smiles, "More are due here in a moment. Best to wait for everyone." He moves away from the door and sure enough I hear foot steps coming up the stairs. Two fem.

My mouth falls open and I start crying my eyes out.

"Puu, Cat! You're alive!" I run to them hugging them furiously, making a total fool of myself, till I see tears in their eyes too. More hugs ensue.

Edwin is curious about Smudge, until Smudge hisses and swats at Edwin, which causes him to jump into the air and out of range. Good reflexes.

"Friend! Do Not Eat. You know about 'thants. Don't mess with them Smudge." Cats can be so annoying. Only reason Onri is still alive is I am sure he tastes horrible.

"Not everyone in this room is invited. I will remove those who are to a new location where the rest are waiting." Drup bows to Silver and sits down. What me? I am nobody. I rush over to grab Onri. Now I am getting scared.

Cat World

We are back on what looks like Cat World, but given my understanding of the multiverse, it could just be a nearby one. There are lichen trees scattered about. Even a few sloths about. I let Onri go in the nearest tree. He has a collar, so I will know which one is him. He has to be happier being home.

Edwin is very nervous. This is where he nearly died twice. Facing both of your lifelong nightmares in a short time has to have really messed with him.

"The others will be here in a moment." Not that I could do anything about it. I have to be the weakest TK here and the most expendable. Edwin would be next weakest is my guess, not that he needs any more reasons to be afraid.

Rand comes up to me, "How are you doing?" He gives me a hug and I settle down some.

"I worry about Edwin. I assume you know why we are here." He nods and smiles.

"With 'thants, nothing is short term. Time will settle him. A few thousand years should do it."

"Now you are just being silly."

"Actually not. You read the reports right?" He knows I did and was the only one of our group to do so thoroughly.

"Why are Drup and Smudge not here too?"

"Oh, the thought of Smudge or any Cat being ready for this is amazingly funny. Nope, not going to happen. Too much into themselves. Drup is holding down things while we are here. He really likes Crab Cove and so I was elected to accompany you."

"You make it sound like we will be here forever."

"Not quite. Here comes the few remaining ones."

Squeak and White I recognize. I am guessing the one in the air car is Ron. Two meters at least and very thin.

Squeak runs up to Puu and Cat and jumps around them all excited. So much for the dignity of the mature ones. I smile. Ron goes up to Silver and Turtle to talk.

There is nothing around us that I can scan, ten kilometers out. Just lichens of all kinds. My guess is this is not the final location. I gather up Onri again, but Rand tells me without words that Onri needs to stay where he is. I remove the collar and Rand nods. Good luck Onri. Have a

good life. At least you are home. There are tears in my eyes. Time to grow up Myra. Not sure I want to. I was finally getting used to running the library and dealing with all the local characters. Some of them were out there.

"Attention. We are ready to begin." Without thinking we gather around in a more or less circle. Edwin is next to me followed by Puu and Cat. On my right is Rand, White, Squeak and finally Ron. Turtle and Silver are in the center. Edwin is still wearing his top hat and suit. So cute. I smile. Maybe he will be my new best friend.

"We have two groups, sponsors and initiates. After a brief orientation and training period there will only be equals. No chiefs, leaders, authority, whatever."

"But you are still the top TK right?" Rand asks.

He smiles, "Turtle could beat me any time, she is just less overt in her work. And from what I have seen Puu and Cat could take on anyone in the multiverse." That gets a groan from Puu and a smile from Cat. I have seen that smile on a Cat before, oh yeah, like Smudge just before he pounces.

"This is not about power. We REALLY need to work together as a team. You might have noticed that not every TK you know now is present. We are a select group chosen for what talents are needed and the ability of each of us to work as a team. Admittedly that will probably be hardest for me. I do have a tendency of being a lone owl." Everyone pretends to be shocked and then laughs.

"We all have to LISTEN to each other. Especially if we do not agree with the other. They have a gem of wisdom we need. Pay attention to them. We will work by consensus. We have time, but little room for error. We need to get things right the first time and it has to work for a very long time. Okay, why are YOU here?" He gives the floor to Turtle.

"Owl has had thousands of years and many incarnations to learn and teach others what he knows about TKness. But, only teaching a few things to a few people." She squeezes her fingers together to indicate how small. That gets everyone laughing again.

"I don't think Edwin is getting this." He looks agitated. Silver and Turtle stop and look at Edwin.

Puu states, "His culture does not have humor. We are trying to teach him. Cat and I will try and offer hints as we go along. None of the humor is technically important except to make us vertebrates more comfortable."

"Ooooooh!" comes back from the rest. We are getting a little punchy. Nervous as a cat in a rain storm.

"Don't worry Edwin. I will help protect you as well."

He looks up at me and then bows, removing his hat when he does so. So cute. I am falling in love.

"Ah hum. For those who do not know him personally, Ron, our token Martian is a total wiz and expert on sustainable urban planning. We seriously need his help here and on the locations we go to. It was a unanimous decision for him to be included. He is also an expert at running consensus meetings. There are no leaders outside of temporarily elected ones at the village level. There is no honor or reward at being chosen, but a huge amount of responsibility." Ron bows to the rest of us. I did not know all that. Sounds like a good choice.

Silver laughs, "Puu and Cat are sponsored by Turtle and myself respectively. I can't imagine breaking up this pair. And I want them on my side, not working against us, even if not intentionally."

"Collar, collar, collar!" Cat hisses and pretends to bat us before laughing herself.

White steps forward. He is in his full Di form now.

"Squeak is my candidate. Fearless, smart as hell, very quick learner. During trouble, she is the one you want next to you without question. From the Di equivalent of a pest species raised by Cat and later others, in the short time I have known her, which is her entire life, I have never met anyone of any species who has achieved so much. Besides just being a really nice person."

"Ahhh!" This is getting to be funny. Two of us left.

Rand steps up, shit I am next. I am so embarrassed and turning red all over. I first instinct is to run as fast as I can. Surprisingly it is Edwin who places a leg on me looking up.

"Just wait until it is your turn Edwin. We support each other."

Rand comments, "Could not have stated it better. Myra just said 'we support each other'. That could easily be our mission statement. From galley slave on her mother's ship to the most insightful person I have ever met. And I have been around a long time. She gets to the heart of the problem or understanding in the clearest most obvious ways that still astounds me and others. She is currently the weakest of TKs present but could run circles around all of us in a new social situation. For what we are going to be doing, this is an essential skill."

"Welcome Myra!" The rest clap. I am crying again. Shit. I should be made of harder stuff than that. Edwin and I are holding each other close. His turn now.

"Shit, what the hell is she doing here? Silver, you gave away our loca-

tion! How could you."

"Cool your hackles Cat. She has been invited and is the sponsor for our last candidate. You may have noticed that each candidate was represented by a similar species sponsor. We could not exactly invite a queen could we?"

"Looks can be deceiving. She is not here as a representative of the 'thn collective."

Rand is shocked, "Didn't I tell you? Amazing."

Silver and Turtle bow to Qr'thn, who dips in kind. She comes up to Edwin and me. I am not sure what to do. I have never met a 'thn this large before.

"Your majesty." I finally say.

I will not eat you Myra. I am on your side. The side of all of you. There is a fracture in the 'thn structure that threatens the multiverse. You have been chosen to help figure this out and help repair it if possible.

"No sweat. Done by this afternoon." Hysterical laughter. Qr'thn ignores Ron. It is Cat I worry about.

Given what you have learned, are there any present, given the right tools, who could not take down a Regional 'thn overlord, if needed?

"Wow, that is intense. We are 'thn hunters now?"

I am asking if you could do it if needed.

We all sigh collectively and acknowledge in the way of each kind.

She goes up to Turtle and Silver, *Good. They will do. Proceed as necessary.* She pops out.

"At the moment, Qr'thn is the ONLY 'thn you trust. Got that? The ONLY one. Not even the baby 'thn or the newly sentient can be trusted. The infection is not easy to diagnose. We will work on this collectively. Till then, only trust Qr'thn as you would us." She is looking straight at Cat when she says this.

Cat sighs and acknowledges, "Fine, but I don't like it."

"What about Edwin?"

"Qr'thn sponsors Edwin. Edwin is extremely special and we are amazing lucky you are here Edwin. The 'thants have been around in some form since nearly the beginning of the multiverse. Edwin is the first male separated from the colony that has survived. As you have seen their normal fate is a parasite or warrior chow without exception. Even the ones who have successfully proven themselves and mated with a queen are discarded afterwards."

"I have a question, how old are you Edwin?" We all turn to look at him.

Adjusting to your time reference.

One thousand six hundred and fifty two point three one eight approximately.

"Days?"

Decades.

"Over sixteen thousand years old. Amazing." Puu had never asked that question before?

"To finish, Edwin knows personally of tens of thousands of cultures/species/worlds and through records a hundred thousand more. He is a walking library. He will not go on field trips. His loss would be extremely heavy. His life is more important than any of ours. Period."

"Welcome Edwin and thank you." I bow to him.

Squeak comes up to him, bows, "I have fought 'thant in the Di 'thant war on Di Eden. Know that I will defend you with my life." Edwin reaches out a front leg and places it on Squeak, who is fortunately not wearing armor at the moment. I have to stop crying.

"Sounds like we could use millions more of us." White comments.

"Don't think for a moment we are the only group. Just the only earth based group. The multiverse is a huge place. A very large percentage of which will never know of us or any of the other groups."

Turtle comes in, "Smaller groups are less noticeable. Can be move discreetly. The changes we initiate may not bear fruit for thousands of years. This group," she waves her hand over all of us, "was conceived thousands of years ago when Qr'thn approached Owl and raised him to TK8, followed almost immediately afterwards by myself. We have seen what the 'thn are willing to do. Silver and Rand, along with a few others successfully escaped Farout. The 'thn thought this was impossible. Unfortunately, this also put us under their constant gaze."

"Thanks to Cat we now have ways to avoid their detection."

"And defend ourselves."

"'thn influence in a culture can be very subtle and not always easy to detect when it has turned dark. It took Sauron millions of years to raise the very nasty species you all know as Hu. Fortunately he was defeated before he could finish." *What would we have become if he had?*

Think of your mother in the billions. It was that close.

"It is time to eat. Time to rest and think. Time to start setting up our space here. For the record, we have moved Cat World to a new location, pocket, just to be sure. ONLY Qr'thn knows how to get here and she keeps that information hidden from herself even, in case she is questioned."

"We need a different name for this world now." I suggest.

They all turn to me.

"Fine, this is our world now, not just Cat's world, how about Sanctuary."

"Works for me. We can always change it later." Everyone seems to be in agreement. I don't for a moment believe all decisions will go that easily.

What is Sanctuary? Edwin asks me.

"Safe Place."

I like that. Good idea. Safe Place. He bends down and wipes the sand in front of him. It becomes a solid slab.

I bend down next to him and do the same. Being TK4 it is not that hard. He watches me, then continues. He writes something with his mandible. The rock hisses as if hit by hot acid. I cannot make 'thn metal, but have seen enough to recognize he is writing with raised 'thn metal.

"Cool" I write Sanctuary in Standard on my slab. He seems pleased.

We are official now.

There is a pattern to the way he clicks. I bet it does not take me long to understand him even without TP.

"Hey, look at what these two have done." Puu calls everyone over.

"A plaque recognizing our new status. What does the second one say?"

I answer in 'thant as best I can. That really sets Edwin off. He is all over me petting me. Gee if I knew it was that easy to make him happy.

"What did you do Myra?" Rand asks.

"I said safe place in 'thant. Their word for Sanctuary. Not that hard really. Pay more attention." White laughs and pushes Rand gently. This gets the others laughing too.

Edwin is confused. I am beginning to read his emotions as well.

"It's okay Edwin, they are just happy that I spoke one word in 'thant. Hopefully you understood me."

Understood. You okay.

"I want to learn much more."

He does his best to bow to me.

"I am glad you feel that way Myra. You, Ron and Edwin are a team to begin with. Your primary task for now is information storage."

I sigh, "Yeah, a library. Got it." Rand smiles. Just when I thought I was getting out of the old farts making academic jokes.

"To finish the thought. You each have experiences that will complement each other. We leave it to you to figure out how to put all of this to-

gether."

Turtle then turns to the other new ones, "Puu, Cat and Squeak you are assigned TK tech. You need to build a center a safe distance away in case an experiment goes awry. Think: defense, offense and information gathering."

"Both groups. Make is simple, practical, flexible." My head spins, is that all? "Oh and multi species. Not just for Hu."

"Will we be adding members then?" I ask. Hey, if I am going to get into trouble, might as well go all in.

Silver smiles, "Eventually. We will largely have temporary groups depending on immediate needs. Do not feel sorry for those not chosen. They are needed where they are and we will call on them if need arises."

"I have a question." They sigh and turn towards me. May be wearing out my welcome. But it was not me, but Ron who asked.

"Shouldn't tech also have a useful category? Sounds too militaristic at the moment."

"Information gathering covers that. We will need to be able to trade 'gifts' at times to show our benefit to a group. Being TK makes you too self reliant, but we can't be everywhere for everyone. So, yes, being useful is a given, but you may be right in understanding from the beginning it is part of our purpose." Thanks Ron. I nod to him.

You do not already have TK methods worked out? Edwin asks me.

I hold up a Cat stone and whisper. "This can take out seven regional 'thn at once. Is this something you already have?"

He looks shocked, *No, nothing like that.*

"Well, it is only the beginning. Silver can go from one end of the multiverse to the other in a fraction of a moment."

I am not worthy. I am not worthy. He scrunches down in the sand.

"Myra, did you break the 'thant?" Rand asks.

I sigh and lift Edwin up by a front leg carefully. He looks fragile.

"You are definitely worthy. We are all very happy you are with us Edwin. If anything I am the weakest one here and no one has asked me to leave."

"Yet." Everyone laughs.

"Hey, I am having a hard enough time trying to explain our behaviors to him. Sarcasm is not an easy concept for an ancient culture to grasp. Cool it!"

"There is work to do. Best if everyone gets to it, ah, after eating of course."

Turtle shows up, sets up tables, including an Edwin size one with a

bowl of fresh lichens. Food appears. No ceremony. I TK Edwin to his spot and upon seeing everyone else eating he does too.

Rand asks me, "Are you going to make a carry net for Edwin now?" He is smiling so I come back with, "No, is White going to make one to carry you with?" Looking as innocent as I can. White nearly doubles over and then starts to make a net from a rope like material.

"Okay, I get the message, stop teasing the Myra."

"And the 'thant, who is many times your age baby Hu." White comes in with.

"Maybe Drup would have been better here."

Sounds of "Yep, maybe he has a point. We can still call Drup in can't we?"

"Ha-ha!" I poke him in the ribs and he pokes me back. Still a kid. Men. Sigh

Library Meeting

The others leave the three of us alone. We are SO different. I am not sure what is supposed to happen. A Martian, a 'thant and a fem Hu. It is amazing actually none of us have to wear a spacesuit or something just to survive in the same space. Too hot for Ron, too cool for me, too sunny for Edwin.

Edwin keeps looking up suddenly and is getting really nervous, running around in circles.

Something needs to be done soon. Both Ron and Edwin are used to SLOW time decision making. I don't think Ron even wants to be here. Edwin is happy to be alive. I am along for the ride, always willing to help. Sigh

"Okay, I do not have TP. Please use TP when talking. I will continue to use Standard, but you are free to pick up my thoughts." They both stare at me.

"I know I am the youngest and have no right to speak, but we need to get something started. Edwin needs shelter. He is used to being underground, out of sight, protected. Ron, I suspect you would also prefer to be inside. I imagine being outside on Mars is not a normal activity. I am not talking a full on LIBRARY yet. There are only ten of us at the moment. Let's start with that. Shelter, food, waste, study areas, maybe some private space for the Hu as they seem to need that."

Ron nods and structures start to appear around us. We end up in a courtyard surrounded by structures of varying sizes, but all large enough for him to walk in and stand up still.

"Edwin does not need to prepare his food, but he needs to find it. Maybe a tunnel system branching out from here he can learn to get to various fields of lichens without being outside much." Ron nods and a tunnel entrance appears next to us. Edwin is curious and very happy to get out of the sun. He immediately goes inside, comes back out to see we see him, then disappears again. One is happy.

I walk through some of the entrances and see the kitchens, table areas with different height tables. Shelves to store books or objects. More like stacks of cubicles. The library will not be big to start. What knowledge we will need is still to be determined. Ron goes into one of the taller structures. I follow him to see what it looks like. Everything is up and down, like it has been stretched out. To each his own. This is clearly his area. Still normal gravity. I wonder if tech can do something there. Have

to remember to ask. There is even a 'thant tunnel entrance on one wall. Good idea. Edwin can get around in his own way to interact with anyone.

I leave to go visit the Hu areas and notice one building with HUGE entrances. Ah, the Di area. Is Library coming here? Or will he visit her once in a while? Do we trust either of them? Granted Library seems okay. but I have seen enough hidden agendas onboard ships to not trust everything at surface level. Be careful.

I find an area to my liking and stake it out. At TK4 I can make some things for myself now. Granted not as fast as Ron just did, but he is a nine and used to designing and building settlements. I miss Onri, but know better to pick up another one at random. It really was not fair to her. I am not a little girl any longer. Need to accept that.

I make storage areas and some clothes of course. Washing and drying items. I know most will just use TK and not bother, but I still like the routines. A water pitcher, cup and bowl.

Kitchen. Edwin is self sufficient and everyone but me really is, but I have noticed that everyone likes to eat in common and have the opportunity to discuss what is on their minds. Next to a large table in an open area I make more bowls, utensils, pitchers, etc. Dining done.

There is a kitchen area. I am assuming it is a kitchen area. May need Ron's help to understand some of the artifacts. Is this a stove? Do Martians even use stoves and ovens? Nothing to burn as wood that I can see. Is the oxygen level high enough to support burning? How about solar. I remember flat lenses that can concentrate heat enough to do the job. Which would not work inside dumb dumb.

Back outside I do see a few structures that look sort of like fire pits, but with huge lenses at an angle to them. Why so big? Oh yea, Mars is further away. May not need to be this large here? Maybe for large pots?

I can hear running water and decide to check that out. Close by at least. Should have thought about that before setting up, but I lucked out so I will take it.

I clear a path to a flat area near the stream and a large pool. Make steps as needed. Some shade from the lichen trees, but maybe some umbrellas too. It does not get that windy here if I remember, except in some of the canyons. Should be okay then. Wish I could see further out to know where exactly we are in respect to other land marks.

I hear some movement in the side of the hill near me and turn just in time to see Edwin coming out of a fresh borrow.

"Perfect Edwin. Good job. This is starting to look ready to move in and begin out work."

What is our work? He looks up at me.

"Well, we are not warriors or scientists. My guess is we will be the ones sorting and cataloging information as it comes in. Your own knowledge of other cultures will be invaluable. You need to teach me how to read 'thant. Oh, and of course more about your own culture. For instance, how many castes are there? Our earth related species of ant have workers, scouts, drones such as yourself, warriors and of course the queen."

He looks at me.

Five hundred and forty six, depending on how you organize them. There is some overlap depending on the area they are working and tasks expected. It is a complex society, but everyone knows their role and place, so it is easy to negotiate.

"Do other castes also talk to each other?"

Each caste has a caste language as well as universal. I believe you use the term vocabulary. Each caste has need of different vocabulary to do their tasks. Males are expected to learn all vocabularies and variations so we can converse with anyone. I am happy to be assigned to the 'library' as this was my main task in the colony also. I will set about organizing areas of relevance. I will teach you written form as we label each area of need.

"Not everyone may agree with your organization."

We have been doing this for thirteen billion years. Any knowledge required will be a subset of this knowledge.

I suck in air, "Yeah, that makes sense. Feeling like my head will get very large learning all the new things I will need to know."

"How do you remember so much information? Granted a lot of information can be stored in your 'thn metal quantum foam, but you are not infinite."

Alas, no. We are expected to be able to do a presentable job of expressing most knowledge. I could not build some of the more complicated devices and structures myself, but I understand basic principles.

"More important. Have you made a nest for yourself that you will feel comfortable in?"

Oh yes, including chambers where the lichen can ferment to perfection. I am very happy now I am underground. I believe I am supposed to say thank you.

"Yes, that is the proper response to a kindness shown to you."

Not necessary in the colony. Interesting concept. Different forms are practiced by primitive cultures trying to avoid internal conflict.

"There is no conflict? How about when two queens disagree?"

The multiverse is large. We can exist in most locations. One of the two will move to a new location.

"There have been times in Hu history where that was possible for us as well. Eventually the two new cultures do meet again. Not always good."

Same is true for us. Warriors are designed to kill everything as this is sometimes necessary. When two conflicting 'thant lines cross, both suffer until sufficient space is made to keep them separate again.

"Ouch. A lot of death."

Yes.

When we get back to the library itself the others are waiting. Ron has come out of his shell even. Granted he did a lot initially, but once the large structures were complete he disappeared into his new rooms. Likes quiet time is my guess.

I point back to where we have come from, "Stream with bathing pool and picnic table meeting space a hundred or so meters that way. With Ron's help, Edwin has set up his tunnel network. I will leave it to all of you to make some foods for the kitchen. Please, anything but sap chow."

That gets a laugh. Rand pulls some out of his cloak and gnaws on it making as much noise as he can.

"The chocolate flavor is not that bad." he comments. I know there is no chocolate flavor.

White walks behind Puu and Cat who come in together.

"These two are major scary. Glad they are on our side."

Puu gives an evil grin as asks, "Are we? Are you sure?" Evil laugh that sets off everyone else again.

I don't really know Turtle, but I ask her, "Is it always this way?"

She sighs, "Pretty much. It is stressful working at this level. Lots of room for mistakes that can not be fixed and can have long term consequences."

"Thanks for those depressing thoughts. I am ready for the 'nap' I guess. It has only been two days since I became a four. Isn't this happening a bit fast?"

"We can do one update a day if necessary. It gets easier with the higher ones. The first thing you will notice is the increased range for abilities you already have. You also have the list of what happens to Hu, so you know what to expect and look for. Besides, lots of nines around to help you too. I am not saying it is fun, but you will do fine."

"As long as I don't become another Cat."

She smiles, "Oh I doubt we have to worry about that. She is definitely

one of a kind."

"What about the danger of going rogue?"

"A, the fact you worry about it means it is highly unlikely. B, usually happens at TK3 and you are already a four. So, relax. Which room is yours? It will insure a little privacy while you are out."

"Thanks I appreciate that. I trust everyone here, but pranks are still a possibility. Oh, Edwin will not understand being pranked and likely to freak. He really should be off limits. They really do not have the humor gene."

"Got it. Good to know. I will tell the others. He can be with you if you wish, as I said, he is unlikely to be affected. Too different. They are pretty much what they will be once they come out of pupation."

"That makes sense, from the perspective of the colony. No surprises."

She nods. We have reached what I have claimed as my space and I lay down.

When I wake Edwin is on the floor near me and there is a plate of chocolate on the stand near me. I instantly claim the chocolate and wolf it down. At the last piece I offer it to Edwin.

"Not sure you can even taste this if it is okay for you to eat, but you are welcome to the last piece."

Turtle gave me some while you were asleep. No ill effects, but I prefer lichen.

"Why do you like lichens so much. Surely they are not on your home world?"

Each of us is assigned a specialty knowledge. As lichens are found on almost all earth worlds, I was assigned them. You can tell a lot about a world by its simpler life forms. A good scout can bring back a few samples and I can tell those who need to know what level the world it is and what to expect. For instance, the world you came from, I believe you call it earth two, lichens went through a rough time where most species disappeared. Only the strongest survived, but are starting to diversify again.

"That matches what I know of the world. It used to be a high tech world, but a strong plague killed off most of the dominant Hu on Earth One and a series of volcanic cataclysms on Earth Two. With them gone, the pollution that was killing the lichens ended. It has been nearly two thousand years since then and most of the pollution is gone. Oh and tech is purposely low now."

It is better, but still much damage. Most disturbing. How do you feel?

"Oh, sorry, I forgot why I am here. Hmm, a TK5 Hu can repair damage to oneself and others. TK5 is the life healing level for us." I take out a

knife and purposely cut myself.

May I taste the fluid?

"My blood? Of course." I offer my hand and he licks up a few drops. I will admit, having a new friend I can actually talk with is better, as much as I enjoyed being around Onri.

I concentrate on the wound and it heals before my eyes. Amazing. Of course this is just a simple cut, but already it would be hard to see it ever happened. Edwin watches the process.

He then bites off a foot!

"Edwin, I don't know how to heal a 'thant!"

He hands me the foot to examine. He then begins to push a new foot out from the wound until it is a direct perfect copy of what was lost.

"Okay, then you can heal yourself too. Good to know. No one here will intentionally hurt you, but accidents can still happen. Are you like the war 'thants and can reassemble yourself from pieces?"

He shakes, *No, only war 'thants can do this, but not infinite. Even they have limits.*

"But everyone else is usually dead at that point. So, what happens when a war 'thant runs out of creatures to kill?"

Oh, they kill each other until there is only one. Then it goes into a stasis state to wait.

"Scary."

Yes.

"Can they reproduce themselves?"

No.

"One of life's mercies. God help us if they ever figure that out."

Cannot build portals either, nor make 'thn metal. They have limits.

"How do you feel being among us Edwin? This has to be very strange."

I should tell you my story. It is not as strange as you might think.

"We should wait for the others. Everyone will want to hear your story I am sure. Thank you Edwin for being a friend and sharing with me."

Edwin's Tale

I am very nervous. It is not our way to transmit information to a large group of 'thants at once. We normally do so one on one as needed with no formality or set timing.

"No one will bite you Edwin. You are safe here. We will likely just ask questions. I am sure there is much we will not understand. Also unlikely this is the one and only time you will talk to one or more of us. Don't worry if you forget to tell us something. We understand you are not up on our culture either." Myra is my closest companion. I appreciate her help. I was never alone in the nest.

Actually I know quite a bit about your culture. Before there were TKs on your earths we could come and go without notice and did so. We keep scouts at most locations where tech cultures could develop.

"Or any other threats to the colony. That makes sense. We would do the same." Rand states. He likes to 'tease' others. I have to be careful around him. A lot of what he says has double meanings. Not used to that.

We do not become conscious until eclosion, when we come out of the pupal case. Your insects were actually patterned on our own life cycle. It made sense to set up something similar when it became obvious that your world would eventually develop intelligent beings. We can read their information, albeit not as well as from one of our actual scouts.

"Wait, bugs are spying on us?" Rand again.

"There are no bugs here on Sanctuary. Relax." Myra of course.

Silver sighs, "All creatures spy on each other. Part of what it means to be part of an eco system. They have to be able to react to changes, same as everyone. No need to get paranoid."

We do not like surprises. Part of this is because we are such an old culture. Most things have happened before at some other place and time.

"If it quacks like a duck and walks like a duck, it probably is a duck."

"Edwin has no idea what a duck is."

Turtle, "Ssssh. Let him speak." Thank you Turtle.

When I came out of the pupal case I was taken care of by nurse 'thants, fed, fitted with a tool belt, taken to the library to begin my training. We are pre programmed to understand our language, visual, audio and pheromonal. I immediately began my work and was assigned to learn as much about lichens as possible. Of course we are also given a general education in likely cultures we may encounter in our studies. That will likely be the most useful to you here.

"And the 'thant culture itself," White says.

We actually do not communicate very much. Everyone knows their task and the expectations associated with it very quickly. Males, being useless for other tasks are librarians. We cannot scout, fight, do manual labor, etc. So, we study, learn, assist others in their information needs. Of course, if called on to mate, we fulfill that role as well. The later is exceedingly rare and no one I know ever was called. We all know our fate once we reach old age and can no longer maintain our usefulness. This is the same as all other castes as well. No one expects or hopes for anything different.

"That is depressing." Puu. Puu and Cat were the first Hu I faced in person. I appreciate that they did not immediately kill me. In fact they removed the parasite and saved me. A most unusual behavior considering I was sent to kill them.

"I have a question. How many sentient cultures do you know about?"

I have to think about this. *There is no clear delineation between sentient and non-sentient.* Cat nods she understands. *A better question might be what kind of variation is there in sentient cultures. The variation is very large. That makes it nearly impossible to judge one better than another. What each culture has clearly works for them or they die out. Most cultures do eventually die out unless they develop TK helpers. This is one of the reasons we look out for TK development. Where TKs develop we are usually no longer needed. There are exceptions of course. Your own Ku Eden and Ba Eden are examples where our presence is not seen as a threat and we are allowed to co-exist. This is rare and in most instances we withdraw for safety reasons.*

Interestingly Hu culture found out about us before TK development. This is why our portals were covered in gold to prevent our using them. Of course we have other ways, but having the Hu know about us means we needed to be more circumspect in our observations.

"That makes sense. No surprises so far. This matches our own observations. We do apologize for the cultures that did not adapt well to your presence. Too bad we did not meet you much earlier. Hu are also very paranoid and afraid of change."

"Does not help that 'thants being insect like are scary to Hu in general and being as large as you are, doubly so."

We never send in anything but workers once a portal has been established. Scouts are only used when investigating a new world.

^RYou were in New Hope and I was not just imagining the presence of scouts.^R

I do not know the particulars of every intrusion of course, but this is likely true.

Myra comes into the conversation, "Edwin has sixteen thousand years of experience. Obviously we cannot listen to a detailed report or we would be here for years and years. How about a summary version or just answer questions?"

Puu asks. I like Puu she has been nice to me without being afraid. "Yet you were specifically sent to kill us."

Not my choice. Not my choice. Especially knowing what I know now. Understand, two of your worlds destroyed nests. That puts the colony into defense mode. No doubt you would do the same. I was at the end of my usefulness, I was expendable. It is supposed to be an honor to be chosen for such a mission. But, there is no choice. We are infected and shoved through the portal before we understand what is happening. If I had not immediately hit the limiter pad it is unlikely I would have survived.

Cat, "We did not know of this of course. The limiter pad was to literally limit the workers to the sphere itself."

Puu, "So we could study and understand the 'thnts. You may have been studying our world for a long time, but we knew almost nothing of yours."

Silver, "Did you ever meet Sauron, the first TK on earth one?"

Not personally of course. I stayed in the library complex. Reports did come in about him. We lowered our presence to observations only. No direct action. He was the one who figured out that plating our portals with gold would prevent them from being used. It became a standard to plate anything that looked like a portal and eventually all 'temples' whether or not they resembled a portal were covered if the surrounding culture could do so. It is interesting that no other TKs were around when Sauron was on your world. He did not make helpers.

White, "How do you feel about being with us? Do you wish to remain and work with us? Of course, you would be free to go anywhere you wished. You like lichens, you would even be free to wander this world all you want and totally ignore us."

This seems to be a large concern of all of you. Understand that 'free choice' was never part of my life. I knew where I was and what I was to do at all times. You accept me as sentient and even as an equal. I did not even know I was sentient until talking with Puu and Cat. I need purpose. I would not know what do to without it. I like being useful most of all. I had reached the end of my life and thought I was useless. Alone I am def-

initely useless. Here I can help. As long as you do not go Warrior and try to destroy my kind I have no objections to helping you and would like to stay with you.

"Fair enough. You are welcome to be with us."

Cat, "What exactly is the relationship between the 'thants and the 'thn exactly?"

I have to think about a simple way to answer this question.

'thn provide structure to the multiverse. They are responsible for the waves of fractionation or duplicating. Though it is not strictly a duplication as each resulting universe is unique. They nod at this, so they already know this part.

To some extent the 'thn are guardians of this structure and get very worried when anyone threatens their hold on it. This is why some of you were sent by the 'thn to Farout. When your TK tech became high enough, you became a threat to the 'thn themselves.

Rand, "We did figure that one out. We have been careful since not to build up any more high TK cultures. Until this event with Puu and Cat we thought we were being good." Puu and Cat squirm. Interesting that is what I do also when stressed or uncertain.

Puu, "Must have scared the poo out of the 'thn when you escaped from Farout." Rand laughs. Silver shows concern. He gets it at least. Not a game.

Which bring us to the 'thants. We were formed near the beginning of each incarnation to help the 'thn with the more physical tasks. We can reproduce in large quantities whereas the 'thn cannot. We can be in nearly every world that has life or can develop life. We are their sensors to inform them on the conditions in their sectors.

Turtle, "Sauron mated with Qr'thn to produce Br'thn, which Silver then took over and finished raising to sentience. I also mated with Qr'thn to produce Pr'thn and raised her to sentience. Yet, we have a dozen TK8s ready to make more 'thn but no one has come forward to mate with us. How come?"

It is very rare that a 'thn dies. Extremely rare. Replacements are therefore rarely needed. Once a replacement is needed, available TK possibilities are reviewed for the best choices. Given the nature of Sauron, the available options must have been very low. I cannot speak as to why Pr'thn was allowed. I was assigned to a different section at the time. If I still had access to the library records I could of course look this up for you. It is rare that more than one or two 'thn are produced per world complex. It is unlikely anyone else will be asked.

Cat asks, "Do the 'thn fear us?"

Fear is not a normal emotion for the 'thn. They have very little to fear. As I said, death is extremely rare for them. Given what I have been told of your experiences I would say, yes, they fear all of you here.

Puu asks, "Did they think sending you to us loaded with parasites would actually work? Or sending in a Warrior even?"

I believe you have a saying, 'nothing to lose'? She nods understanding.

Puu again, "Yet, it is now my understanding that we are working with the 'thn for some reason. Qr'thn at least does not appear to fear us, but wants us to work for her. What's up with that?"

Silver interjects, "Work with her, not for her. She is not our leader or has any authority over us."

Cat, "Good to know. Good to know."

Each incarnation is different. You know this of course. The QUESTION could not be answered if the result each time was exactly the same. It was explained to me that each time the incarnation is changed just ever so slightly at the level of one part in $10^{13^{13}}$. This time apparently the change was enough to upset the natural order and all of you happened. This was apparently not supposed to happen.

Puu, "You mean we are outside what they were expecting. This would seem to be the reason why the tweaks are engineered into the system. We are not a mistake, we are an asset, a chance to answer The Question."

Silver comes in, "That is the way that Qr'thn sees us and why we are working together. Most 'thn are content to wait and watch to see what happens. They know they will happen again at the next incarnation and this is nothing to get upset about."

Turtle, "On the other hand they will not stop a few bad 'thn from trying to undo us either."

"As I said, wait and see what happens. Are the 'thn here as a sort of self correcting homeostasis mechanism? Even they are not sure. This has not happened before."

"What do the 'thants think about this Edwin?"

I do not believe we collectively have a thought on anything. We serve our purpose. Sentience would seem to be an accident necessitated by the complexity we find ourselves in.

"Well, that is depressing. 'I am' is an illusion and I am not really here."

Silver laughs, "That has always been a possibility, but you will go crazy if you go down that path. If you think you are real, that is enough to go with the flow and see what happens. Personally I find this all very ex-

citing and am very curious to see where this path leads."

Myra asks me, "Did you know Silver was an insect in one incarnation. It was a tidally locked world. Very interesting read."

I did not know this. Fascinating. This might help explain their lack of fear upon seeing me the first time.

"I will teach you how to read our volumes when you teach me written 'thant."

Agreed.

Discussion

"I am concerned about Ron. He did not participate in any of the discussion with Edwin. By the way, I am assuming Puu chose Edwin because of his similarity to our last incarnation Edwin who loved lichens."

"Likely to the latter statement. As to Ron. I wanted him here so he knew how to get here in an emergency. We should leave none of our TKs hanging in the wind. Mars has only a few TKs and would be an easy target for a malicious 'thn/'thant raid. He will leave as soon as he is comfortable doing so. Likely he will just go missing. A TK of few words."

"He is making excellent progress on Mars. I could understand his wanting to see it out. Likely to take tens of thousands of more years though."

Silver sighs, "I agree. It is troubling. There is always one TK who thinks they can create a utopia. None have ever succeeded for long."

"Strictly speaking they are no longer Hu. I doubt they could produce viable hybrid offspring. And the utopias based on a monastery models have gotten the closest."

"Maybe, maybe, good luck to him." I nod.

"So, what do you think of our small group. I am also worried about Randy. He is taking this too lightly."

"It is funny, while on board ship and at Crab Cove he was not like this. It is like he is reverting to his Farout days. Some people do this when they visit their parents or childhood friends. The old roles reassert themselves. Time and responsibility may change him."

"If the others do not get set into thinking of him this way."

"You do not know Myra that well yet. I think she might keep him straight. In a lot of ways she is more mature than he is. I would have preferred Droopy in a lot of ways, but as we have discussed, he prefers the simple life of the sea. I am almost jealous."

"Yeah for a few thousand years maybe, but it would get boring eventually. He may still come around. At least earth two will not be going anywhere soon. We have succeeded at keeping the tech low at least."

"They keep trying to break free though. Hu are curious. Something will slip past us eventually."

"And we will deal with it. Assuming the 'thn have not tied us up of course."

"Nothing is forever."

"True."

"Myra's upgrade to five went well. Upon waking she actually cut herself in front of Edwin, allowing him to taste her blood and then healed herself. No scar. Excellent job."

"I wonder why Edwin would want to taste her blood."

"They are friends for sure. Myra could make friends with a rock. Now Edwin has her DNA and could find her anywhere, even if she was limited."

"Interesting. We really need to learn more about the 'thants. Never paid attention to them in past incarnations. Wonder why we are now?"

"Each time is different. I would imagine if we had paid more attention to them in the past, things would have been very different. Of course this time we have Cat and Puu. I think they have a large part in why."

"They are an interesting pair. Heaven help us if Cat is left alone without Puu for too long. Her TK tech understanding is amazing. Scary amazing. I can see why the 'thn see her as a threat. We have to keep our end of the bargain with Qr'thn and keep an eye on her."

A gold carbon sphere appears before us. A purple shimmer to it. Not the same as the others.

"What the? Is that one of Cat's new pets, bots, whatever?"

I am Gracie. My mistress Puu asked me to find you.

"She did it Turtle. Puu made one too! Oh, I want to make one too. I really do."

"Silver we are supposed to be keeping them in check, not encouraging them. More than anything, these pose a threat to the 'thn."

I will not hurt 'thn. Off limits. Only fight War 'thants.

"Gracie, are you sentient? Are you aware of yourself as separate from everyone else?"

I make a mirror and hold it up to her, "What do you see here Gracie?"

I do not have eyes. You are holding up a silvered plate meant to show a reflection for wet life form light sensors. I do not sense surroundings in the same way and do not need to see a reflection of myself.

"Smart ass little thing," Silver laughs.

"This is beyond what Cat did. Who is your mother Gracie?"

"She said Puu is her mistress Turtle."

"Right. I guess I am still shocked."

Puu pops in, "Pretty good huh?"

"Is she really sentient?" I ask.

"I do not know what that means Turtle. I doubt anyone does. Are Br'thn and Pr'thn really sentient? Are we? If you are asking if I taught her to use the pronoun 'I', I did not."

"And the purple haze?"

"To tell them apart. They are very similar otherwise. Not sure why Cat's did not rise to sentience. They may have for all I know. They really are very similar to the 'thn. Cat did not invent them out of air. Well, out of air, but you know what I mean." I nod.

Silver asks her, "What do you think Puu? Ready for some adventures?"

"We need a little longer to stabilize some of the tech. Once we do that, then I will feel more comfortable. The 'thn got me good. Never again. I am not prey!" It is their strength, I just hope it does not become their weakness. Not everything is out to get you. Not everything is personal.

"They are ready to eat again. Do you think Edwin will fit in alright?"

Silver looks at me and I let him answer.

"He will be an excellent librarian and that is where he will be happiest. Not the adventure type, though will be very happy to hear everything we bring in for him to record. He is deathly afraid of being alone. That is his weakness."

"Yeah, I thought the same. What about Myra?"

I answer that one, as she is under me for the moment, "She is still in training of course, just now a TK5. She will progress fast and in a couple of months she will be ready to join the rest of you. She is definitely the adventure type. You should sit in on the next upgrade so you can learn how it is done." She nods.

"Her greatest weapon will be to love them to death. Oh and Cat and I did raise her to TK2, so I already know some of what the process is," Puu says and all of us laugh. True though. Too easy to accept her strengths and her weakness. Good thing we will never be alone. Always at least in pairs.

"Edwin might be better off if he could learn to interact with the Georges and Gracies? That way he will never be alone."

"'thants are nearly solidic, so that might work. We all need to learn 'thant if for no reason other than it would be very useful in the field."

"It is on the list Puu. Give us some credit for thinking ahead."

"Of course. I am sorry. Just worry a lot." We know dear. We know.

"Go ahead, we will be there in a moment." She nods and pops out.

"The bots are TK4 right? TK, DS, TP, scanning. Am I missing something? They cannot reproduce anyway."

"As long as they are not nines and tens I am happy. They are too untested to let loose on their own, sentient or not."

"Agreed. Maybe in a few million years."

Training

"How come I am the only one being picked on? Don't you need to raise Puu and Cat to TK9?" I am so tired of constant repetitive exercises. I know it is good for me. I know it has to get to the level of reflex, but it is so BORING. Even Edwin as stopped watching and concentrates on the library itself now.

"Myra, they are already at least nines. We did not need to upgrade them, they figured it out themselves."

"Ah, just like you and Silver did." She nods.

"I am an eight now, do you upgrade me to nine or do I have to figure it out myself too?"

"We will see. Better if you figure it out, but we will do the task if needed. Be at the all hands meeting. We are planning off world training for everyone."

Puu pops in, "We have succeeded. Tested from ten different locations." She holds up a black stone.

"Good, what about the specificity requirement?"

"Keyed to the individual TK signature. We could have used DNA, but wanted it to be form agnostic. Everyone is unique in their psiotic makeup and that can't be faked. Of course, this made the stone a bit bigger to fit that in. We did not use the entire signature of course, just big enough that it would be unlikely to be copied or match anyone else."

"Excellent. Go and show it to Silver too. Can these be handed out at the meeting?"

"Ready to go." She pops out.

"A 'get home for free' card. Glad I am TK now. That first time was nasty." Turtle smiles. Amazing I made it actually. Almost didn't.

"Shit, Turtle, could the stone be used to find us."

"How so?"

"If they can read the signature from the stone, then they would just need to find a match."

"Relax, we do know what we are doing. The signature is encrypted. Reading the stone gets them nothing, not even how it works. Cat is good at this." I nod. Still, a new improved evil creature is just around the corner.

On the way to the meeting I see Randy. Strange that we usually walk to get around the complex instead of popping everywhere. Fear of parasites means we do not take DS for granted.

Randy comes up to me and gives me a gentle nudge.

"What do you think bilge rat? Like your new digs?"

"I miss the rocking of the boat and the constant abuse. Not the same at all."

"You want more abuse?" I glare at him and he backs off.

"Randy what is going on with you? You are acting like a pup rat. The constant teasing and trying to make fun of everything."

He sighs, make a bench and sits. I sit next to him.

"I am in way over my head. I was meant to be nothing more than a servant and now I am with the elite of the elite. Way over my head. I am thinking I should go back and help Drup."

"I thought it might be something like that. How do you think I feel from bilge rat to TK8 now and soon a nine. Like falling from the main mast to the deck. Quite a splat."

"So, you want to go back too?"

"Absolutely not. I will never get this chance again. No way. I was never allowed shore leave when the rest of you got to see different people and different cultures. Of course, nothing like what you experienced before and during Farout, but way better than endless chores while everyone else had fun."

"Fun? Rounding up deals, hauling cargo, collecting the rest of the crew from whatever gutter they ended up in covered in their own waste. No thank you. No, I like the library. Stable ground, good food, interesting people. New cultures come to us instead of boringly long sea voyages only to work my butt off at each end."

"Well, when you put it that way . . . still, don't you want to see where all of this will lead? It will have to be exciting."

"Too exciting. I am a servant. I can't be making decisions that guide an entire worlds future. I am a nobody. I should never have been made TK even, not that I want to go back to plain Hu mind you. But it has taken me thousands of years to get used to that and every day I am afraid of messing up."

"Wow. I never knew you felt that way. You and Drup always seemed so composed and sure of yourselves. If you need to go back I am sure they will let you at any time. Ron is likely to go any moment. He is set on taking care of the Martians and really wants to see that through. If you leave too, that makes us two down. Not sure if there is a second list of candidates." I look up to him as if it was a question.

"I was surprised when asked myself. I was not surprised when you were chosen. Drup agreed you are a great candidate. You are the begin-

ning of your TK life. Everything is ahead of you. No mistakes to regret yet."

"Except my mother."

"She made her own choice. You just let her make a choice. Likely she would have gotten herself killed if she continued on the path she was on. Besides. We were right next to you and would have caught you."

"Who will catch me now? Certainly not Edwin. He is afraid of his own shadow."

"Speaking of which, why is he here?"

"Opportunity. Apparently this entire quest started with trying to find out information about the 'thants. One plops into our laps. Too good to pass up. Edwin is okay. He will be very useful, staying here." I smile. Randy shakes his head.

"And the others accept this?"

"Sure, why not? We are all different. We all have something to contribute and none of us can do it all. Imagine if we were all like Cat. We would be on our own worlds complaining about how stupid everyone else was and why didn't everyone see how important our work is."

Randy does laugh now.

"Puu would organize us to death, where everyone was afraid to make a wrong move. Turtle would get frustrated, scrap the whole thing and start over. Silver would likely get us all killed by mistake."

"How did you get so smart?"

I stare right at him, "Hanging out with you."

"Oh." Gives me a very goofy grin and I laugh and give him a nudge.

"Come on, the others will be waiting."

"Where is Edwin?"

"He prefers his tunnels to being out in the open."

"Like an eagle will swoop down and get him?"

"I know, but to each their own. We all have baggage as they say. We are all needed too." That sobers him up. I doubt I have convinced him, but he is still here for the moment. God, I hope we have some easy assignments to begin with.

Everyone looks at us when we are the last to arrive. Puu gives me a dirty look. Right on personality. I stick my tongue out at her and Silver laughs.

Silver comes up to Randy, "Still here then?"

"Shit, does everyone know?" I smile, because of course we all do. We are too few to hide anything from each other.

"Small town Randy, small town. Glad you are with us."

"Really?"

"Really." Silver goes off and sits down next to Turtle of course. I find Edwin and sit next to him. Randy sits next to me. Puu and Cat are playing with some new construct of course.

Turtle stands, "Okay, let's get this going. There is a lot more work to do of course, but part of what we need to do is dependent on what we find we need." Huh? We are all trying to figure that one out. Silver smiles but says nothing.

"We need a few field trips under our belts before we are going to be able to figure out what our needs are. Good chance that each trip will teach us new things and we will adapt as we go along."

"Ah, where is Ron? Shouldn't he be here?"

Silver states the obvious, "Ron is back on Mars. He will assist if needed and his quarters can hold over a thousand people now in case he needs to evacuate a settlement in a hurry."

I quickly scan. I had not been paying attention. His quarters do not scan any different. Randy nudges me and TPs me the location of a city sized complex a few hundred clicks away and in a very dry area. Makes sense. He would not be comfortable around too much water.

"How many are there on Mars currently?"

"About ten thousand, but he has set up these ready to go cities on many froth Mars worlds. Did not want to place all of his people at one location in case whatever was attacking them got too good at hunting them down."

"Shit, he really expects that?" Edwin shakes next to me. Yeah, I am scared now too. I place my hand on his mid section and he calms down. We are out in the open of course. Even a hand provides some shelter.

Rand comes in with, "He must be really pissed at us for putting him into this position then."

"Actually, except for here, the other locations were already in place. An asteroid is as destructive as a bully 'thn overlord." I am guessing Puu does not really like the 'thn at the moment. Can't blame her either.

"Okay, calm down. That is not why we are here. We are splitting up into two teams for this first run. Myself, Puu and Cat will be team one and Rand, Squeak and Myra on team two. Edwin and White will stay here to guard the nest." I noticed she did not say fort.

Puu and Cat come up to Edwin. He likes them as they were the two that rescued him.

"We have made some helper devices to make you feel more secure."

Puu places a collar around his tiny neck, "Currently your DS ability is

limited to a kilometer, this device makes it world wide. We can increase the range later if needed and once you are used to it. Controlled by your already present TP ability. We will show you how to use it before we leave."

"We have set up smaller nest sites all over. Partly to confuse an enemy and to provide already existing hiding places for you."

No offensive weapons I notice. Puu and Cat sit back down. Edwin is likely to run before fighting anyway.

Silver and Turtle come up next. What is this, Edwin's birthday?

"You will find in the library a new room. It is a tradition of ours that recruits to our group all have to read the journals of past TKs in the group. These include at least three incarnations. The books are in Standard which we all know. The panels all over the room are written in 'thant. We hope by studying the two you will learn Standard and we will learn 'thant. We all need to be fluent in both." She says this louder so we get it.

"That should keep him busy. Especially writing his own experiences down," Rand exclaims. True. Though he picks up stuff pretty quick.

When in doubt it is time to eat. We sit down. Edwin has a raised platform with a mix of lichens. I am not sure he really needs to eat at all, but it gives him some thing to do while we eat.

Technically we do not need to eat either. Still getting used to that. We eat mainly because life throws you curves and best be ready for anything, including running into a limiter and having forgotten how to feed yourself from what is around you.

"How did you translate the Journals into 'thant? I know you can read him as he can TP us as well, but still the cultural differences are huge."

For most 'thants you would be correct, but understand the males are required to study a large number of cultures. I have studied all the cultures present here. Do I have the same understanding as you do of these cultures, no. But I know more about you than you know about me.

Squeak nods she gets it.

She comes up to Edwin, "I am sorry now for attacking the nest. I did not know."

Edwin looks up, *We kill each other as well. Each tries to protect their own. Di and Raps died during the brief war as well as workers. It is good you understand more, but I did not personally suffer from your actions.*

She nods and accepts this for now. I bet it eats at her though. She will be more cautious in the field. Could be good or bad.

White, who has been quiet during this discussion comes in, "I have an

idea. We are all at least TK8, well, except for Edwin, but hopefully he will never have the opportunity to be confronted. I propose we make taking a life off limits as long as we have our abilities."

"Some cultures may expect us to participate in their own actions to be accepted."

"We will never fool anyone that we can belong. I don't think we should try. We need to keep ourselves apart."

Silver comes in, "I concur with White. We are different than normal TKs, set apart. We need to have a higher standard to go along with our standing."

"It is actually a relief. There will be no questions then. What if we see something truly evil happening and the only way to stop it is to kill?"

Turtle looks confused, "Okay, tell me such a scenario? I cannot imagine one where our abilities could not choose another path. Given the fact that if we were not there we would not have any obligation to do anything. It is their culture and their responsibility."

"We just pop the badies out to another location, or dissolve weapons, or whatever?"

"Those are some ways. We will learn others. Best if the situation never comes up of course."

Randy sighs, "Not the butterfly talk. Anything but that?" We all laugh except for Edwin who looks confused. How am I picking up on his emotions? His face is not flexible like ours is. Even Squeak is easy to read from the way she holds her lips, eyes and head feathers.

I TP Edwin, *The theory is a butterfly, a small flying insect, flapping its wings on one side of the world will ultimately affect the weather on the other side of the world.*

He thinks about this. *Agreed.*

I announce, "Edwin gets it." Randy looks surprised. The others smile at his surprise. Got you Randy.

It is the basis of our methods in interacting with other species. A small change at the right time removes the need for a large change in an emergency.

"Shit, he really does get it. Took me forever to wrap my head around that one."

"Could be why the 'thants have such a rigid culture and Randy lives for chaos." White suggests, giving Randy a shove at the same time.

"Ha-ha, just because I cannot pick up after myself all of you are jumping on me." We all try to look as innocent as possible. Squeak shakes her head.

"We have work to do."

"Okay, break apart into your teams. Edwin, enjoy the journals. White will be here in case you get lonely. He is excited to learn more about you and your species." White is also physically the largest of us. Maybe that is why he hangs out with me the most. I am the least scary.

I TP White, *Under no circumstance do you chase him. He freaks easily. He will come back once he feels safe again.*

This will be a lesson in extreme patience for me. We are all getting new lessons. Sigh . . .

Did not know you could sigh in TP. hee-hee.

Team Turtle

It has been awhile since the three of us worked together. I am excited and fearful at the same time. Cat has gotten much more suspicious of any authority. Both Owl and Turtle raised 'thn babies. They brought Qr'thn into this group. That alone makes them suspect. We will see.

"Ready?" We both nod and we are bubbled up in a hard structure, not 'thn metal, but carbon gold matrix. Guess we are all a bit sensitive about 'thn metal now.

"I will take us to an orbital position before DSing to our destination."

"Where are we going?"

"We already know our close earths pretty well and mapping expeditions have been going on for some time. No need to repeat that effort as there are TKs on most of these worlds, that is the ones with obvious tech development."

"Makes sense." Calm down Cat, she will not bite us. I sigh. Cat gives me a dirty look.

I add, "These are also the worlds the evil 'thn would expect us to be on." Cat nods, Turtle smiles.

"We will be going to a far earth. Except for the chance encounter with the Pink earth, we have largely left them off our map."

"What about the tidal locked one Owl was on?"

"That knowledge has been lost. Not everything makes it through the veil." I am actually surprised that any of it makes it through.

We pop and after some time, so really far earth, we come out.

Same size, but the continents are really different.

"Is this in the same time frame?" Cat asks.

"Yes, but a branch that occurred soon after formation. Actually right after the Theia struck and tore off a piece. We wanted it to have the same gravity and moon. Something about the tides makes it easier for intelligent life to rise. I studied the Library at the regional center and all intelligent life, where we know the origin world, has tides if liquids are present."

"Does this apply to the plasmotics and magmotics as well?" I ask.

"Good Puu, yes, as far as we know. When we checked earths that had not been stuck, magmotics did not evolve."

"Where is Owl? He was not assigned to the other team?" Cat asks. No sneak attacks or surprises.

"Someone has to hold down the others. He will visit the known TK

earths and assist if needed."

"And even the 'thn are not stupid enough to go after him." Turtle smiles.

"Give me your assessment of what is below us." Game time.

"The continents are different, but there is water and oxygen, albeit a little higher, 22%."

"There are rivers, vegetation, structures of some kind that I do not recognize. Not natural rock formations anyway."

"Not chlorophyll bases, more pink. Plantimals?"

Turtle shakes her head no.

"The Pinks scare me. I did not think you would do that to us. More like the world Randy, Droopy and Snap were on then. The seas are fairly shallow like Magenta. Not much deeper than a few kilometers even in the deepest spots. The continents are spread out with lots of different terrains at least."

"Worlds seem to do better when there is variation. Sanctuary is really boring." I roll my eyes. It was really hard being trapped on it with Cat for all those years. I learned a lot, but still . . .

"I am not sensing much in the way of movement. Is there intelligent life present?"

Turtle smiles, but does not answer. Shit. Everything is a test.

"Hey, I thought we were supposed to act as a team. I'm going back if all you are going to do is play with me." Cat is pissed. She has a shortened fuse since all this happened.

"I do not want to prejudice your view of this world. It is very different from any location you have been in or heard about. How do you define intelligence? Is movement on a large scale necessary? Do you need mass movement of individuals, terraforming, ecology changes?"

"Well, understanding Edwin is hard enough, but he still fits our basic understanding of a living thing, stretched to the limit, but he is physical."

"Shit, they are not transdimensional like Meep are they?"

"No, we would not do that on our first outing. We really are curious about them. We should get closer. Some ground rules. As we really do not understand anything about them, we need to be careful not to interfere. Even if you see something that would be immoral in our world, does not mean it is so in theirs."

"You are giving some of it away. You talk of individuals and morals. They are not that different then." Turtle smiles at me. Shit.

"Won't they react to seeing us?"

"Please Cat, we will set down out of possible visual range. You are

nines, we really do not need to go down at all, but our human senses are useful sometimes."

"I am sensing a lot of repeating units at seemingly random locations. Sort of like small triangular houses?"

"I am getting a TK signature folks. Not sure of their range yet, but we cannot get too close if we want to remain hidden."

I make a good size refractor telescope that goes nearly from one side of our ship to the other. I position myself at the eyepiece side.

"There are small flying creatures." I exclaim.

"And swimmers too," Cat says.

"Lots of strange plants. Everything seems to be based on a triradial pattern. Except for the swimmers and flyers I am not sure what could be the sentients. I mean New Hope would be strange to anyone visiting for the first time too. Who would imagine creatures who could literally blend with trees."

"True Puu, good observation. I don't think it is the flyers and swimmers. I know birds are smart, but there seems to be a need for appendages to manipulate your environment and with so much going into flight itself, not a lot left over."

"Some birds can be really smart, but except of the Ku, which of course cannot fly, none have developed tech."

"Ba can fly sort of."

"Ehh, more of a glide actually. What the hell are those repeating things?"

"Whoa! Follow my TP. A wave of movement just occurred in one of those hexagonal fields. There it goes again."

"A large creature seems to have blundered into the array and the array is reacting to it. It is tearing it apart! Okay, don't mess with the array."

"The array is built from nearly identical components all linked together. Each one is linked with three others." Cat makes a hologram in the air to show what she is thinking. "Each individual has three arms. Tri-radial as observed with everything else. Each arm is connected to another individual, thus making a hexagonal pattern. Well except at the edges or when something is in the way."

I make a copy of one of the individual components. The fact that the copy does not move means those below us are alive. TK cannot copy life only move it from one form to another. Usually this is a backup copy of ourselves in case something happens.

"Good idea Puu. They are strange. Three arms and three toes."

"A light sensing organ near the end of the arm. Yes, it has a lens and a

retina of sorts. DNA has six bases, not like our four. Wonder if that set them to be triradial? Even the plants are this way. The branches all have three sides. Even the leaves do too."

"The eye can move easily as can the arms. Scanning below it appears the arms are what are linked together. Ah, lots of sensory pads on the 'hands'. I bet they can communicate this way."

Cat exclaims, "This a fluidic array but arranged like a CPU from the old computers that used to be on Earth Two. Together they are a sentient! But as individuals they are no more sentient than one of our neurons."

"Good Cat. Biology and mind build understanding."

I come in, "Not that different from the bots we build. Only much larger. If they could ever reduce the size of the individual units . . ."

"Puu, these connections are spread nearly over the entire continent. How do they feed?"

"They are not animals Cat! They are plants! We were thrown off by the arms, really branches, and the eyes, really modified chloroplasts instead of retinal cells. Pink pigment, that means they can see greens really well. Good contrast for a pink world."

"What about the creature that fell into them?"

"Basic defense. The creature would tear apart the array. Just defending itself."

"That could be why they fly or swim. The arrays do not extend into the water and flying would allow moving from open area to the next."

"And being plants, they are also connected with the local OM. They are one giant OM!"

"If that is true, it knows we are here."

"Time scale is off. We are like really fast bugs to it. As long as we keep moving randomly it is unlikely to notice us. It would be fun to go into slow time and link with it though. Can you imagine how far above us its thinking is like?"

"Hmm, not quite that simple Puu. Look here." Cat lights up a spot in our minds.

"They are fighting each other. So, more than one individual. There are gaps in the array. I can see that now. Not one organism at all. More like colonies of Argentine ants. Where they meet is a no mans land."

"Just enough differences to prevent communication?"

"Or like Hu, they don't like strangers."

"Stupid monkeys." Turtle says and we all laugh.

"They are a forest! We know trees talk to each other on the other earths. Also I was wonder how a triradial could fly. They float using a gas

bag. We know blimps are not size limited. These floaters could be the sentients. They use their three arms to help guide them maybe even provide a small amount of motion. They probably follow the air currents."

"The sacs are filled with hydrogen. Easy to do biologically. They can deflate to feed once they are over a suitable location. Oh, yeah, a huge eye on their ventral surface. Once they feed, they reinflate and go to the next location. Neat."

"The 'fish' are less of a problem. If you are neutrally buoyant the three 'fins' provide propulsion. Their mouth is triradiate also. Amazing number of sizes and shapes."

"Some of the bottom dwellers are like three pointed starfish. Oh, crab like things with six legs and a calcium carbonate shell just like ours. Mouth is in the center of the ventral surface and eyes between each leg. They do not have a forward/backward direction. Can go anyway that looks interesting."

"Hmm, that could have some advantages. Nothing can sneak up on you anyway."

I finally ask, "Okay Turtle. We are not going to solve this in a few days. I am seeing no obvious construction, at least not on a large scale. Where are the sentients?"

She smiles, "Plants can't be sentient?"

"They can, different time scale of course, but tech is a problem. They can't manipulate their environment. Dolphins and whales are sentient, clearly, but no tech beyond simple found objects to use as tools." Cat answers.

"Oh, so you need to be able to destroy the nature around you to qualify?"

"Aaaaaah, that is not what I meant. You are playing with us." Cat is getting upset. Do not upset the Cat.

"To be fair to Cat, New Hope is not tech really. No metal use. Toxins and ballistics are the best they have. Without TKs being present, they would be easy for a metal culture to conquer."

"Oh, I doubt that Puu. Have you forgotten what it was like when we arrived. They have darts that will seek a crack in any armor. Short of another TK coming in, they can do just fine in a fight. You do not need to have a tech culture to be sentient. Barbara's whales in the journals are a prime example. Skip metal tech and once you are TK you can reach out to the universe."

"Forgotten about them. Let's say something here is reaching up the TK ladder without obvious disturbance of the world around them. I am

suspicious though, even worms on earth two can build huge structures out of sand and protein glue. Or termite mounds. The forests, for lack of a better word, are certainly organized, but the organization is nothing like a CPU yet. More like a memory array. No computing ability."

"What are they trying to remember?"

"Memory without thought is pointless. Oh, Barbara's whales could skip manipulation tech because Hu did that for them. Barbara was not born whale, but Hu. She built on that experience."

"And whales never needed 'home' or tools, more pure thought. The great philosophers. That was why their thinking was so valuable."

We are gradually moving around to the other side of the world. We were on the light side and now moving to the dark side.

"What the shit?"

"Puu, watch your language." Cat teases me.

"There are lights down there that are visible from here! Not volcanoes either. Not a forest fire either."

"Tech? TK light? We never did determine what level they were at."

"They only have to remember one thing. How to make and use the TK light. They are photosynthesizing even at night!"

"So the question is, is this a chance TK that will go no further, or the start up the ladder?"

"Is it even the same ladder? Think about it. Our TK is really based on our need to move and manipulate our surroundings. Their needs are clearly different."

"On our scale they need to be TK3 at least to make lights right?"

"Four I think. But making light does not involve movement or scanning. If their array allows them to see and manipulate at the molecular and atomic level do they need mass movement or scanning?"

"At least TK2 then. Yeah, I could see that. They may not even be conscious. The forests that figures this out did better because they could grow all day and night. They pushed out the others and took over. Now all of them have this trick."

"Change has happened since then though or there would not be gaps between them."

"Just say it Puu, they fight each other."

"Just saying that evolution is at play here. They are changing. Does this mean they will eventually develop TP or DS?"

"DS would be useful if you want to expand into a new world without competition. Should we be checking nearby worlds?"

"I will save you the trouble, no evidence found. Would be a good pos-

sibility we need to keep a watch on. See, two days here and already you have logic'd out ideas."

"My guess is they would ignore us if we went planet side. Can we go Turtle. Can we?" Both Cat and I give our best sad looks.

Cat adds, "TK is all well and good, but without getting dirty I am not able to understand the complexity of what is going on down there. I am sure there are WAY more species than I am getting from orbit. Likely lots of commensal organisms, symbiots, etc. that are not separating out. Even this model that Puu made looks like it is incomplete."

"Well, I did pick a small one. Likely an older tree would have more going on, but it would not fit into our bubble."

"And no way all the bird things are the same species. The size variation alone is huge, from tiny insect sizes to almost whale sized."

"Plants, lots of plants, not just magenta chromes, but green ones, brown ones, and mixes too."

She sighs, "Well go ahead then. Unlikely to mess it up too much."

We smile and pop down to a relatively empty looking area.

"Holy Shit Batman, this wind must be at least one hundred kph. This is crazy."

We make a wall to hide behind and soon have an assemblage of other creatures trying to get out of the wind too.

"Actually makes sense. There are no mountain ranges to speak of, just low hills. The continents are really spread out and broken up too, so terrain is pretty uniform. About the same land and sea area as New Hope, but without the mountains to slow down the wind, it is howling."

"You think. How do we work in this? Using TK the entire time?"

"Explains why the forests are where they are. The are on the far side of each hill from the wind and in every shallow canyon."

"With everything being so uniform, no need for migration routes either. Just get into the wind and go to a new location easy peasy."

"Hey little guy. Aren't you cute." I am reaching for a three legged creature about twelve centimeters wide."

As soon as I get near, it flips over really fast and latches its teeth into my hand. I pop it off and repair my hand.

"Okay, they bite. Not friendly." We pop all the other ones near us back into the wind.

"Strange, as we would likely poison them. Their DNA is triple stranded and six bases as we observed before."

"Everything here is based on three or some multiple. Interesting. Not the usual plantimal seeded world then. I wonder how many strains of

plantimals are floating around out there?"

"Just how far from our own earth are we anyway. Could this even be a different star's forth? Have you seen the moon? Totally different from ours. Smaller and closer and the patterns totally different. We are definitely not in Kansas any more."

"Day length is shorter too. Closer to sixteen hours. Like everything is speed up. Smaller moon means lower tides and it won't be slowing the day any time soon either."

"I am popping us to a forest clearing. I want a closer look at the major life formation." I nod to Cat.

"Not a very big clearing Cat."

"I really did not want to end up in the wind again. Note, we are standing on dead trees. Looks like a few dozen. Mushroom like things. That at least looks familiar."

"If six sided mushrooms are familiar to you. Lots of colors and sizes too. Like a fungi forest." I lift my foot. The underside is now black from squished shrooms.

"Look at the nearest tree Puu. It is totally covered with all kinds of other things. You were right to come down. I would never have separated all this out. Must be several hundred different species on each one."

"Six base pairs in their DNA gives a lot of variation. Likely they evolve very fast. I wonder how old life is on this world."

"Are you saying that it was seeded more recently than our worlds?"

"I would not even know where to look for fossils on this world. No mountain ranges uplifted with sedimentary rocks to investigate. Lot of sediment in the shallow seas. I am guessing it got there more from wind shear than rain and rivers."

"The wind would explain why even the largest trees are not very high. No more than three meters I would say."

"But they get just as wide. Some are at least ten meters wide. Sun is coming up here. That was fast."

"Time flies when you are totally confused."

"What the freep?" The trees unfold umbrella like leaves from their centers that completely cover the spaces between them.

"Efficient. They do not miss a photon this way. Also explains why they are spaced out the way they are. Likely the big ones only got that way because their neighbors died off for some reason."

"Have you seen how many things burrow into them? Amazing there are any still standing. I am guessing they grow fast and die young, unless you are exceptionally lucky."

"Fast turn over, high variability. This place evolves like crazy. No sentient life? Yet is my guess. It will not take them long at all." Cat nods agreement.

We pop back up to Turtle.

"We need to monitor this place. One hundred year intervals at the longest. This place could go suddenly tech and we could miss it. They operate on a way faster time scale for evolution." I tell her.

"Good, we are in agreement. I did not want to think I was losing it. I thought New Hope was insanely fast, but this place takes the prize."

Cat adds, "We are very lucky we came at a time before they evolved. They are already TK2 and have reasons to evolve more in that direction. They could be a threat to our existence soon."

Thanks Cat, I needed yet another reason to be freaked out.

"And this is why Qr'thn wanted us to check things out. Thanks evil 'thn overlords." Cat is not happy at all. Not everything is the fault of a 'thn. Forewarned is one of the best defenses. Now we know such world exist.

Turtle smiles but does not say anything.

Still on Sanctuary

White comes up to Squeak, Rand and I just as we are about to take off on our own expedition.

"I need to leave. Go back to Di Eden. I want Squeak with me so I don't shit it up." From a Di, that is a lot of poo.

We stand staring at him.

"Okay, I am suspicious of Library. No love life for thousands of years and then the 'perfect' lady shows up, who just happened to be totally in leagues with the 'thn overlords we are not hiding from and working around. Too much coincidence."

"About time you figured that out White. We have all been thinking it and whether or not we should trust you."

"You should have said something!"

"Would you have listened?" Rand says quietly, but firmly.

White sighs, "Likely not. Sorry. We will figure this out. As soon as we get back you can go on your field trip." We nod and they pop out. I pop all of Squeak's stuff back to her room.

"It looks like it is just you and me kid."

"And Edwin," I remind him. No way I am leaving him here totally alone. No way. I think my facial expression said more than my words.

"So, how are your 'thant lessons going?"

Two bots pop in, Gracie and George it feels like.

A 'thant intrusion is eminent.

"Guess we are going to find out." I sigh.

Edwin, 'thants are trying to enter this world. Do you want to be there?

NO, NO, NO! I can feel him borrowing in frantically.

"Edwin does not want to join us. My guess is he feels he is still under a death sentence and is worried they are coming here for him."

Rand shakes his head, "I doubt they care enough to hunt for him. Probably assume he is dead."

"Yeah, I think the same. Then, why are they here? I thought this world was completely off the circuit and unreachable normally."

"I wish Cat, Turtle or Silver were here. They would know. My best guess is once they know of a world, they can follow it anywhere."

"My question is, is it parasites, warriors or just normal workers?"

"Good question Myra. Do we abandon this world before they kill us?"

"And eight and a nine, plus hundreds of bots that can tear apart a warrior? I don't think that would be allowed."

He sighs, "I was afraid you would say that. Okay George, show us where they are." A TP location shows up in our minds.

Rand, "Here we go. A few hundred meters away. I want some wiggle room if it is a warrior. Gracie and George, gather the others to us. We need to be ready."

Understood. They pop out.

We pop to a landscape that really does not look any different from where we were. Oh, except it is where Puu and Cat had set up their first 'thant trap. The hole is still there from when they dissolved everything. And it is night, because it is on the other side of the planet. The bots are standing by. Impressive when they are all in one place

"Myra, there." He points. I have to use TK as it is pitch black, like the hold of a ship at midnight. A small mound of 'thn metal is rising from the ground. Nothing like the ten meter spheres that Cat made. Well, to be fair that was bait. I do not have much experience with 'thn metal as we do not ever use it any more. Of course Edwin has a lot in his system, but I don't mess with his body.

I broadcast to everyone, "Do not attack unless it is a warrior. I have a limiter ready if it is another male. Edwin might actually like a brother to play with."

Rand say, "Mound is too small for a male or warrior to come through. It is wiggling at the quantum level. Should not be long."

Yeah, several hours later we are both still staring at it. Rand hands me some sap chow and I actually gnaw on it out of boredom. These things really are nasty. No one would eat one unless they were right on the verge of starving to death. I can't imagine what Silver's life was like in that incarnation.

"Here we go. Get ready Myra. You are up."

"Just as a precaution." I make a gold ring a meter out from the portal.

"Just so you don't scare it back in."

A worker finally emerges from the lump. I would have expected a better looking portal. Rush job? Or hard location to port to?

Once fully out I speak 'thant to it. The pheromones are the hard part of course.

thWelcome traveler.th

And it ignores me completely. Was my accent that bad?

Ah, another one is emerging and another. Once the third one comes out they stand facing me. That seems to be pretty universal at least. Facing the problem.

thWe mean you no harm.th

'thNot colony. Warrior present?'th

'thWe had to destroy the Warrior. It is safe now.'th

'thPsionic being. What intentions?'th

'thYou are free to establish a nest here if you wish, but you can have only one nest and it must stay on this side of this world. You are free to use any nearby worlds.'th

Psst, we never agreed to that Myra.

We agreed not to be adversarial. Just trying to be friendly.

'thKilled Warrior how?'th Yeah, I would want to know that too. I thought Edwin said they were stupid.

'thYou see the small spheres about us? They kill Warriors on sight.'th

One turns around and goes back in. leaving the other two watching us.

'thMay I ask your intentions and purpose being here? We know you follow 'thn directives.'th

They remain silent.

A larger 'thant emerges.

"My guess is your questions were above the worker pay grade."

"What is a pay grade?"

Rand sighs, "Rank?"

"Got it."

"Not a warrior, not a worker, not a male. Any ideas?"

"The one who shall not be named said these markings indicate an assessor. Female, limited defensive capability. Used to negotiate terms is my understanding."

"Not that gender has any bearing."

"True."

'thPlease repeat last statement.'th Down to business.

'thMay I ask your intentions and purpose being here? We know you follow 'thn directives.'th

'thKnow much. How know?'th Not sentient then. No pronouns.

'thNo.'th

'thUnacceptable.'th

'thIs it wise to play this game with beings you do not know the full strength of? You have been told we kill Warriors for fun. Any other species that can do that? You know our species can destroy entire nests. We have offered you space yet you will not tell us why?'th

It turns around and goes back in the portal.

"Damn Myra, wish I knew you had this in you when we negotiated trade deals."

"We are not prey Rand. Very simple. Everything else follows."

"You know who will not like a nest here."

"You know who has the ability to DS anywhere he wants. And we back him up. We need information. They are offering to provide it without our having to hunt them down."

"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer."

"Yeah, nice way of saying it. Where did you hear that?"

"A very, very long time ago." I keep forgetting he is not thirty. More like three thousand.

Now we sit as the information goes to the one higher on the list. I have to remember, they do things VERY slowly. I expand the gold circle out to ten meters and build a shelter for the workers. It will be morning soon and I know they prefer to be under cover. They immediately go to it and check it out. Big enough to handle a dozen their size.

"Why am I here Myra?"

"Oh, not that again."

"No, not that. I mean right now. You are doing great. We have left someone alone and scared though. Should I go back to check up on him?"

"He would prefer I did."

"But I don't speak 'thant. How did you do that anyway? Hu mouth parts are not shaped right."

"TK can shape sound as well as objects. Just have to make a solid air manifold in the right shape."

"May I see?" I make the manifold.

thEveryone loves 'thants.th

"Cool let me try."

thTake me to your leader.th

"No, I don't think we want that to happen just yet." He has spooked the two remaining ones.

thDo not believe him. Just making noise.th They settle down.

"Shit, I did it again. I am going to check on him before I start a war." He pops out.

All you have to do is think before speaking Rand. Really is not that hard. Not that I have ever said the wrong thing. I do not like being here alone. Rand was my backup. I am the youngest of the group. Scary.

Sixteen hour days suck. It feels like noon before Rand comes back.

"I am maintaining a TK link with him. We have an expert, might as well use him."

"Is he okay?"

"Yeah, when he saw nothing worse than an assessor came through he calmed down."

"Nope, no Warriors."

"Yet."

"What do you think they will do?"

They will attempt to kill us all! We do not like surprises and unknowns.

"And that has worked so well for them in the past."

"Best to be prepared though."

"They still have two workers here."

Sacrifices. They don't care about individuals.

"Okay, we best get ready then."

We get further back. Expand the gold ring and layer it with a huge limiter field. Would hate to get stuck there myself. The two remaining are getting nervous and go into their hut.

Gracie and George, get the rest ready for an assault. Expect multiple Warriors this time.

"I am sure glad that Puu and Cat kept busy making more of them." I nod.

Edwin, is there anything worse than a Warrior?

A 'thn overlord.

"Oh, yeah, forgot about those. Get your stones ready too."

"What is the radius of the stones? And don't they just bring us back here? Short trip at least, but does not get us out of danger."

"On the other hand we can see the effects on the 'thn up close. Could be very interesting. Doubt a 'thn will show up. They are afraid of us. It would make them extremely vulnerable."

"Like we could mess with their insides vulnerable. I would not recommend killing one. That would set off a shit storm."

"What is a shit storm Rand?"

"Bad, very bad." I have heard the term before along with a lot of other ones that make no sense.

"As bad as a hurricane?" Now I am just teasing him and he knows it, ignoring me. Oh well.

"There is no way a warrior will fit through a portal that small."

"And you expect them to use a portal we know about. We need to keep scanning the entire world."

"Gracie and George, spread everyone out. They could come in anywhere. We will cover this location. Go!" They all pop out.

"Will give us some warning. Just hope it is enough."

"Puu and Cat did not mention a Warrior being about to DS."

"And you really think they would throw the old version at us?"

"No, not really. Should we evacuate?"

"And leave the returning team members to them? Remember they do not leave until there is only one left."

Now we just wait. That is really hard. I hate killing, but better than being killed. I think. Gee, I could be in the hold of a ship right now chasing rats. Somehow that does seem not so bad right now.

"Chill Myra, it is likely part of their strategy to psych us out by making us wait. They have forever to respond. Could be centuries even."

"True, they lose nothing by waiting. And it distracts us from confronting them more directly."

"Hmm, interesting idea. Portals are two way right? We can read where this portal goes right?"

"Theoretical, but remember their psiotic link is different. They have limiters that affect us but not them."

"Yet, our limiters clearly affect them."

"We need to think about it some more."

"We are on the other side of the planet. Warriors cannot DS. If we stay in the Sanctuary we can monitor them from there and it gives us time to respond."

"Home Myra. We work from there. I am sure Edwin misses you." I extend the gold ring a few more meters all the same. I find the remnants of the other spheres and add gold and limiter rings there too. No surprises. They come in at locations they have already plotted first.

When we get back Edwin is still buried deep in his hole.

We are back Edwin. The portals are secure. The bots are maintaining watch. I have a question, you said that the larger one that came through was an assessor. What does that mean?

They gather information and report back.

Then they are not negotiators.

They make no decisions themselves.

Who does?

Not clear. Sort of a colony consensus is my understanding. Males are not the only ones with TP and DS abilities.

When will they likely act?

Depends on how much of an immediate threat they see us as. They have no permanent nest on this world and can close all the portals and stay away.

Except the 'thn overlords want us watched and reported on.

Yes, a conflict of interest.

Edwin comes up and rubs against my leg in the kitchen where I am

sitting.

thNice to see you Edwin.th

thKnowing we can take out Warriors and the 'thn are afraid of us, what is your best guess as to what will happen if they decide to confront us?th

thThey will open as many portals as possible. Likely hundreds. And send in warriors through all of them.th

thAnnoying, but still possible to defeat. Since they cannot DS, just bubbling them below the ground a few kilometers will slow them down a lot. Even to the mantel if need be.th

thI have another question. What is it about gold that bothers all of you so much? I mean it does not react with anything in our world except extreme acids and is not poisonous. It was used in implants in our bodies for thousands of years without harm.th

thPain, extreme pain.th

thBut only on contact. The mesh around my neck does not bother you?th

thAs long as you do not touch me with it I am fine.th

"Interesting. Very interesting. Might explain a lot."

thUsed to control individuals. Enforcers use special covers to handle thin rods they can touch an individual with to force them to do what they want.th

thDo Warriors have gold inside of them or on them?th

Edwin looks at me in shock.

thThat would explain a lot, as you say. It would drive them mad with rage.th

thNow we know how they are made to behave the way they do. What would happen if you removed the gold? Any of the Hu could do that easily and quickly.th

thAn interesting experiment. I have been reading the journals. Experimentation seems to be a unique quality of your species. I am guessing we depend on accidents more than purposeful seeking.th

thEither one will get to an answer eventually. You have time on your side. Our lives are short, so we try to find faster ways to an understanding. Does not always work of course. Sometimes the experimenter dies trying.th

thI do not want to die trying.th

thNeither do I Edwin.th

Di Eden

We arrived a ways away from the university. Early morning and very windy. We both wanted to get a feeling for any changes since we left a little over an eight day ago. On Di Eden it takes 32 days for the moon to circle the earth. One fourth of thirty two is eight. On Hu Eden it takes 28 days, hence a seven day 'week'. All logical. There was no moon around Sanctuary. But I am getting off topic.

I am not sure why White rushed us here, but I can guess in one word, Library. Who is she really and why did she become a 'friend' of White? Di are not used to deception like Raps and Hu are. They were the biggest and they generally get what they want by being the biggest. For the longest time their leaders were always the biggest in the clans. With Hu I heard the early clans were the same. With Rap it is the smartest. We depended on our wits to survive when the main threat is bigger and stronger than any of us, any five of us combined actually.

White points to the ground. Gold trip wires. What is it with 'thants and gold? You would think that a creature that could make and manipulate 'thn metal would think nothing of gold. A pretty, but inert metal that does not react with anything likely to be found normally. Never played a part in Rap culture. Last thing we needed was something that made us even easier to spot in the field. Some have taken an interest in it now because it can signify rank. I prefer reputation over shiny bits.

The gold goes completely around the outer periphery. There are other traps further in. Limiter traps. Clearly set up to prevent 'thants from sneaking up on them. Only 'thants hate being on the surface and prefer going underground.

Ah, further in there are 'thn metal spheres surrounded by gold and limiter fields.

They have been busy. White says to me. I nod. A curious Hu expression most of us have picked up. Easy and works. Of course I can say more in nonverbal Rap.

We move to the main road into the University. There are fences along the path, again with thin gold wires. I am surprised no one has tried to steal it. Maybe because it is too thin to be worthwhile, or because no one wants to be anywhere near the battle zone. It was nasty during the brief 'thant war. No more surprises.

There is now a gate with a high stone wall around the main buildings. Reminds me of the stories the Hu told about their ancient times. A 'thant

could burrow through the wall easily. Gold wires again on the other side of the wall. More like a mesh, a mesh smaller than a worker 'thant. Of course a warrior would just smash through all this without stopping.

They do not know about warriors I am guessing. I say to White.

Clearly not. This is making me even more suspicious. Library really does not know much about 'thants.

Or pretending not to know so as to put everyone at a disadvantage.

That is a Rap way of looking at it. Yeah, and what makes you think Library is a Di? I keep quiet. He has to figure this out himself. Theoretically she could have taken any form she wanted. Too much of a coincidence that she picks Di just at a time when a gullible Di they are about to ban from the center is present. I don't like it. White growls. I am guessing he does not either. Good.

The gate is closed of course. Otherwise what is the point. White rattles the bars, layered in gold of course. A 'thant could not 'rattle' the bars, but of course they would also not know to do that even without the gold.

All of this is for the benefit of the Di and Rap present. No way all of this would keep a 'thant invader out.

Ah, you got that too. Very interesting.

The gold and limiters do not go beneath the surface. A 'thant would just burrow under and come up in a closet or other closed room and gather there before coming out at night to attack. Too easy.

A low level undergrad comes over sleepily.

!What do you want? Go away. No visitors.! Oh, that really makes White growl. The student ignores him and goes back into the room next to the gate, likely to go back to sleep. It is early morning. Strange how the young Di have so much trouble with early hours. Best hunting time. The rodents are fat and slow from eating all night. Best time for a Rap snack.

We simply PS through the gate and continue our way to the admin building. At least where it was when we left. They did a lot in one eight day. Of course it could have all been done in an hour by a TK8. Probably not though. Best if you get everyone involved and 'taking ownership' as the Hu say.

My guess is the gate is only intended to keep norms out. Even a TK3 could likely get through that weak thing. White is stomping now to be sure and wake everyone up. No surprise visit here. Not like a Rap. I would have raided the admin building for information before anyone got into work. Di are more confrontational. Scary. The best fight is one you avoid. We are not cowards and will fight when we need to, but why risk unnecessary bodily damage. Of course all of this is meaningless to a high

TK. Still there are other eights and I believe Library is a nine. Still better to be careful.

!Welcome back White.! Library is the first to greet us. Not really surprised. She will be assessing us at the same time we are doing so to her. Di do not press mouth parts together as Hu do, but just rub up against each other. They do so now.

!Have there been any more encounters? We noticed the perimeter changes as we came in.!

!Why didn't you just come here? Would have been easier.!

!A nice walk and short run feel better. Meetings are boring.!

^RI am going to visit the Rap center and check in. Meet up for mid meal?^R

They both ignore me. I hope he does not get sucked into her trap again. He gave me his Sanctuary stone just in case. I think I could get there without one now. No matter.

Unlike the Di section, the Rap section is full of activity and I am greeted warmly.

^RWelcome back Professor Squeak. Have a good trip?^R

She is taller than me of course. I was the runt of the clutch. Of course I could be any size I want now, but find being small has a lot of advantages. Others underestimate you when you are smaller. Puu and Cat complained about it all the time, but it definitely worked to their advantage.

I ask, ^RAny 'thant activity?^R

^RNone. Surprising really. They nearly overtook us. Except for Jones coming in and removing the entire hidden nest at once, they would have. How is he doing, we have heard nothing?^R

^RHe is fine according to Silver. We are not allowed to visit him while he adjusts to his new surroundings. I trust Silver and Turtle.^R

I continue, ^RHow do you feel about the defenses?^R

She looks surprised, ^RI am a low rank, my thoughts are not important.^R

^RYou have been around Di too much. A pack cannot afford to silence even the lowest member. Everyone has eyes and ideas that others do not. Please feel free to tell me what you think.^R

^RI do not like them. What part of, they were living in tunnels below us, did they miss? Not a single measure to prevent them from doing the same again.^R

^RExcept for TKs monitoring for activity.^R I add.

^RAnd we know they have limiters that can handle us and prevent us from seeing them. Well, unless we get a group together into a sensor array. I suspect they are too lazy to do that very often. We are spread too

thin now anyway. The high TKs have gone world wide looking for activity. No Rap would hit in the same place, so that idea is good at least.^R

^RHave studies started again?^R

^RAll studies have been postponed indefinitely. We concentrate on war tactics instead. Incessant drills. I am TK4 now and it gets worse as you rise.^R

I show amusement, ^RI remember.^R

^RI need to get to class.^R I nod and she leaves in a hurry. Next they will be wearing watches to tell time. Not sure that is an improvement at all. The old ways are being forgotten.

I go to my assigned space. At least they have not given it away yet. Someone has decided to store stuff here though. Ah, history artifacts and other teaching aids not needed at the moment. Out of the corner of my eye something catches my attention. A Cat Box. What is that doing here. I go through the procedure to open it and it opens for me. I read the note inside. Interesting.

The lava below is still hot. Our trees have died and likely we will not be able to grow our own food for some time. At least it is winter. Free heating. How long will it take to cool? I wonder why they did not move it to some uninhabited location? Maybe to prevent them from building below us again. At least not soon. They were fairly deep though. They could still build closer to the surface, or elsewhere. This entire area is limestone and easy to borrow in. If I was them, I would go north of here and start over with heavy limiter fields.

Myra has taught me that violence is not always the right answer. Di and Rap culture, for that matter, Hu too, have a long history of violence. Why is that always the first choice? A dead enemy cannot hurt you, but a dead friend cannot help you either. Best to determine which before acting.

I wander about observing everyone as they get about their business. A few recognize me and we acknowledge each other, usually by hand signs. At least it is quieter than the Di section where they are more likely to be below at each other.

I hear booms and am curious. I go towards the sound, scanning ahead of me. Explosions. Strange. Who taught them that? Unstable chemical mixes. Not part of our history. Hu on the other hand. Who taught them this? Jones? Was he here long enough?

TKs that can make the devices make small spheres of unstable material and lower TKs advance them towards targets a few hundred meters distant. The devices are not large enough to take out the stone 'thant mod-

els, but you can tell if one hits. Some go off way too close for comfort, but everyone is shielded. Hu would use a detonation device so the explosive was more stable until needed. This means they were not taught everything the Hu know.

All of this seems like more show than practical. Are they worried that the high TKs will be targeted first and these lower level ones will be left to carry on? Makes sense to take out a leader. Another failing of the Di method. In a Rap pack, anyone can take over being lead without taking another breath. Served us very well. Of course the difference between a TK7 and a TK4 is a thousand fold. Not so in any pack.

I go to the library and no one is about. Strange. Are we a military now? No more scholars? I do not like it. I am sure the Ku and Ba cultures are not so encumbered. The more you spend on defense, the less time you spend on the living. Better to move along and get out of the danger zone.

I am early, but slowly make my way to the Di quarters to where we will have lunch. I am not looking forward to talking with Library. The more I see the more I think she is working against us or is very naive. There is no way the Regional Center could not know more about the 'thants. The 'thn made and rule the 'thants. They must want fluidic TKs to be ignorant, so they can be controlled if necessary. A fail safe as it were.

White has not asked for help and he can reach me anywhere here so I decide to go for a run instead of lunch with them, which my inclusion was never acknowledged. It is cool and there is a wind, but it feels good. I run out of the University towards the town. Surely when they removed the nest it would have affected the surrounding area as well. The nest was tens of kilometers long.

I was right, there are steam vents reaching the surface in places. This area is pretty wet from the winter rains and high seawater level nearby. Makes for high humidity even without the steam. Hate to think what it will be like in the summer. Everyone may have to move higher up the foothills to escape the heat. Too early for crops, but I can see the remnants from last year all about. Trees look better as I get further away from the lava field.

I am not wearing anything that would identify me as coming from the University, so no one pays any attention to me when I reach the town itself. It has not been that long and vendors are where I remember them. I get a few snacks to eat from a Rap vendor I have been to before. I can eat Di chow, just prefer Rap. Di really love melons for some reason. Too much water in them. They make you pee like crazy. Of course I can use TK to take care of it, but habits are hard to break. Come to think of it I

have probably had more Hu chow than Rap. No Hu vendors though. Too bad. I do love pizza. I should quit the University and open a pizza shop. I would eat the profits though.

In spite of the fact that many died at the University itself, I am not seeing much change here. Wait, over there. That is new. I go to see what it is.

^RWelcome to the Rap Baths,^R a Rap at the entrance calls to me. What is a Rap bath? I go in, paying the nominal fee. Inside I see a large room with a huge pool in the center. Rock edges and rock steps going into the water. The water is steaming? No one is wearing anything. Hu are funny about nudity. I see some washing off in stalls near the edge. They do this before entering the water. I follow the example and do the same.

Once in the pool I will admit I am impressed. I could definitely get used to this. Oh yeah. I nearly fall asleep. I scan about and yep, there are Di baths too. Given our size differences I can see why they are separated. It is hard to have Rap and Di eating places, sleeping places, etc. We work together in offices, agriculture and construction. Allowances and roles are made and adjusted.

When I come out I am very relaxed and clean. The air is fresh, the day in not even halfway over. White and Library are waiting for me outside. Shit. Picked up that expression from the Hu.

Sorry, but I really thought you did not need me for anything. Not even sure why I am here on Di Eden. Have you tried the baths? Wonderful.

They look at me like I am a creature from another world and then start laughing.

They have baths at the University too you know. White gives me a curious look.

^RI was out for a run and ended up here. Ate some food from a street vendor and then noticed the baths. Makes sense given the steam coming up from the ah, nest removal. There were steam vents the entire way here.^R

!One of the many positive aspects of Jones' actions.! Library says.

^RThere will be some negatives too come summer when the extra heat is not appreciated or wanted.^R

White sighs, !There are always side effects.! I sigh in response and nod.

^RWhat next?^R

!We may have a possible intrusion. Caves midway to east.!

^RLet's check them out then. I can't soak all day long.^R

!Could have fooled us. You seemed quite content.!

^RIt has been a long month. A very long month. You should try it. I think it helps me clear my head too.^R

We pop to the surface of the caves they mentioned.

Further east means it is later in the day. Getting to be near sunset. Sky is overcast too. I shield to keep warm. I sense the others doing the same.

I look about and scan at the same time. I know on the map there are caves here, but sure enough, I cannot scan any. Everything gets sort of fuzzy a few tens of meters below the surface. I do notice a cave entrance nearby and go to there.

!You are smaller Squeak, but be careful. Do not end up like Smith.!

^RI do not need to enter. They are here. Question is what do we do about it. No settlements nearby. They are not an immediate threat to anyone.^R

Library has been quiet so far, but as predicted she comes out with, ! We need to remove them. They will not stay here. Sooner or later they will build portals to other locations. They have killed us before. No reason to think they won't do the same this time. Even worse likely. They are mad at us now.!

^RHmm, did not know they had emotions.^R I quip.

!Don't be a smart Hu Squeak,! White suggests. Wish I knew where he was in relation to Library.

I go to the entrance and shout in my best 'thant, thWe are not a threat. You are safe.th

Library freaks out, !What the seven hells did you just say or do?!

White turns to her and tells her, !She told them we would not harm them.! Oh, he understands what I said. I have a new respect for him.

She is stunned, !How the hell did you learn to speak their language?!

^RWell, it turns out that on Ku Eden and Ba Eden the 'thants are not a threat, but an asset. They are accepted as part of their cultures and are welcome. In both cases they are making great contributions to the cities where they live. A mutual cooperation thing.^R

!Here comes one.! White tells us.

^RA worker. At least they have not escalated their defenses here yet.^R

!What does that mean? All 'thants are the same.!

^RNo, they are not. There are over fifty castes. Their culture is billions of years older than any of ours, going back to near the beginning of the universe in fact. They are NOT ants, though ants are based loosely on them. But even ants have at least four castes, worker, warrior, drone and queen.^R

!All thants must die. No exceptions.!

I walk up to the 'thant and hand it some lichens I have put in my pouch for this purpose. She takes it in her mandible and starts to eat it.

^RThey especially like the gray green foliose ones for some reason.^R

Library sits on the ground confused. That is a good sign. She could have gone ballistic and killed her instead.

White explains, !You have been told a whole lot of lies Library. 'thants are not a threat to us or anyone else. It is the 'thn overlords who are the threat. They know how we are likely to react to a creature like the 'thant and make use of that to scare us into doing stupid things, like fight them and each other. 'thants are fully capable of defending themselves. I hope you never experience some of their other castes. There is one who would be a challenge even to a TK9 if we were alone.!

!No, there is only the one size. We have never seen any others. Some variation between colonies on different worlds, but always near this size.!

I turn to 'thant, thIs is possible to talk with an assessor or negotiator?th

The workers are pretty stupid. They are used to following orders. I added the necessary scent and hand signals for it to be fooled into thinking I was authorized to give her an order.

Sure enough a much larger one comes out shortly and greets me. I bow in the proper response.

She knows I am not a 'thant and we can talk with her freely.

Library sits there blinking with her mouth open. Reality sucks.

thWe are here to negotiate a treaty and ceasefire between the local sentients and your colony.th

I am sure glad that Myra and Edwin gave me a crash course in 'thants before we left. This could have gone so, so wrong.

They sent me a Cat Box. It was in my room.

That explains a lot. I was beginning to think you were TK10.

Good timing it appears.

Earth One

What's the best place to hide something? In plain sight of course.

I assume my owl form. Feels so good to be back to my first form.

No Hu allowed. They sure made a mess of it. On earth two, Turtle insisted we give them another chance on New Hope, and then only with the Hopi. I insisted they could not stay in Hu form if we did. Now no one would recognize them if they happened on them.

Earth Two has been knocked down to 16th century level, pre-industrial. We will see. Drup has already run into a lot of trouble keeping them contained, tech wise. Maybe Rand should come back to help him. Need to raise some more candidates. Let Drup decide. It is his world now.

It took forever to clean up all the toxic and dangerous messes left behind on both earths. How could one species do so much to destroy their only world? Countless Hu screamed warnings and all were ignored. Most species that impact their surrounds too far die out from lack of resources much, much earlier. Not Hu. Their stupid minds and curiosity kept them going too long. Their stupid tribalism destroyed them. Monkey A got one more banana than I did. End of the world! NOT!

Calm down. No longer a problem. Yellowstone did most of the work on Earth Two anyway. At least life has come back roaring.

I soar over the savanna. Warm day, lots of updrafts to ride. Rain was good this year, lots of food to eat no matter your preference. The cats here are not TK. I smile, they are not doing so well on E2. Can't run things by laying about all day silly kitties. Interesting about the 'thant nest. The nests on Ku and Ba are doing well too. Not the horrors we were led to believe. Can we trust anything the 'thn taught us?

A raptor zeros in on me, but once she sees how large I am changes her mind and veers off. Smart birdie. Rabbits and other small game scatter at my shadow. TK, do not need to eat, but good you are reacting the way you should. Maybe you will survive to pass your genes on.

It is near late afternoon when I arrive at the herd. I count a few more since last time. The rains have been good for them as well. Without Hu to hunt them they now only worry about the lions and hyenas. Only the babies and the very old are in any real danger. Speaking of which, where are my two?

I placed trackers on them so I could find them quickly and see both of them playing in the shallow stream while the others eat. Close to the time when the lions hunt. They like the cooler temperatures and lower light so

they cannot be seen as easily. Guards have been posted. Good.

I land on the back of a large male nearby to watch them. It does look like fun. Maybe I should be one of them next time. Not crazy about grass and leaves, but a nice slow life without much stress. Most of the time.

I see two young lions in the tall grass hiding and watching, a brother and sister. I screech a warning and two large males walk slowly over to discourage any ideas on their part. Looks like the three newborns were getting their attention, they would be the most vulnerable. Not stable on their feet yet and forget running. A rabbit could outrun them at the moment. Adults surround them of course. The lions did not have a chance. The bull I am on decides to move closer to the two and three year olds. That means my two along with six others nearby. He calls and they all rush back to the herd. They will sleep the night together with the younger ones in the center.

I fly down and land near Smith and Jones in their new lives.

^EUncle Owl!^E the smaller one says. The herd complains about the noise.

I will mind talk so you do not wake anyone else up.

We have names! I am Ruff and he is Tumble. The other one says.

Good names for you two. I am glad you like it here and are fitting in. Any problems?

Ruff says, *Nothing we can't handle together.*

Aren't you afraid that when you grow up you will have to compete with each other? You are both males and that is what they do.

We are brothers forever. We will never fight each other.

We will work together to keep the other males at bay.

I laugh in my mind. That will be a change that will get their attention.

Now that it is dark I notice there is a fire pit. At first I thought it was an accidental left over from a lightning strike. What are they doing with a fire pit?

Fire is dangerous, I TP the lead female.

She snorts, *Keeps the lions away. We are careful. Happened after a recent lightning strike. We keep it going with dry branches and clearing everything else away nearby.*

The road to tech has begun. Fortunately the rains will stop it for awhile.

Uncle Owl, tell us a story! Tumble asks.

The rest of the herd knows about me of course and they all hear this through me. The boys do not have TK of any kind.

Okay, one story. How about the story of my early years. It falls silent.

They have heard it before, but the herd loves stories and tell them to each other every night. My turn. The racial memory is amazing. Their stories go back tens of thousands of years. Of course, more myth than fact that far back. Sort of like the Native American stories in a number of ways. It will be fun to come back in a few hundred years and hear them tell the tales of the great silver owl who visited them.

I was hatched on this world thousands of years ago in a land far, far away. I lived in a forest with lots of others. It was a happy childhood. I had lots to eat. My brother and sister both survived and were fed well too. I grew big and strong quickly.

I still remember my first flight. It was amazing. To be soaring through the trees free of the ground and the tree I grew up in. Lasted only a moment and I was on a branch of a tree a short distance away and lower down.

I flapped my wings and made my way back to our branch with my parents and siblings, who arrived after me one at a time. We spent the next few years together, helping to raise the next two year's clutches before we set out on our own to start our own families. Life was good. Game was plentiful.

Of course with so many of us surviving we needed to expand our range. This is the way of life. The consequences are also part of the way of life.

My brother was the first to die. He got too close to a Hu farm. Fenced in, guard dogs, and bang sticks. Owls are good for farms and he should not have had to worry. We eat the rodents that eat the food they have planted. Young Hu males are stupid though and will aim the bang stick at anything that moves and my brother made a very nice large target in the low light of an early morning. He died alone, abandoned by those who killed him. My sister was the one who finally found him and tasted the bang stick pellets in his bones.

Only Hu hunt others they do not eat. They even hunt each other. They poison the ground they live on. They destroy forests, grasslands, streams, even the mountains themselves. We learned to stay well away from the Hu and their evil ways. But the Hu kept having more and more offspring, who needed more and more land, causing more and more damage to everyone's homes and lives.

We were eventually crowded into smaller and smaller areas to survive. For some reason I never grew old like the other owls. I watched everyone I ever knew die one at a time. This is not a good thing, for all must follow the ways of life. I knew I was cursed. I survived as witness to

the destruction by and of the Hu. This is the only explanation.

I left the forests of my youth and ventured into the stone cities of the Hu. The very air itself was poisonous and yet they did not seem to care. Their stone dwellings kept getting larger and larger, with more and more of them. They invented metal things that moved them from place to place without muscles. These all made more poison for the air, water and ground.

Thousand of species died out completely. Everyone else suffered horrible lives just trying to stay alive. It did not matter where you were. All suffered from the cold of the far away to the heat of the water-less regions.

How could this continue? Why were they allowed to do this to everyone else who lived in our world. Surely Gaia would intervene and stop this madness, but she remained silent.

Your kind suffered nearly the most. Free for countless generations, more and more were hunted with bang sticks. The dead left to rot after a few meaningless body parts were removed for reasons none of ever understood. This caused us to adapt of course. These body parts got smaller and smaller to the point where they were not noticeable any longer. The killing stopped, but your lands were purposely burned. The wonderful grasses gone. The succulent bushes and low trees gone. It was almost better to be killed quickly than to die slowly. Even the water of these land became unsafe to drink. The rains stopped coming because the land no longer called the rains to come.

Everyone was asleep by this point except for the few guards on duty. Time for me to do a sweep of the area to check on everyone I know. I am still upset that I continue to find pockets of Hu destruction that we somehow missed.

I swoop down to the fire pit first to be sure it is not a danger. It had to happen eventually. They are very intelligent. This was how the Hu first discovered fire. I hope they do not follow the same stupid path. How much does Ruff remember of his Hu life. His form is totally different and skills learned as a Hu are not that easy to transfer. Agriculture would make more sense than fire. Maybe I will suggest that next trip. Not the stuff of rows, but of scattering the seeds in areas they will grow to help expand the range of a desired food a little bit at a time. The willful destruction of all other species will not be tolerated.

Except for an amazingly long life my TK abilities did not appear for thousands of years. I spent the time learning and watching. Measure twice, cut once. I needed to understand how Hu social organizations

worked. How they could be steered. How disasters could be prevented. But in the beginning I did not know any of this. I was just fascinated by the tech that the ingenious Hu kept coming up with.

Around the 19th century Hu tech time on Earth One (note that E2 was behind tech wise about three hundred years, spending an extended time in the Medieval epoch), Qr'thn showed herself and agreed to raise me to high TK. I convinced her that I really was a new incarnation of the Silver line by describing past incarnations in detail. I was not born with this information. I needed to have studied Hu for some time to put the dreams and stories into context. Nothing like owl society and ways. When born I had nothing I could relate the stories to.

Unfortunately I was so enamored with tech that I made the mistake of following the 'shiny' path instead of the smart one. Raising TKs like crazy, TK tech advancing in leaps and bounds, visiting other worlds and intelligent species from the regional center and beyond. You know the rest, we all ended up at Farout. Took me hundreds of years to crack the code to get back here. By the time I did the Hu on E1 had gone extinct, leaving their mess behind of course. At least it was the usual plague, collapse of tech, loss of knowledge on how to do anything, eventual die off of increasingly small pockets. I spent some time cleaning the world up in anticipation of a new species rising. Br'thn helped, Sauron was so pissed at the collapse of the Hu that he took off and has not been seen since. A sixty five million year disappointment. I could sympathize.

It was not until the early 21st century, E2 time, that I got together with Turtle, Randy, Droopy and Snap, all long time companions left over from Farout. The latter three rescued from Magenta. I left everyone else in Farout. I wanted to start over with TKs I trusted, ones that were not interesting in empire building or revenge. None of my crew held our Farout sentence against the 'thn. We blamed ourselves. As you can guess we are reluctant to encourage any tech, TK or otherwise.

When E2 collapsed from Yellowstone and more plagues, Randy and Droopy staid on E2 to guide and watch the survivors. Limiting them to Eurasia with the Cats inhabiting the Americas. Nothing above 16th century tech. It seemed to be going well. Lately Hu have been getting cocky again and will have to be watched closely.

Meanwhile Turtle, Snap and I started New Hope with a remnant Hopi group. A radical departure. A desperation measure. Time will tell.

Which brings us to Puu and Cat. What are we going to do with them? Their tech is not spreading beyond the closed circle. We are not creating empires, contaminating other sentient species outside the Earth multi-

verse. That will not be allowed to happen. Going to be tricky. After what happened at the center, it will be hard to keep what we are doing a secret. We are protecting ourselves. That is how I am justifying it for now.

Next time, it will not be Farout. I know the 'thn overlords are scared. They should be. We are playing with TK nuclear fire. I know that. I think the rest do too. The question is, can we contain that damned Hu curiosity? And will the 'thn not pull the plug on everything? The final option of last resort.

Sanctuary

"Well that was certainly strange," Cat quips.

"Noticed that Turtle disappeared as soon as we touched down. Is that us in a few thousand years? By the way, how come it is always me that writes about our adventures and never you?"

"Believe me, you would not like what I write. You are doing fine. We each have our strengths."

"And me doing the dirty work is one of them." I tease her.

"My experiments are important. Saved us many times."

"And got us into that position in the first place. I am sure if we had been plain corn mush TKs we would not be on their hit list."

"WHAT THE HELL! I am sensing 'thants at the old site. I thought we shut that down and hardened it."

"There are hundreds of them. What was White thinking of? I can't find him. I sense Edwin in the library. He does not seem concerned. Oops, incoming."

Myra pops in out of breath. When was the last time anyone saw a TK out of breath? Randy comes in after her. He is fine.

"Please do not hurt them. They are invited. It is all cool."

"Cool? When did you learn that expression?"

Randy, "She means she negotiated a peace treaty with the 'thants."

Turtle comes in, "A what?"

"So, where is White? I thought he was holding the fort," Cat asks.

Myra sighs, "He was, but he and Squeak popped out in a hurry. I believe they are on Di Eden. Randy and I never went on our adventure."

"Thank goodness. Leave poor Edwin alone."

"Oh, he was most helpful, well, not physically, but his knowledge during negotiations. I think this really surprised the 'thants."

"They were surprised from the moment you addressed them in their language," Randy laughs.

This gets Cat's attention, "You speak 'thant?"

"Randy does too now. You can copy my talent if you want. You will find it useful."

I turn to Turtle, "How long were we gone? Is this what happens when you leave the young-uns alone? Sigh, I will never make a good parent." Everyone laughs.

Turtle calms us down, "Explain. Now!" Ah, oh.

"Gracie and George reported in that a 'thant intrusion was imminent.

They are watching the nest by the way. In case you were wondering where they were and why they did not check in."

"They have taken our kids from us too," I comment to a dirty look from Turtle. Can't help it. We are obviously not under immediate threat. Chill out Mom.

"Using TP Randy and I talked with Edwin about what to do. The first 'thant to appear was a worker of course. I was polite and asked that she get a negotiator for us. One arrived and we assured her we had no intention of hurting the nest as long as they stayed on their side of the planet. I assured her we were fully capable of taking out parasites, warriors and entire nests if need be. She went back in and two admins came out to agree to the terms."

"She also told them about the successful agreements in Ku, Ba and E2. I am sure the nests are all interconnected so this was easy to confirm."

"I also learned something interesting. The warriors are the way they are because of force feeding, abuse and gold. It appears," She turns and Edwin is with us now. Guess he feels safer when Myra is here.

"As I was saying it appears gold is like instant unimaginable pain to a 'thant. Embed gold all over inside a warrior body and they literally go crazy."

Turtle, "Okay, and you know this because? Warriors are not anything to play with Myra. You are too new to this."

"It's okay, Randy was with me." Randy looks at the ground sheepishly. I'll bet.

Cat asks, "What did you do Myra?"

"The negotiations went much better after they sent in a warrior to test us."

Randy, "She removed the gold from its body and it immediately stopped and became as docile as a pussy cat."

I nearly faint and Turtle is ready to blow her top.

I scan, sure enough, it is a ways off gently grazing lichens. I mean a ways off from here.

"You brought it back with you?"

"Well the 'thants were never going to come out with her staring at them were they?"

Rand, "She has found a new pet. Even Edwin is not afraid of it any more."

She is still scary big, but harmless now. Less thinking than a worker even. Edwin finally comments.

"Not high on strategy then, just mayhem and destruction. Good to know."

"Ah guys, White and Squeak have just come out of an over sized nest tunnel. They appear to be helping them organize where to put things."

Turtle throws up her hands just as Silver pops in looking confused.

"You won't believe what the kids have done this time dear." We nearly die laughing.

We pop to the nest. Clearly we need to be there. Edwin goes back into the library. I don't think he is quite comfortable showing his still alive self to a nest yet.

Both White and Squeak are talking to the workers in 'thant. Of course.

"Okay, you win Myra, give it to me. Might as well do everyone else too while you are at it." Turtle, Silver, Cat and I sit down with Myra in the center.

"I got it all from Edwin of course. I gave it to White and Squeak just before they left, figuring it might turn out to be useful. Okay here we go. I am still new to this." Turtle growls. Do turtles growl?

Nearly knocks me out. That is a lot of information all at once. I notice that I need to use TK to modify my air passages when speaking 'thant. Makes sense. I am sure we all still speak with an accent.

"Each colony has its own vocabulary of course. This tells us they are of the same genetic lineage as Edwin anyway. Would not have turned out so well if they weren't." I could imagine that Myra. How much luck can one Hu have?

White comes up to us, "I see you have noticed a few changes. Squeak negotiated a treaty on Di Eden without even knowing Myra had done the same here."

"And the nests are all interconnected."

"Right, getting them to make a wider portion to the portal tunnels means we do not even need TK to go between 'thant positive worlds now. New Hope is still out of touch of course. Should be easy to remedy. I think I understand their portal system now. More efficient than our solidic forms. Nothing beats our own DS abilities or Cat's stonics of course. Cat I am sure you will want to learn about them." White and Cat go off together to inspect one that is out in the open. Another Rap comes through, drops off a large package and then goes back in. All like it is a routine boring task done hundreds of times.

"Any comments Silver," Turtle turns to him.

"Excellent. This goes way beyond what I was hoping for. Qr'thn will be very pleased." He pops out. I am guessing to report. How does he

know where she is at any given moment? Guess that is why he is the oldest and the one closest to her.

Turtle asks, "What is happening here now then?"

"Well the initial work went so well the nest and we decided to drop all formality and join forces. Turns out they hate the 'thn telling them what to do too. Sanctuary has become a true sanctuary for all the misfits on our multi-earths."

"I don't think I can go on any more field trips Puu and Cat. This is way too much to come back to. We were not gone that long even. This should have taken centuries to work out. Everyone be careful. Anything worked out this quickly is likely to have unforeseen problems and consequences."

"I am personally convinced that Myra could make friends with Satan and he would be overjoyed at the prospect." That gets everyone laughing again. We are just a happy group I guess.

Randy comments, "I think I need some chocolate. Hot chocolate, chocolate cake with chocolate icing coming up back at our new home." He pops out. It only takes a moment for everyone else to as well. Even Cat gets the message and briefly says something to White before popping out. I am the last to go, sigh, and pop out too.

One problem, their current portal ends up in the middle of a shallow sea on New Hope. One problem at a time I guess.

Progress

Guess I am the recorder as usual. I know the others can write. Everyone is just too lazy and I am too anal to let it go. Sigh.

Edwin has come out of his shell, so to speak, exoskeleton and all. He now has an apartment on the third floor of the library. From here he can oversee the growing complex below.

We showed them how to make roofs that look like natural terrain. 'thants like to be under cover, but we need more space, well, because we are larger. Except for a warrior, of which there is an entire herd a few hundred kilometers away, the second largest 'thant is horizontal even as long as we are tall.

The warriors are interesting. They are well behaved and the 'thants use them as cattle, complete with culling for food purposes. None of the rest of us need meat, but their culture goes back billions of years. Can't change everything overnight. This is a huge change for them as is. Even with the culling, the warriors are clearly better off. Others who would have been 'culled' instead are happier and glad to be working longer. Edwin is even better off. He is no longer on the cull list and is able to use the colony library as needed. This is a big plus to everyone. He gets information from our library to help the 'thants and we get information from them to help us understand everything.

So much is becoming clear my head spins.

For some reason, this incarnation, a group of bully 'thns got this idea that they were the masters of the multiverse. Silver will tell you this was NEVER the case or intention. They provide structural support, but were never intended to rule. Qr'thn and a few others recognize this and have no problems with their roles. Just like the very, very subtle change this time that allowed Cat and I to exist, it also allowed the bullies to exist as well. I don't understand the connection, but I am sure there is one.

Our task, should we decide to accept it, is to put things right. So, explain to me why incarnations are different, if once you see the difference you try to erase it? Shouldn't we be waiting and watching to see how all of this plays out? Especially given there is really nothing to lose by waiting and watching.

Cat of course just sees this as a new puzzle to play with. A higher level, but still a game. "We are not prey" is still our mantra and she has no intention of be bullied by anyone.

Speaking of Cat. She works with 'thant techs to improve tech on both

sides. The stuff they are coming up with should scare the 'thn metal out of the 'thn bullies. I can't help but feel that they are doing the same. You don't live to be fourteen billion years old without figuring a few things out. I am sure they know tons of stuff we have never thought of.

Time. We are still existing in normal time. Is this safe? 'thn exist for the long game, but once a decision has been made, they can strike insanely fast. We have no real defense against this except shielding. Can we react in time? I have my doubts. Are we too concentrated? They could get all of us at once here. On the other hand, spread out we would be easier to pick off one at a time. I would never make a general. I see too many what-ifs. This of course drives Cat crazy and I have to leave the room when I get this way.

Well, so far at least, we are staying on earth worlds. No venturing out into the greater multiverse. That was what got 'thn's attention the first time and everyone got banned to Farout. We are only just beginning. Library keeps insisting we need to be telling others what we have learned. Problem. Out 'thant friends represent only one colony. There are countless colonies out there. Each will fight the other to the death if encountered. I suspect this was built into them by the 'thn to keep things compartmentalized. There is no way currently for the 'thants to gang up and take out the 'thn. Not that that would be a good idea. What happens to the universe if you take away the structural elements? Maybe taking them out is the wrong idea, need to control them and put them back into their original role.

On the other hand we are going way beyond what Silver and Turtle figured out on their own and they were already feared by the 'thn. They break all the rules for fluidics. They can do things, like go from one end of the universe to the other with just a thought. We are not supposed to be able to do that. Even the solidics have trouble with the idea and they are supposed to be at least three TK levels above us. Scary. Now add Cat traps and all the things we are coming up with together and we have a huge target on our backs. Will we be ready in time?

Tridon Eden is now a new emergency escape world. We have portals that do not remain open we, 'thants and earthers can activate and use quickly. The entire colony and all of our the earth TKs can go there with a Cat Stone to meet up. I think we need several more hidden safe worlds. They are working on it. Tridon was chosen because it is SO different from the rest of the earths we have joined together.

Oh, I should mention that the worlds, Ku Eden and Ba Eden at least are benefiting from our tech exchange and dialog. Both worlds are mak-

ing life easier for everyone. This is a real joy to see. Thank you Myra for having the courage to try making new friends. Yeah, well, turns out the Tridon blimps are sentient in the same way that whales are on E1 and 2. No tech, but lots of stories. Myra has a favorite and she gets together with it (they have three genders of course and Standard lacks the words for such) regularly. She makes a shell that roughly resembles a blimp and drifts with them on her vacation time.

We all get regular time off now and are forced to take it. There are many more worlds to explore and most do this, but even time spent alone is positive. We need to decompress from the constant change and fear.

We are learning a lot from the 'thants about flexible predictability. A strange concept whereby new experiences can be accepted by using established ideas. Their library has billions of years of encounters to learn from. Very little surprises them. We did of course. But, get this, they had a prophesy that said they would eventually meet us. I suspect Qr'thn may have hidden that in their knowledge. It is Edwin's and Myra's job to search their records for any more information we should know about.

Edwin is the funny one. He came from constant interaction with other 'thants, but now likes to spend his vacation time alone. Picking up habits from the earthers or from being alone a lot of the time when with us. He learned it does not kill you and has many advantages.

Shit, I just figured out why the 'thants are keeping a herd of warriors going. Most colonies only have a few warriors ready for battle at any given time. Most are wasted as they only last so long once gold primed. Ours can put hundreds into a battle at a moments notice. That is scary.

Tridon

Puu pushed me to write down some of my experiences on Tridon. I do not come here to be a scientist recording everything I see. I come here to be in the most peaceful environment that could be imagined. Drifting on the wind, circumnavigating the globe, seeing the world from your seat. Amazing. Add in the stories from old and recent. Wow. There is so much to learn about how to live in a peaceful culture.

Well, not entirely. They are carnivores after all. Just that there are enough natural disasters and accidents to keep the population in check without resorting to killing each other. But, there is no doubt about it, there is blood, lots of blood. Hydrogen can leak out of their sacks and so it must be replenished constantly. This means eating constantly. They can feed from the seas and the lands. They come from above, grab what they want and ascend into the heavens again.

Some of the locals are learning to protect themselves. A sharp object does wonders for a gas bag. Once down, they are the prey instead of the predator. It takes several years to go around once and they live, on the average, for several turns. That makes the oldest about twelve years old. The youngest mere minutes after budding off a parent. The odds are on their side. They do care for young, who remain attached to the parents for at least a half rotation. They do herd together for protection from storms and mountains. They defend themselves with their talons directed mostly downward.

The world looks pretty uniform at first glance, but is actually quite variable. Hence the stories. It helps everyone remember what to hunt and how to hunt it in each location. Some locations are so full of prey that everyone is on their own. Other locations they herd prey together into larger groups to make it easier.

I of course do not partake of the local food. Poisonous, not that I could not counteract it. But it would have no nutritional value given the fifty amino acids, six nucleotides and triple stranded DNA, bizarre sugars, fats, proteins, etc. Nope, not worth it. They accept me, because I have become a good healer. I can't bring someone back from the dead, but I can rescue a downed flier and fix a punctured sack. I am sort of a good luck charm. I have had to adapt my capsule quite a bit to fit in more. I really do not want to draw too much attention to myself.

They call themselves the Wind Walkers. Translation is not perfect of course. Everything is based on three here. They have three eyes, three

tentacle claws to reaching down and grab food. Digestion is in and out the same orifice. Sex is strange, as I am sure we would be to them as well. One of the three is the 'mother' and they other two contribute one strand of DNA each. They only need one long chromosome and not the twenty three we have. Mutations are enough to keep variability going, but all in all it appears to be a pretty stable world. Everything is soft bodied, so no fossils to look into the past.

"Holy Mother of the Sea! What is that?" It looks like a Wind Walker on steroids and then some. It must be a hundred meters long with a huge triplex lift sack. The others around me have seen it too and everyone is trying to hide. We go lower and nestle into the 'trees'. I just hope this thing does not eat trees. I scan it like crazy. There are all kinds of helper creatures all over it. Sort of like cleaner fish on a shark. It is an entire ecology onto itself.

Listening in on the conversations I get that their word for this is simply, Death. I can see why. Looks like another flock/herd of Wind Walkers got too close. They are descending, but not fast enough. Death reaches out and snags several at a time to feed into its maw. It is a very messy eater with lots of body parts falling to the ground. The triders are going to eat well today.

It floats over us slowly. Nobody moves. We were lucky enough that another flock was seen first. It must be full or we are hidden well enough. Once it is gone I make motions to rise again. I want to see what is happening. Scanning is great, but not the same as eyes. I am tugged down. No one else is ascending. I scan in the direction Death came from and I see a huge storm. It rides the storm fronts to use less energy. I would imagine it would take a lot of chow to keep that thing going. Even if it somehow harvests the hydrogen from its food, it will need help to move.

The Wind Walkers have simple fins they can wave to get some propulsion, but it appears everything in the sky is largely dependent on the prevailing winds that circumnavigate the globe. Not perfect of course or we would never leave the equator. Rarely reaches the poles which are ice free. The ocean currents can circumnavigate as well. No land masses large enough to completely obstruct the currents. If they get an ice age everything will change of course. Given that they likely evolved at least millions of years ago and are a very poor design for an ice age, my guess it has been awhile if ever this world has seen one. Maybe the smaller moon, which means lower tides helps? The faster day increases wind speed though. Never seems to be below fifty kph, even on a calm day.

The stories. I was going to talk about their stories before we were so

rudely interrupted. Glad I got to see Death. Glad I was not close. Of course I would have been safe, but still creepy to get eaten by something so much bigger than yourself. I am sure Puu will want to get inside to check out how it works. Leave her the biology stuff.

The stories are songs. Similarity to whales is probably not surprising. Deep low sounds for long distance and higher pitches for close quarters. At night we huddle together and this is when the story telling starts. I try not to miss one while I am here. I can also work on any injured at the same time. The others will pull me to whomever needs help. Not too many today. A juvenile snagged a tentacle and lost it when in the trees. An easy fix. It would have regenerated on its own, but it is much harder to eat with just two and young ones really need to eat to get big enough to avoid being prey from larger triders and other ground dwellers when they feed.

Oh good, tonight's tale is from the long ago past. They believe their distant ancestors were once sea living creatures. They escaped the sea to avoid large undersea triders. I should say that triders are three legged crustaceans basically. They range in size from nearly microscopic parasites on everyone and everything to massive ten meter ambush predators you do not want to meet.

The basic lineage seems to be they first developed the air sack. This allowed them to range higher in the water column. Smaller species had already figured this out, so there was plenty of food at first. Not having much in the way of locomotion meant they were still easy prey for anything faster. The air sack was replaced with hydrogen gradually and they spent more and more time above the waves. Eventually they got high enough that they could go over land, over the tops of trees, mountains and across the few deserts on their path. A lot of them got snagged in branches until this stage was over. It was the smaller lighter infants that succeeded at first. Not a good way to pass on information though.

There are other floating species as well, but they do not brood their young, instead dropping them into the sea to take their chances. They make up for the low odds by dropping thousands. Wind Walkers generally have one at a time each. I said they had three genders, more like they have one gender of which they can role play the other two depending on circumstances. Yes, they do have favorites, lovers if you will.

The larger Wind Walkers were the largest creatures I had seen until Death made an appearance. Most species depend not on size, but numbers. Even the largest creature can be taken down if there are enough of you with fangs, poisons, etc.

Their stories tell of great groups, not individuals. That is different from the Hu. The group is everything. Everything for the group. Not that different from the 'thants except they do not have castes, just young and adults. Stories start and end at a location decided on at the beginning of the story. All stories are one trip around the world. Telling the stories helps everyone be ready for whatever might happen on their current trip.

As this is a story from time past, it tells of the evil lachers. A sort of spring loaded creature that could shoot a barbed dart at low floating Wind Walkers. All of the lacher fields are well mapped now and we either work hard to get around them or go high enough to be out of reach. Of course, no one feeds during this time. Starvation is a common theme as well. The four horsemen of the apocalypse here are plagues, lachers, Death and starvation. Not that different from us. Until today I did not have a face to put on Death. I can see why it is one of the four now.

I have scanned lacher fields to learn about them. They bud asexually and can fill a hill top quickly. Without easy access to Wind Walkers they catch smaller prey now. They are sort of like Venus fly traps in that they can use sunlight as well, but need the nitrogen from meat to grow. No bright colors or fragrant smells to lure in unsuspecting prey. Give it time and they will figure that out too. There were carnivorous plants in the wet meadows near Crab Cove. Fascinating variety and fun to watch.

I guess I had better get back to Sanctuary. My vacation time is nearly up. They will want to hear about Death. I will let someone else scan to determine how many they are. Can't be that many or someone would have seen them before.

Getting back is easy now that we have installed a Hu-'thant portal that only TKs can activate and use. The locals here would not last long on any of our worlds and would likely freak out the locals there as well.

I have one of Puu's bots with me. We all have been assigned one for safety reasons. We need a better word though. I like calling mine Companion generically and Ila specifically. She actually asked to go into the center of Death to check it out. I did not want to risk losing her, so said no. What happens when she reaches the terrible twos and starts rebelling against my wishes, even when she starts to make sense. I think Puu and Cat have made me a mother against my will. Can you imagine a teenage Companion? Horror!

New Hope

Silver and Turtle left first. Then Puu and Cat over the Regional Center tiff. Next Smith and Jones. That leaves myself, Marie. Then Mike, Sam and Tia. I know that Randy and Droopy run Earth Two most of the time by themselves, but we are newish to this stuff.

Life is pretty slow. We eat one meal a day together. The rest we are on our own. We all help out now. Not fair to make Tia and Sam do all the grunt work. We take turns doing world scans and physical spot checks. No activity at the lava bed that Jones left us. Not surprising there. Sort of the nuclear method to remove a problem.

We do get regular reports by Cat Box and know the 'thants are no longer the enemy, if they ever were. This particular colony anyway. We still need to keep an eye out for any other colony muscling in on their territory. I doubt they could be of any benefit here. Turtle and Silver spent too much time setting things up. Everything just sort of works.

Oh, I forgot, Snap is still here as well. We never see her though. Keeps to herself deep in the sea. We let her maintain the oceans. Guess technically that is close to 80% of the surface. We should stop complaining.

Yes, the tit fairies are still annoying. They will steal anything, even if it takes a hundred of them to lift it. Magnets frustrate them. We use iron based utensils and then turn on a large electromagnet on to hold everything in place when we leave. Mechanical locks do not work. They always find some way in. There is no such thing as personal property to them. All of the Cat Traps are missing now. This is scary. They do not affect the fairies, but we could accidentally trip one doing something else. It was so much easier when they were all in Cat space. We could avoid that easily.

"Hey Marie, check this out," Mike calls. I walk over and he hands me a beer. Still don't know why we keep making the stuff.

"What?"

He takes a long swig and then points to the ground.

"Shit, 'thants. Get the ID kit. We have to make sure these are ours."

The kit pops into Mike's hands. Sam and Tia come over too.

We can't ID one until it emerges from the tiny first portal. That could take days. We can maintain ourselves forever if we have to. No one died of boredom.

"Nearly out." That was really fast. What's the hurry?

A worker comes out and holds still. It knows we need to ID it. That

alone works good enough for me. Any other colony would take one look at us and go back in the portal to hide.

"Passes ID," Mike announces.

I use hand signals to signal, "Welcome." I know the others all speak 'thant now, but we saw no reason to learn a language we thought we would never need.

Tia says, "We need to give them space. They are apparently building something."

"And time," Sam adds.

"Back to work everyone. Sam and Mike are on dinner detail tonight. Try to come up with something new please. Tacos are getting old."

"Get us a new cookbook and we would be happy to. We have to eat the stuff too." They are smiling when Mike says this of course. He loves Hopi tacos.

We arrange the dinner table so we are all facing the growing structure. Much bigger than the last one they were attempting to build in the ruins of the beer tanks.

"It is getting big enough for a Hu to step through." Sam suggests.

"You mean Puu or Cat. Not sure you would fit yet."

"You don't think this is their doing do you?"

"Who else? Beginning to look like a Stargate, without the strange symbols around the edge."

"Stargate? What have you been eating Sam?"

"Old sci-fi story. Never mind."

Well it takes days for it to be finished. The scaffold was really only the beginning. Solid 'thn metal, quantum level, insanely complex. Not my thing at all. I am TK8. I can see all the details of the circuits. Just no clue how it all works. I could probably make a duplicate if I had to, but not adjust it to work differently.

"Not tacos again! Come on you two." We have this discussion a lot. More teasing than any real feeling behind it.

The center turns totally black. I mean blacker than the blackest night. We have those here everything as we have no light pollution. So, it is really black.

We used to be able to see New Hope though the hole. Not any longer. Appears to be a room? That does not make sense.

A door open inside the view we are looking at. There is light on the other side of the door. We can see a silhouette. Not Hu. The door closes and a Rap comes into our space.

"Squeak!" Tia yells and runs to hug her. The rest of us line up to do

the same. Sam hands her a few tacos which she accepts and inhales.

"Not enough hot sauce Sam. Are you getting weak being here with nothing to do?"

"Hey, we did not choose this isolation. What's happening out there. We see you weren't kidding about working with the 'thants now. Still sort of creepy though."

She shrugs, "You get used to them. Just be careful not to step on one. They break and 'thn metal is really sharp."

Mike comments, "Good safety tip." Mike is on his knees looking at one close up, who is returning the favor and looking at him.

Squeak says something to the 'thant in some sort of clicking language and the 'thant goes back into the portal.

"You speak their language? What did you say?" I ask.

"Teach me please!" Tia asks. Yeah, what she said.

"Patience."

"Whoa, that is one big 'thant." A much larger one comes through.

"Everyone, this is Edwin. He is one of us and now a TK8 just like we are. Please respect him as such." Why wouldn't we?

It is a pleasure to meet the ones whom Squeak grew up with.

The fairies know Squeak, but they do not know the 'thants and Edwin in particular.

"Tit fairies. What took them so long?" Mike asks.

"I set up a distraction for them a kilometer away so we could eat in peace." Tia admits. We usually just shield ourselves, but the sound of them hitting the shield can be annoying too. They actually like tacos. Causes a lot of gas in them though. Tit fairy farts are near lethal in their pungency after tacos.

I am sort of in charge when no one else steps up, so I ask, "To what do we owe this honor? A portal seems to be overkill just to come visit?"

"What she means is are we being allowed out of prison?" Mike is more blunt.

"What he means is that it gets frightfully boring here." Tia says.

Everyone looks at Sam, "I'm good. Just living in the moment."

Hu are strange.

"Yes they are Edwin. Yes, they are." We all start laughing. This apparently confuses Edwin even more.

I sigh, "We get a little silly with nothing much to do."

There is much to do. Please come with us to a secret lair.

"What, where did he learn about lairs?" Sam asks.

"Cat of course. She is the master of secret lairs. Yes, this is one of

hers. We did not want to make a direct route to New Hope in case someone we don't want comes the other way. The lair is on a black earth." Meaning, nothing there. No life, no air, no water, nothing.

Please follow us. Edwin goes back through the portal.

"Wait, all of us? Who takes care of New Hope then?"

Squeak looks at us, "Really? Do you think New Hope needs your help? The only real threat was 'thants and they are on our side now. They have no interest in New Hope. Not enough lichens after all the changes. I doubt anyone from any of the earths would be interested. I am sure the stupid fairies will not miss you." Cute Squeak.

"When will be back? Do I take my stuff with me?" Sam asks.

"You need stuff? You can't just make it again when you need it? Besides you will all need to be fitted with new tech. Everything here is grossly out of date and of no value."

"Okay troops. Let's go. No more lollygagging." We file in one at a time, with Squeak taking up the end. Hope she closes the door.

Dark Earth

Maria passes me the journal to keep. I almost never have this task, so I am nervous about what should be included. I set my shields when we go through the portal. They said no air, water, etc. Is this place at a vacuum?

The corridor we are in is black in color, as is the floor and ceiling. There are TK lights set at intervals, but there is a wall a few tens of meters ahead of us. Air is present and it is warm enough, maybe 18 C. I lower my shield. I feel others doing the same.

"Whoa, we are at least a kilometer below the surface. We should be burning up. Oh, the core is solid iron and at absolute zero. Good thing the walls are insulated. Hate to see their heating bill."

"Pay attention. There is a maze ahead of us. Learn the route in case you have to get back here without TK."

"You mean like if under attack? Shit." Mike does not look happy. Why do you think they put it here Mike? Certainly not for the scenery. I scan the surface. Featureless. I would have expected mountain and canyons, low areas at least. Nope. No more than a kilometer difference in heights. I am guessing there is no moon either. Gravity is a little higher. So, no impact of a Mars sized world either. Are we even in the earth multiverse?

"Have you scanned this place yet? It is HUGE. Hundreds of kilometers, no, more. It goes all the way around the planet."

Squeak says, "Not quite. We hope to have nearly an underground sphere soon."

"I am not scanning any 'thn metal except from the 'thants. Sure are a lot of them."

"Is this a large portion of the colony? Is the Queen present?"

"There are chambers for the Royalty if needed. This is a last ditch escape location. The entire colony could fit here if necessary, but only a portion are here presently helping to set everything up. A majority will go back to their current worlds soon."

"Is that even safe, putting all your 'thants in one basket?" Mike of course. Ha-ha.

"No, other provisions have been made too."

Edwin is communicating with some other 'thant about his size. We continue past him following Squeak. We enter a large chamber with a lot of tech. Monitors of some design I have never seen, even when back on earth two before the plague. Most are at 'thant height, but there are others for Hu, Ku, Di and Ba. We see representatives of all the common earth

TKs. This is huge.

"Gather around." Squeak stops in an open area that must be for the purpose of having meetings. "You can make a chair if you want from the mass in the center. Please put it back on the pile afterwards please."

Mike just floats like he has an invisible chair. Marie shakes her head. Sam looks like he wants to do the same, looks at me, and changes his mind. We stand. Soon, Mike drops the act and stands too. Squeak looks annoyed. And this is why we were not included earlier.

I ask, "Why are we here. I doubt very much we can contribute anything. Looks like everything is well in hand. I doubt you need someone to make Hopi tacos or Cowboy chili."

Squeak smiles, "As much as I miss Cowboy chili, that is not the reason. The reason is we are expecting the worst. Hopefully it will not happen, but we need to be prepared. As you know the 'thn overlords are not happy with our TK tech accomplishments. If they knew what we have now they would destroy all earths at once."

"Can they do that? Doesn't that go against their code? I thought they could only discipline TKs, not whole worlds."

"Do you really want to test that Sam?"

"No. What do you have that has them so upset? A multiverse reset button?" Mike asks.

"Without 'thn this time?" Marie asks.

Squeak remains silent. Holy Mother of God. I have not had that thought in a long time.

"Each of you needs to be trained in how to get along in here, in case you are called back to do so. Tia and Sam will train first, Marie and Mike second. Marie and Mike, you need to go back to the portal where a portal 'thant will assist you in getting back to New Hope. Training takes a few months depending on how fast you catch on. Pay attention. You will need to know how to get here from the portal and how to get back without help, without TK."

"Guess this was a waste of time for us Marie. Could have said all this back on New Hope."

"Don't be an ass Mike. You would not have been so impressed with the seriousness of this if you have not come here."

"What the?" Three tit fairies are suddenly loose in the room. They dive bomb some of the workers at consoles. Where did those come from? Squeak sighs, catches them and gives them back to Mike who puts them in his bag. Marie looks like she will take his head off.

"Really, I honestly did not know they were there. Must have snuck in

when we were getting ready to come here. You know how curious they are. Must have been looking for something to eat and then got scared when we entered the portal. Decided to wait until now to make their escape." I don't believe it. Just like Mike to prank us with them. Poor things must be scared to death. He is going to be on latrine duty for some time now. I doubt Marie believes him either.

They take off. Down to Sam, me and Squeak.

We wait.

One of Cat's spheres appears.

"This is George. Cat's companion."

"Hello George," both Sam and I say at the same time.

Welcome Tia and Sam.

Cat pops in disheveled facing the wrong direction looking distracted. She takes a breath, turns around and sees all of us.

"Oh yeah. Knew I was supposed to be here for a reason." George goes closer to her. I can't tell if they are talking to each other.

Another sphere pops in near Squeak.

"I am needed elsewhere. Please follow Cat's directions." They pop out. Okay, guess DS is allowed here once we know where we are going. Big point. I can see where the portal is, but no idea about the rest of the layout. It would take me years to learn it, even with boosted TK abilities.

"Cat, how are you doing?" Sam asks.

"Okay, lots going on as you can probably guess. I will need to get back to it too. I am here to introduce you to your new companions."

We both look around and see no one coming near us. We look back to Cat. She pulls out two more sphere things out of a travel bag and the spheres spring up into the air near each of us.

"They are keyed to you from the moment you name your companion. They will only respond to you from that time on, unless you tell them otherwise. First thing then is to come up with a name. They have TP capability and will be reading your thoughts at all times. Their purpose is to advise, lookout for trouble, assist. They cannot 'lift' anything other than themselves, but can DS themselves and if necessary, you. TP obviously. No transmutations, healing or phase shifting. Limited I know, but as assistants they are worth it beyond measure. I would be lost without George."

"Oh, a few hundred companions took out a Warrior Ant in a few seconds. DS involves swapping, so they went in and out of the Warrior DS-ing chunks out of it until it was totally destroyed. Yes, they can protect you as well."

Sam looks at his and says, "I dub you Luke Skywalker, ah Luke for short." He stares at Luke for a moment, clearly communicating with him. Of course a Starwars name. Sam used to be so obsessed with stuff like that. I thought he was over it all.

I look at mine and say, "Amiga." Friend in Spanish. I doubt anyone speaks Spanish any longer. I thought of using my long dead husband's name, but decided to keep it simple.

Hello Tia, my name is Amiga. I am your companion.

Thank you Amiga for your service.

I ask Cat, "Did you make our companions?"

"Ah, sorry, I was distracted. No, too many now. Everyone here, including any 'thant above a worker, has one. We have a factory to make them now. Your two are based on Puu's improvements to my original design. They will appear sentient in their conversations."

"Are they, sentient that is?" Cat shrugs. I have never understood what that meant either. We have talking birds, bats and dinosaurs in our lives now, why not companions too? Even the tit fairies and others on New Hope seem to respond as if they are aware of themselves. Certainly the larger wood nymphs are. Oh, a good number of the crustaceans are too for sure. Snap made sure of that. I am sure it gets lonely down there. I need to visit her when I get back. Long time.

"I need to go. Your companion will take you through basics. You have been assigned quarters. They are yours, just as the companions are. You can leave whatever you want there and no one will mess with it."

"Do each of the 'thants have quarters too?" Sam asks. Clearly impressed. Cat has already popped out. He listens to Luke and nods.

Amiga, do the 'thants have quarters too? I ask her. Need to tell her it is okay to com with Sam too. Save time. No secrets among us.

Workers do not. Some of the higher castes do depending on their needs. Some prefer group quarters as their tasks involve group effort and this is easier. Male librarians like Edwin are more likely to request private quarters with a monitor.

"That makes sense. Easier to do library work when quiet." Sam looks at me, huh?

"Male library 'thants like private quarters." He nods understanding.

"Okay, take us to our quarters," Sam asks and immediately I am in a small room with desk, storage, etc. No bed. No wait, there is a fold out bed. Just in case we get limited I guess. Small bathroom too. Now where the hell am I.

"Amiga take me back to where we were and then guide me how to get

here. I need to be able to do this without you in case you are elsewhere."

Understood Mistress. And we are back. Sam pops in a moment later. Guess he figured out the problem too.

I ask, "I forget to scan. Are our quarters anywhere near each other?"

"Right next door. Each quarter has a locator tag on it keyed to us as well. Once you learn that, you can DS back there from anywhere at the facility."

"Good to know. Shall we. I feel like a walk."

"Ah, Luke how far away are our quarters? Oh, and tell Tia also."

Thanks. Good question given the size of the place.

Quarters are close by to the portal in case you need to get here in an emergency. Your portal only goes to New Hope and cannot be used to go anywhere else.

I ask, "Amiga, please tell Sam also. If we need to go to another earth, can we use that portal to do so, or is it only keyed to the people from that world."

Amiga answers, *You can use any portal. Part of the training is to learn where the other earths you may need to visit have their portals. Most of the worlds you know are close by as expected. Sorry, with Cat running things, nothing is expected. She is not in charge. No one TK is. Too dangerous. If something should happen to any one sentient all could be harmed.* Okay, she is listening in. Good to know.

We pass a number of work areas. I soon learn to spot different castes of 'thants and see in most cases their companions are in actual physical contact with their owner. Is owner the right word?

Not precisely. We are sentient and able to make our own decisions.

"Amiga, tell Sam too, what is your word for us, collectively that is."

Companion. I am stunned, though I really should not be.

"I like this place better already." Sam says. I agree. Last thing I wanted was a slave. That was beginning to creep me out.

"Amiga, we are best friends forever." Sam grins and nods.

I should not have said that. We have been here nearly two months now and I am thinking of renaming her to Diablo. We have run evac drills, limiter drills, attack drills, physical training worse than Marie ever did. I thought I was going to die many times. I am an old woman. What are they thinking? Sam is not doing any better and has started calling his Darth Vader. They do not respond of course. The first names are permanent I am afraid.

Squeak comes with us sometimes on these 'lessons' and shows us up every time. Hey, she is a Rap. No way I can compete with that, even if I

have been TK8 longer than she has. Then we three, Sam, Squeak and I start to compete against other gangs of three. We each have to take turns being in charge. I am the worst. Squeak has Rap training and Sam has those stupid video games to fall back on. I knitted baby sweaters. We never win when I am in charge.

That is not to say I am not learning anything. I am learning to avoid a fight at all cost. Not everyone is a warrior.

Then. Sam throws a piece of fruit at me while I am not looking and I catch it without a thought. I turn around and everyone is staring at me. Guess some of it did stick. I pretend it is no big deal, but inside I am jumping up and down like a school girl. A minor victory to be sure, but I'll take it.

Finally the time comes for us to leave. We gather our stuff and meet at the portal. I could get their blindfolded and limited now without thinking.

"Congratulations on finishing your training. To be fair, we really did think it would take longer. Some of the training you had from Marie, Cat and Puu did seem to stick and help." Longer, oh, please Dios, not any longer.

"You are free to go. Tell the other two we are waiting." Puu smiles the most evil smile I have seen her do. I smile back. I know what they are in for now.

Are we ready to go Amiga? She is right next to me, sort of like a parrot on my shoulder.

We go through system check to be sure the portal has not been compromised then Sam activates the portal and we see home. Night, but I don't care. We wait. Usually if something is going to attack this is the time they will take advantage of. All four of us scan as far as we can see through the portal. Amiga and Luke go first, DSing like crazy to confuse any possible enemy.

I turn around to say goodbye to Puu, but she is already gone. No way we would be this suspicious in the past. Brave new world. New multi-verse.

Qr'thn

I am the first one here. Not surprising. The entire situation is getting heated to say the least. We still have options. Always have three ways out of a trap.

Meep shows up a few tens of meters away. Meep is a six dimensional being and shows up as a swirling pattern of colors about three meters tall.

"You are looking good Meep. I have not seen you in some time. Thank you for coming."

The situation will affect us. I am glad you are including us in what is going on so we can prepare as well. We are very impressed with the progress you are making in your understandings.

"I can take very little credit. We have a team, in particular one individual, who is amazing. Of course if only one person understood it we would not get far. The team really are a team and are advancing rapidly by working as a team."

Ah, here is Qr'thn.

"Welcome Qr'thn." She bobs slightly. A 'thn version of a bow.

Is everyone ready? We both acknowledge.

"I have a question, will the 'thn try to kill only TKs or all sentient populations under our care?"

Unknown. This has never happened before. Be prepared for the worst. Do what you have to do.

"Understood." Meep and Qr'thn pop out.

Shit.

Sanctuary

"Welcome back everyone. How was it?" Randy asks. Edwin hurries to his library. I am sure he thinks they messed it all up. Not Randy's favorite place, so it was not him. Myra on the other hand, curiosity can be a problem.

I answer, "Tia and Sam just finished and now Marie and Mike are starting. We learned a lot about how to train people. Going to be hard. We have been taught to be gentle and curious, not quick thinking and violent. They did well though. I am sure they are very happy to be back on New Hope. Wish we were there too. I miss the old place."

Cat comes in, "You and Myra need to do the training also. You can leave everything here. Took two months for Tia and Sam, I expect you two to get done in less than a month." Way to pile on the pressure. Can you see either one being ruthless soldiers?

I sigh, "There is a special black portal in the portal complex now. It is keyed to your psiotic signature. Do not bring anyone with you. They will not end up at the same place. That means no pets for Myra."

"She will hate that." Randy grins. I am sure she will. I don't think a warrior 'thant would fit anyway. Thank goodness. Out on the field they behave themselves. I am not sure back in an underground colony they would not freak out, gold poison or not.

A load of companions come up to both of us. Two stick with Randy and Myra as she walks up. They were assigned their two a few months ago. Even Edwin has one. Immensely useful. I worry about becoming dependent on them. Fortunately the training makes sure you can work with and without one. And they can work, with and without you. Hey, if you want to play sentient, you need to assume the responsibility that goes with it.

Cat asks me, "Did you tell Tia and Sam what to do?" I nod. They need to remove all traces of our existence from New Hope.

"We only had a few pueblos and eating areas, so it will take very little time."

"And the old sites? It has to be as if we were never there."

"Old sites too. Snap knows as well. She cannot fit her group into Dark Earth for obvious reasons. She has always had a backup world she can retreat to. Last count she only had a dozen TKs to move. The rest are non sentient versions to fill in the ecosystem." Cat nods.

I ask, "You are not going to miss all your art and creations left on New

Hope?"

"I am ashamed of the early work now. Like going back to when you were five and seeing what your parents thought was so cute. Not that I remember any of that."

"Turtle did not keep any of mine either, I can only imagine what that would be like. What about the journals? Is everything here now?"

Cat nods, "One copy at least. You knew that. But, they are too valuable to only have one copy in existence obviously." I nod. I always suspected Owl and Turtle to have multiple copies hidden in unlikely locations.

It is really scary what we have been able to figure out. Knowing we are only one of an infinite number of incarnations was a huge clue. How does an incarnation KNOW itself was the fun part. Early earth two scientists had a theory about existence being a hologram. If you are part of the hologram, how do you study the true existence behind the hologram. It is possible, but it takes logic twists that tie your mind in knots. No way any one of us could have figured it out.

Turns out that how we figured out how to see went back to the most excellent 'thant shields. Similar reasoning worked here as well. By stationing TK9+s, yes Cat and Puu are in that category, at our extreme limits in a six and then a thirteen dimensional array, allowed us to peer deep into the nature of our existence.

We have plotted where every high level 'thn is in the universe. Dark Earth is not just a location, but a huge data array as well. Nearly the entire planet is now data storage and computing. AND shielded from the high level 'thn. Another benefit of our understandings. Scary. Like being a little kid spying on your parents having sex without their finding out. At least we hope they have not found out.

Yes, as Owl and Turtle will tell you, we do have backup plans. Never put all your eggs in one basket. The multidimensional sentients have helped a lot too. They are by nature very comfortable in the sixth dimension and it was easier for them in the thirteenth as well. They helped place each of us in the best position.

Of course, now we have the dark worlds doing the sensing and reporting. Cat and my work with the companions helped here. Expanded trillions of times over of course. Turns out the universe is not quite as random as it appears. Seems like a lot of copy and paste went on when they were set up. This makes sense, but also points to the fact that even if we had not already known, we would have seen the incarnation effect through this fact.

Sort of creepy to think we are all just a thought in a huge machine and are not 'real', whatever that means.

"Puu, stop day dreaming, we need to get the shields set up." We are essentially removing Sanctuary from reality. Cat had done a really good job of hiding it, now it will appear as if we do not exist at all. Like a Romulan cloaking device as Sam would say.

Cat Land

It is good to be home. I bet I smell like monkeys. Disgusting creatures. Hard to believe I used to think they were the answer. No more. I am so happy that this incarnation I am a Cat. Far superior in every way. Tech was the wrong path. Oh, monkeys are curious and can work their hands like crazy, but they have no sense of order. They get into everything and destroy most of what they touch.

I mean, think about it. What is the most enjoyable activity you can imagine? Eating and laying in the sun, right? Of course right. But monkeys? They want to build things that either go fast, do a simple task in the most complex inefficient way possible, or kill each other in massive quantities. No honor in any of it. They even seem to derive joy from this. Stupid monkeys indeed. What is this obsession with explosives? I mean, if you want to kill, it is best up close and personal. There is so much joy in watching their faces as they die.

Another point is what happened to my kind in this incarnation. So disappointing. Ugly too. Smaller teeth, lower muscle mass, more passive. Evolution is not your friend.

But I digress. I should be concentrating on now. I was fortunate in that I was born in Cat territory, given a good 'education' in fighting, deceiving, planning. Oh I have been planning. A lot of planning. This time I will succeed.

I port to the royal grounds, pass by the guards without acknowledgment. They are beneath contempt. Level 4s. They can keep out the rats and losers, but little else. More for show. They ignore me as well. We have an understanding. And they have the scares to show for it. Of course I have to give them a new one once in a while just to remind them. No time today. Not even I keep the queens waiting. For now anyway. One of the rules of deception is make someone else pay for the games you play.

I wait on the edges of the court. I know the games of power as well. I relax, clean myself, yawn an enormous yawn, pretend to be sleepy. Finally I nonchalantly wander further into the circle of power passing oth-

ers who want to be closer, but fear being so. Losers. I grin, what was the word I used to use. It will come to me.

I bow perfunctorily to the TWO. They ignore me of course. I would in their position. I take up a position one step lower and curl up for a nap. I am not really napping of course. But what we need to discuss is for the TWO only. No one else.

I have failed. Temporarily.

Explain.

The 'thants and Hu are now working together. Ear flicks, not good.

Time for some mischief to distract them.

I have an idea there that might solve another problem as well.

We are listening.

We have a food shortage, not that I would admit it to anyone. What would happen if we ah, poached what we need from the Hu areas? I don't mean a lot, just a missing prey item here and there. Ones that won't be missed. Outcasts. Granted, they won't make training prey, but better than starving.

This will make them suspicious eventually.

Yes, and they will blame each other. That is their way. This will cause friction between neighboring clans. Friction causes raiding, which leads to wars. Distraction successful.

And if they figure it out?

They won't. We can leave duplicate corpses with the necessary marks of Hu on them.

Excellent. Even though this was not your assignment. We like it.

Anything to get back at the Hu Silver. Anything. On that one we all agree on.

In the meantime, search for another way to interfere with the new alliance. That must be stopped.

Understood. I then fall asleep for real. All for show. I do like naps though. The longer I stay the more jealous the others get. Two for one.

He who sleeps with royalty goes a long way in terms of gaining favors. You really did not expect me to do the work myself. Please. I have standards. Soon my name will be Conqueror of Worlds. I hate my current name. Now I remember why. It reminds me of my name for losers. All in good time. All in good time.

The Hu really are so stupid. They think I am a TK6 and totally do not suspect me being an eight. Cats are ambush predators, deceive your prey into thinking you are not a threat until it is too late. Oh, the fem, she is the worst. She would love a boa constrictor while it was wrapping around

her. Will almost be a waste to even take her out, but she is a six, so it will be easy and best to get her out of the way. Not too soon though. The others would notice her absence. Temporary attachments for gain is the rule. Long term is a handicap.

Hunted

I have no idea where I am. Does not matter. Every community has the stuff if you know how to find it. The goms will find it and shut it down eventually, but it is hard to lock up knowledge. Almost anything can be used to make it from. Granted some goes down easier, but it all does the job. Remove me from reality please. That is my only desire.

Got off the ship a few nights ago. Won't be going back to the same one. There is always need for grunt labor that knows their way around the holds and rigging. I know how to bow and scrape and I can still lift twice my weight. A few days back at sea and I will be sober again. No matter, it is just until the next port.

Light rain. Annoying. Sheltering under some big trees. Pull leaves over me and fall asleep or pass out. Same thing for me.

I wake to a hot sour wind on my face. I open my eyes to an enormous creature breathing on me. I am surprised. I have heard of nothing dangerous about at any port. Oh, small snakes and poisonous plants. We all know about those. But what is this? It is making a rumbling sound. And licking its lips. SHIT, IT MEANS TO EAT ME!

Rumbling, purring, a very large cat. There are leopards here? I thought those were just to scare children. Why hasn't it attacked? I scoot back and slowly stand. The bigger you are the more intimidating. I raise a stick I always have with me and threaten it. It continues to look at me.

Run monkey, run! What the shit? I am going insane.

I run. I can hear the cat behind me, not making any attempt to hide where it was. Crashing branches, pouncing hard on the ground. I see a tree I can climb and make my way up several branches, dropping my stick to have both hands free. It follows me, purring and watching me carefully. I scoot further and further up the branch. As far as I can go. It is a long way down. It keeps coming. A tree is not the nice order of rigging with ropes to hang onto.

The branch is not strong enough for both of us and begins to crack. Shaking violently at each step of the cat. It finally breaks and we both go down. The cat jumps off at the last moment and lands softly on the ground. I land at a bad angle and it is clear that my right leg is badly broken and useless. I am going nowhere. The cat comes up and licks the blood off my clothes. I can see my leg bone sticking up through them. It comes for my face and bites my throat, ripping it out. I black out.

Problem

Well, that was a huge disappointment. I tried larger non-hu prey first. These would not be noticed by the TKs anyway. But a large herd stampeding might be noticed. There are lions here. How can they tell the difference? Do I want to take a chance.

Though very distantly related, we do not hunt the same way as the lions. Lions hunt to feed, to stay alive. They are quick, efficient, no play. We need that too, but more importantly we hunt for the pure pleasure, the chase, the fear of the prey, that first bite. Such a high. We prolong the hunting pleasure as long as possible. Of course we risk the chance the prey will get away. Not often, but it is possible. There would be no fun if we always won. No TK allowed during a hunt. We have to use our normal senses only.

I really thought a Hu would be better. They are supposed to be smarter than an antelope or bison right? I was very disappointed. Did not last longer than a moment. Did not taste good either. Blood was full of some chemical that tasted awful. Was this an exception or the rule?

I did not bother duping the body. No one else would want to eat this one either. No one else would get pleasure out of hunting one such as this. There was no play, there was no chance of escape, no danger even. That stick would have been easy to swat away.

I need to find a warrior. But they tend to stick together. How do I get one alone? I really do not want to hang out near the Hu, they smell so bad. Besides, one might get lucky. A large cat hanging out near a Hu settlement is fair to hunt. The lions all know this and avoid the coastal areas. Stupid Hu cannot see the obvious superiority of our form. Who ever heard of an all gray cat this large and wonderful? Of course I can always pop out, but then they would know it was me. Word would get back to Drup, Rand, Myra and the others. Then I would be in trouble. The TWO would not protect me for getting caught breaking the rules that has kept peace between us. I need to be sneaky.

Earth One

Off limits to all TKs except Silver and myself. For good reason. Needs time to recover. It was a mess. The plague did most of the work, but not enough. They kept recovering, developing tech, crashing again and again. Three times so far. Each time is weaker of course. Harder to get the necessary metal concentrations for tech.

E1 TKs were removed to Farout of course. Should still be there, well at least everyone but the lost Magenta ones and the two of us. We brought them straight to Earth Two and they know not to come here as well. Nothing they would recognize anyway.

I did not become TK until Silver made it to the 'thn portal on the Hopi rez. I was the first one he turned. Yeah, sort of like creating a vampire isn't it. We become immortal and cannot reproduce. At least we do not feed on norms.

The last Hu here were scattered on Earth Two, their tech knowledge having died out. Most did not really notice much of a difference. They split three thousand years ago, so not likely to run into themselves or even a close relative.

No Cats either. They are all on the Americas on Earth Two. Blowing it. Owa thought she was so smart. Sylvy not so much, but she has gone along with whatever Owa wants. You can't keep reproducing and not end up painted into a corner. Always ends bad. Now they spend most of their time in a sleep trance duplicating enough food to keep everyone from killing each other. And still they reproduce. It will be nothing but Cats soon. Imagine the smell?

All of the dams were gone long ago. It is late winter and the central valley is flooded as usual. LOTS of birds. So many birds. They ignore me not having been hunted by any Hu in generations. Oh, they complain if I get too near a nest of course. I apologize and dupe some nice tasty morsel to ask for forgiveness. Generally this works. Of course some learn and squawk even when I am not anywhere near their nest. Sorry does not work with me. Try Silver. His has a soft heart for birds, given he was born one this time.

He watched the Hu for thousands of years, remember everything from past incarnations. He has been friends with Qr'thn the entire time. They worked out most things between themselves until I was found and upgraded. They looked for a long time. Sorry, if I had known everyone was waiting for me I would have been born earlier. I came at the heyday of

the Hopi culture, before the west came over, before the plagues they brought. Women were not allowed to be chiefs, but I was as high up the hierarchy as I could get as one and chiefs sought out my counsel.

Sauron was found and dealt with almost as soon as Silver was raised. He never expected a large silver owl as an adversary. I never met him, but of course I had to read the journals as part of my training. Glad I did not have to meet him. Still he had influence on Hu evolution for millions of years and his mark was made. And now gone.

The reason for my visit. I am close to where the 'thant nest entrance should be. I can scan the entrance, but of course their limiter and shield tech is very good, it looks like a simple cave entrance. If not for the enhancements that Cat and Puu worked out I would have completely missed it.

thHu TK Turtle requesting admittance.th

I do not wait for permission. It is only important that I do not surprise them. Inside, I make my way to the first large meeting area. A librarian is waiting for me.

thGreetings Librarian.th

It is an honor. I prefer TP to avoid disturbing the others. How my I serve you?

I sit on a stone of the right height and the Librarian relaxes also.

Have you noticed any TK portals near this nest?

Other than our own nine you mean of course. I nod.

Some small ones have been noticed at ground zero.

You have seen these yourself?

Scouts noted them in their reports. They did not think much of it and did not report them until they came back from their visit. That was forty six solars ago. I only just received the report.

I thank you. I will visit ground zero and see if I can find anything.

I bow to him and thank him for his information.

Once outside, I pop over. Low tide. No longer any evidence of the former marine station or of the city itself. The sea level rise has come and gone. Near pre tech levels at present. All of the concrete is gone. Compared to granite it did not stand a chance. I have seen boulders several tons in weight move around in a good storm. The music of the storms. If you have not experienced this, it is worth it. The best way is using TK and hunkering down below the tide. Everything goes on above you, waves, boulders, seaweed, and tons of sand.

Wait, this is new. I walk along the shore and see signs of animal activity of some kind. The stones are not where they should be naturally. They

have been arranged somehow to form a safe pool from the waves. It is likely it only overfills at a king tide a few times a year. A small stream feeds it from higher up the hill. Mostly fresh water then. Interesting. What would want a pool of fresh water so near the sea?

"What the?" I see a ceramic jar with lid up a path from the pool. The path was strange enough, but this work is good. Very good. 'thants do not make ceramics. I know the Hu are gone. I know of no other animals even capable of such work. Did Silver put this here to tease me? Would not be beyond him, except we have all been way too busy for such nonsense.

I scan it, then open the lid. There are three good sized rock crabs inside. Not happy about their confinement and the sudden source of light exposing them. I lower the lid. They will die soon and then rot. Who put them here? Who made the pot? The minerals used in making it are not from around here. That means it was brought here. No metals at least.

I look around and it is clear that someone has set up a camp of sorts. No fire pits, but if they eat their food raw, like in the crabs, that might not be a concern. Also might mean they are cold-blooded if they do not need warmth. Not Hu then, but not 'thant either. Lots of lichens about with little signs of nearby grazing. The scout was here at some point, but likely passing through. I am sure they have to cover a large territory.

No sign of a portal, but I have been here less than an hour. I can wait. Not forever of course. Tide is going out. I scan for the position of the moon. Going to be very low in a few hours. If they hunt crabs and such, that would be a great time to be looking under rocks. Of course I stand out like a bright beacon. I make a cover for myself that looks like the surrounding rocks. As long as I don't move and they can't scan I should be okay. And I am well away from the pot, but can see it.

Takes a few minutes but suddenly one of the rocks suddenly changes color and starts to move. It stops and waits. Then goes to the pot and lifts the lid. I guess satisfied that none of the crabs are missing it comes closer to me. Shit. Of course it must have seen me. I am sure it has never seen a Hu before. Looks like an octopus, wearing some sort of structure to help give support to the eight arms. A Ceph! I need to tell the others, I need to show Nease.

I scan and it is clearly a she, does not have the extra male arm. I slowly remove my cover and slowly stand up. Shit, I hope height is not a problem. She goes white. I then bow and give a full Ceph greeting. That sets off a storm of colors going across her mantle. I cannot understand any of it. Not the Ceph I was taught.

I sign for her to slow down. She stops. Then gives me a few simple

arm signals.

Looks like, what are you? Accent? Does that make sense for a visual com method? Probably.

Please do not be afraid. Originally I was a species we collectively call Hu, short form of Human, a vertebrate mammal primate sentient. I now have the ability to show by using my mind. I intend you no harm. In fact I am very happy to see you.

That causes a huge stream of patterns, but this time I am 'listening' in.

What is your tag? I am guessing name?

I am tagged 'turtle' by others. Are you Rooi?

She goes white. Shit, too much?

How know?

Did you get here, this world, by making a portal? An opening in the dimensions allowing you to move from one world to the next?

How know? Clearly getting agitated.

That is a very long story. It would take years to explain completely. We have been looking for you for thousands of years. Or at least your world. I am very happy we have finally met.

I am only thirty years old. How can know of me for thousands?

There is an order to the multiverse. You have existed countless times in slightly different situations. Core personalities are more likely to do this. I existed countless times before also, though I only remember the last few.

This world is so different. Very strange.

Would you be willing to make a small portal to your world? I can then learn how to get to your world if needed. The others I work with have very important information we need to show you. I have to keep remembering to think show instead of tell.

She waves an arm and a small portal about thirteen centimeters appears between us. Will have to train her not to move an arm. Not needed and might give you away to an enemy.

I sign thank you and then make a much larger one behind me. This causes her to blend with her background instantly. Her portal pops closed. Okay, lots to learn. Might be at the beginning of her understanding.

There are several ways to move using dimension space. I motion to the large portal I have made. In fact we call this a Rooi portal tagged after you, er, you in a previous incarnation.

She slowly moves and changes colors. She continues toward the portal and sticks an arm through and pulls it out.

Not correct direction. Rocks do not match.

I'm sorry. I forget to keep it simple. I change the portal and now we can see ourselves from behind in the portal. She turns and sees the second portal behind us and can see us from the perspective of the first portal.

She makes a small portal and sticks an arm through which comes out in a second portal behind her to touch her mantle.

Thank you! She bows to me with the full spread. *It is now understood. This was a missing understanding I needed.*

I make the sign for question.

Are you the only one who can do this? Make portals?

She signs affirmative.

How long have you been able to do this?

Three moons.

That certainly explains why we did not find her before. She literally had not expressed herself yet.

I scan her. TK2. The first two steps on the Ceph ladder. This also explains the size of her portals. She should be able to make a portal much larger.

What is the largest sized portal you can make?

She signs understanding, pauses. The other two portals pop. I remove mine without the sound effects.

A portal one meter in diameter appears near the jar. She grabs the jar and goes through the portal. She waves that I should follow.

The portal closes behind me, but no sound. Ah, she can't hear sound in this form. That's why she never noticed that her portals pop. She will need to spend time in another form to understand this. Lots of work to do.

We make pretty good time along a wet path. Suckers stick better here. That is if you consider one kilometer per hour fast. A cockroach could pass us.

Finally I see (and scan) the settlement ahead of us. She turns off the path to a less developed section. Makes sense, probably not high on the hierarchy. We enter a cave of sorts. My eyes dark adapt quickly. Another advantage.

~It's alright. She does not bite.~ Rooi shows. Three other Ceph appear as they decloak. I am beginning to sound like Sam. Of course they are not Romulans. I do a Ceph bow.

~Oh, so formal. Where did you learn showing?~ The one closest to me shows. All fem. Glad I made the right choice. Nease all had us assume her form for a few months to learn what it was like. All I had to do was adjust to Rooi's dialect. Like the difference between Hopi and Standard. Quite a bit different, but same muscles at least.

~She just learned an eighth ago. Go easy on her.~

~My tag is Turtle. Where I come from we are named after creatures in our environment. And yes, I come from a long way away.~ Loosely speaking if you consider everything around you as sentient.

~Are you a potter? We are really behind on our quota and the Queen is upset.~

Rooi sets the jar down and opens the lid. The crabs go crazy, scrambling out. Everyone grabs one and bites into it live. Well, in Rome . . . Ceph are visual creatures obviously. I do not really taste anything when I bite into mine. It stops squirming pretty fast and I tear chunks of flesh and insides away to rasp and swallow.

There is one crab left trying to hide for its life. It is grabbed by someone and placed back in the jar for later I assume.

Ceph Eden

(This narrative backs up a few eighths to get Rooi's perspective. Sorry for the overlap.)

I had been to the new world many times before the turtle being showed. We have turtles here also, but are land animals never near the shoreline and look nothing like this severely distorted one. They will attempt to eat one of us if we get too close.

Competition for crabs and any food is intense on my world, so when I learned how to go to the new one it was a welcome way to hunt for food without meeting others. Normally I would fill the jar with crabs before returning so my house friends could feed also.

The large one has stopped, waiting for me to proceed.

I never portal near others. I am not ready to give away my secret. What am I going to do about this one? It can be seen very far from our settlement.

Make self small? Height scares us. She looks severely handicapped only having four very clumsy arms. I am surprised she can feed herself in fact.

I can do better than that. It changes before me into a female Ceph!

Unfortunately this does not allow me to show like you do. The Ceph I learned is different.

Let me do the showing. She. Was that true in the other form? Without a male to compare to how would I know? Do their males have an extra arm or some other means of passing genetic material?

She is very clumsy moving, even with a shoe she has made for herself. Finally she appears to give up and floats just off the ground. I need to learn how to do that. So much to learn. No other Ceph I know can change forms so completely. Functional changing, not just appearances. Much to learn.

A portal opens. The lid comes off the jar. Crabs start coming through the portal and fly into the jar until it is full. The portal closes. The jar closes before the crabs can escape. It then lifts off of me and goes over to near her. She floats it near her, but she does not need to hold it.

Oh, I am going to love my new friend very much.

Does sea water bother you? Or do you need to be in fresh water?

What is fresh water?

Ah, sorry, water from land streams. No salt.

Does not matter. We can live with either. I proceed towards home.

Does magnesium chloride make you relax?

I turn and flash anger at her.

I am not a magger!

Sorry, just trying to determine the difference from what I learned. No offense meant or implied.

This other Ceph world had a lot of madders?

Most used the baths occasionally. A few became addicts.

Only addicts here. Illegal to make mag baths or use them. Done in secret. Please do not ask more.

She goes blank. Then she makes random patterns on her mantle. Then suddenly she shows perfectly.

~How? What are you?~

~I am one of very few individuals with these capabilities. I know this is showing you a lot in a very short time. Time is the problem. Events are moving rapidly. Under normal conditions we would take years of observing before approaching and then without any special abilities.~

~You are scaring me.~

~I know. I am sorry. I can leave you to your life if you wish. However, that life would be without your extra capabilities. Once you cross that threshold you become one of us whether or not you chose it. Actually none of us chose this path. Others chose for us and we were all given this same choice, to become one of the special or go back to our old lives.~

~Is it possible to go back at a later time?~

~Technically, yes. But, it becomes much harder once you get to the higher levels. Most see these gifts as a responsibility towards your own sentient kind. You become caretakers if that helps makes sense of this. I think you can imagine how these abilities could be misused. How individuals are needed to help prevent this from happening.~

~How do you know you can trust me? I am totally different from you. I am still very young. A lot can happen to affect a Ceph's personality.~

She shows amusement, ~Rooi, we know you better than anyone else in the entire universe. In your past you were one of our very special ones.~

~As you said, this time is different. I could be different.~

~Remember I said that it would take years to show you all that you needed to understand? That has not changed. You are one of the thirteen. That does not change. Your basic personality does not change. My partner, Silver, is also one of the thirteen. This time he was born as a type of bird. I see you have them here, though much smaller. One time he was a huge insect. He has been hundreds of different forms. But through them

all, he and sometimes she, was always the same basic personality. So, Rooi, you are Rooi.~

~We are late meeting with the others. Please show me how you want to be introduced.~

She shows a symbol for the turtle. Well, that matches at least. Obviously just her tag and not her form.

We get back home, let everyone eat and be introduced to Turtle. Sava mentions what I already know, that we are late meeting our quota. I sign Turtle that she should follow. I hope she can make pots from river clay. We could use the help and do not have time to train her. Probably not, but then I have already seen her do the impossible many times.

She slides up to me and hand signs me, ~Do the others know about your abilities?~

~No, please do not tell them. I cannot be entirely sure that one would not betray me if questioned.~ Questioning is not a pain free experience. We all have limits.

~Do not show your abilities either. Could be very dangerous to all of us.~

~I understand.~

Others are already present when we reach the making area. We continue to our space and set up. Turtle watches this and then helps once she understands what needs to be done. She even starts making pots like we do. She is smart at least. Of course none of reach naming if we are stupid. We get eaten instead. That certainly brings back nightmares. Not that we are ever free of that threat.

Sava comes up to me and signs, ~She is good. Where did you find her?~

I sign back, ~She was on the shore where I collect crabs.~

~You are going to have to take me with you some time.~

~Best if only one of us gets into trouble.~ She acknowledges. Can't reveal what you don't know. I have shown this before. Will have to be careful she does not follow me one day.

With Turtle's help we soon catch up to our quota. I check out her work and it is good, very good.

~You have done this before Turtle?~ Most learn only one skill, so I am surprised she can do this so well the first time.

~When I was much younger.~ She shows amusement. Right, thousands of years. I thought that was just boasting. Not so sure now.

A huge guard Ceph comes in and comes over to our group.

~Inspection. Line up and display your tats.~ I forgot about those, but I

dare not let the Inspector know I am worried about it.

He inspects all of us, including Turtle. Nothing happens. He then goes over to the work we have done carefully inspecting everything. It picks one up to examine more closely.

~Who did this one?~ He knows, a copy of our tat is on the bottom of the work we do.

Turtle shows ~That would be one of mine Inspector.~ Not quite the proper response.

~It is guano. Make another.~ He throws it to the ground and then leaves.

Once he is out of the area, the others gather around Turtle.

~Don't be upset, he is a bully. He always 'finds' one to smash to prove he is superior. We will help you make another.~

~No need, this one is fine.~ She holds up a perfect pot and places it with the others. All the broken pieces are gone too. I hope no one saw her do this. She is scary.

~She made an extra one. I showed her to do this. We all know how the Inspector is. He always picks on the newest one.~

The others turn pale, but when Turtle shows no emotion they relax.

Not a true showing, but it is clear I need to adapt. Hate showing untruths to my group though. This is so new to me.

We make it to the feeding area now that our shift is done. The Guards and Inspectors are finishing up. They get the good food, we are left with the remains. This is why I supplement with crab hunting. Technically they are property of the Queen, but it is so far away that they never go there. I am pretty sure the Queen cannot do portals at least. Still I risk my life every time. How do I explain that I am not really poaching from this world? They would see the pot of crabs and that would be my end.

When it is finally our turn we gather the remains into small bowls. We are only allowed one bowl and they inspect these as well to be sure we are not taking too much. There is barely anything in Turtle's bowl. How does she know these things? As the one with the bad pot, she would not be allowed a full portion.

She signs me, ~This food was rotten.~

~I know, it is part of the control they have over us. Wait, 'was' rotten?

~

I look down at my bowl and dip a tentacle in to bring some to my mouth. It is wonderful. The others are showing surprise too.

~Tell everyone to stop showing, pass it on.~ If the guards think we cheated somehow they will punish all of us. Turtle is clearly going to be

trouble.

I sign to the others that it is time to leave. It will be dark soon. We have chores to do at home as well. All in support of the settlement of course. We own nothing but a few pretty shells. Even the tools we use and maybe even make at some point, are owned by the Queen and can be taken back at any time. Break one and you might be using your own beak for a moon till a new old one is allowed.

Turtle asks me on the way back, ~I am an extra now. What will happen?~

~Obviously they already know. You were not assigned to our home, so likely they will bring you in for questioning soon. They may wait a bit to see if they can implicate all of us as well.~

~I have brought danger to your group. I should leave then.~

~I would be very upset if you did that. I want to learn what you know.~

~That is a very long hard path.~

~All lives are long and hard, if you survive. Few do here. Death is normal and common here. Are you showing it is worse than that?~

~What happens to your group if you or we go missing?~

~They will assign another after questioning everyone and doing a thorough inspection. It happens. Guards can accidentally kill someone who strays without reporting it. They will likely assume that happened to us. They already are likely watching us.~ I grab her right fore tentacle. There is a proper tat there. Complete with serial number.

~How did you know this number to place here? I know you can change, but this number is not one I know.~

~Copied from a few settlements over. If they figure this out they will likely think I escaped from there to come here. Of course, they will not find me there either. I copied it off a dead one. Did not want to get anyone in trouble.~

~You do this often? Invade new cultures and blend in rapidly?~

~Of course, basic TK training. Another name for our kind is 'Watchers' as we observe other cultures. Sometimes subtly influence them in a more positive direction.~

I hand her privately, ~We could certainly use some of that. The current Queen is very hard on us. A large number die to be replaced by new names that are pretty clueless.~

~Do you want to change that?~

~Sure I do. Who wants to be treated so badly? I imagine what our culture could do if we were more equal and shared in the work and the re-

wards.~

~I was hoping you would show that.~ She shows amusement. Now what have I done.

The others are well ahead of us.

~Do you trust your group?~

~Groups change constantly. They do not want any friendships or anyone to start actions as a group.~

~Do you trust your group? I have a plan, but it will take everyone in the group to work effectively.~

~As much as I do anyone, including you. I have only known you a few eighths. Of course you are very different and interesting. A lot of potential as we would show. So, sure. They appear to all be good Ceph.~

We arrive back at our resting place and begin chores. Mostly cleaning everything. Food scraps rot quickly. A smelly home is likely to cause reprisals for damaging community property. Besides, it is nicer to live in a clean area. Then it is sleep time. Come morning we will do it all over again. No crabbing this time. Have to be careful not to be seen. Trips have to be random and with Turtle here they will be watching us for sure.

~I had the strangest dreams.~ Mossy exclaims when we meet.

~Where is Turtle? She did not sleep in her spot.~ Everyone looks around. No one has seen her. I am not surprised. Probably does not sleep either.

~Hey look!~ A pot is in the center of the main room. Our sleep areas are small alcoves in the walls. They have to be open enough for good air flow. It is said we originally came from the sea and need to keep our gills moist to work. Not my problem.

Sava opens the lid and crabs come crawling out rapidly. We scramble to catch them and feast.

~Think they will notice the weight gain. I am stuffed. No way I will be able to eat rations today.~

~We need to clean up. If they see this mess we are dead meat for sure.~

We spend some time cleaning up again when Turtle comes back in.

~We are not allowed out before the proper time Turtle.~ Mossy warns.

~I was not seen. How is everyone. Good nights sleep?~ She shows amusement. She has been up to something.

~Strange dreams?~ We all affirm.

~Good. Think fast Rooi!~ She throws a sharp object at me and I instinctively block it. Ah, but not with my arms. The object just hangs there in the air. It drops when we all see this. I am freaked.

~Welcome to TK3 Rooi. The rest of you should be TK2s now. Rooi, you take these two and I will take the other two. We need to teach them how to use their new abilities.~

To demonstrate she makes a portal, a flat one hanging in the air. She retrieves the stone and drops it into the portal. It disappears.

The others look carefully under the portal. Vifa sticks a tentacle in and sees it disappear. She quickly pulls it out to see it is still whole.

~It can get more fun if you make two of them.~ Turtle's portal disappears and I make two, one on top of the other. I drop the stone into the lower one and it comes out the upper one to fall into the lower one. Gravity is an acceleration process, so it takes almost no time before the stone is going so fast we can no longer see it.

I have an idea and make the lower portal vertical facing the wall. The stone hits the wall with such force it takes a huge chunk out of the wall.

~Good idea Rooi, needs practice.~ The whole disappears like it never happened.

She continues, ~Now everyone else needs to practice. Portals are always in pairs. In and out. I hid the out portal the first time. Rooi showed you both in a pair. She then angled the lower one to point the stone in a new direction. Imagine what this would do to an enemy.~

Everyone but Turtle and I are white.

~No, really, you have all been given this ability. Just need to learn how to use it. Takes practice. Rooi has been practicing for moons. You need to catch up.~

~We are late for pot making. They will come looking for us very soon.~

~Rooi, if you will, make a portal to the 'new place' for us.~

I do so and see it is where I expected, this location on the new world. Turtle's world. I pass through and Turtle gets the others to come through.

I close the portal.

~They won't find us here.~ Turtle shows amusement. No they won't. Any secrets I had are gone too.

~The rest of you pair up and practice making small portals. Nothing big yet. Be careful. You can cut someone in half easily. This is not a toy.~

~What's a toy?~ Fer asks.

~Don't worry about it, just practice. Your lives have changed forever. You will not be going back to the ways things were.~ She points to the shore line, ~Lots of food in the tide pools if you get hungry later.~

Turtle comes to me when the others spread out to practice.

~They were not the only ones changed.~

~I stopped the stone.~ She affirms. I concentrate and raise a good sized stone into the air and then drop it in shock. It can be felt in the ground when it hits. The others look over, but then go back to their own training.

~Make the biggest portal you can make. The other end can be oh, over there.~ She points to a small sand dune hundreds of spans away.

I concentrate and suddenly there is a HUGE portal in both locations. That gets everyone's attention.

~One thousand arm spans is the limit for now. This is about a third of that. Takes practice to reach a limit.~

~What is your limit?~

~That would be very scary. Hopefully it will never be needed. Suffice it to say that right now you could destroy your entire community if you were not careful. Easily take out the Queen's home.~

I white.

~Yeah, scary. This is only the beginning. There are nine talents total. You have three of them.~

~Two, lifting and portals.~

~Three, lifting, scanning and portals. You can't make a portal without knowing where it is going. You need practice to use the third, being dependent on line of sight and random chance till now. I will work with all of you. We have some time yet.~

~But not infinite.~ She affirms.

We walk away from the others. I can see they are succeeding in making very tiny portals which disappear almost instantly. This was how I started to. It is real. It is real.

Once they are out of sight we suddenly are somewhere else. I white.

~It's okay, just a variation on the Rooi portal. You will learn this method too. Has some advantages in that there is not a large portal for others to see you go through.~

~Where are we?~

She shows amusement again. I am going to learn to fear that look.

~Scan Rooi.~ I concentrate on the wall facing us. Trying to imagine if I wanted to put a portal here. I can see through the wall. But not see. It is strange. I cannot see in color. It is like a partial image. Not solid. I reach out and touch the wall and the scan disappears. I try again and it comes back. There are others. I go further and see other rooms. Lots of rooms. Where are we?

~Keep going. You will figure it out.~ I reach out further and further. It is amazing how far I can 'see'.

~Guano, I know that space! The Queen. We are near the Queen's chambers.~

~Very good. Time to meet her.~

~She will kill us for sure. You have to be called. She has guards with weapons that cut and kill.~

~And if you can stop stones, what do you think would happen if someone tried to stab you? Also remember, you are not alone.~

~Oh, yeah. Makes sense.~ There is some loose gravel here and I raise some up into an arm.

~You see the open space in front of the throne? Make us a portal to there.~

~You are not playing games are you.~ Not a question, but she affirms she is not.

We go through the portal and stop just before the Queen. I am tempted to make myself as small as possible. Instead, following Turtle's lead we do a proper bow of courtesy. Just as big as the last time I saw her from afar. In other words HUGE. The biggest one rules here.

The Queen hands a guard. I can easily see what she touched to him. This is fun. The guards are all ready to strike. The lead one raises his ceramic blade to throw at us. It disappears. I scan the other guards and one by one their weapons are gone.

I hand Turtle, ~Did you do that?~

~No, you did. Fast learner Rooi. Knew you would be.~

The guards are confused and come towards us only to stop as if hitting a wall of glass. Really just the new talent. I suspect there is a limit though. Not really a good place to test that.

The guards turn towards the Queen for instructions.

You can kill her if you wish. Just portal parts of her inside to somewhere else. Yuck!

I am not like that. All I ever wanted was equality. I have no intention of ruling. I want to go with you to learn more. I want to meet the others.

Tell her.

~Your majesty. I am a potter from the ceramics section. I am here to inform you that your position of Queen is over. You may leave in peace, but you must leave.~

Sharp pieces of glass come out of the walls towards me. I easily deflect them, gather them together and raise them into the air between us.

~Do you really want to test my patience?~ I make a portal behind her. It fills the wall that was there and the wind is blowing pretty good. Light fills the room. I point to the portal.

She gets up and leaves. That was too easy. Wait until she sees where she is though.

A moment later my group comes through very wary of where this is.

They see us and come up to us and gather around. I close the portal.

~Excellent choice Rooi. She has food and shelter, but will have to work for it.~

~And she will be alone. No one else will be sent there nor will we go there again.~

~You did not kill her as is the usual way to dispose of a leader.~

~That may be the usual way, but I am not the usual.~ She shows amusement.

The guards have all bowed towards me.

~Rise. You should go with her. You gave her the power she had. No ruler has any power but what you give them.~

One comes forward slightly, ~She could kill with a thought. None dare oppose her your majesty.~

I white. They think I am mad and make themselves flat against the floor. Guano. Have to watch my emotions.

~Rise, I am not your queen. There are are no more queens. If someone tries to be one, kill them. Does everyone understand?~ They rise slowly, not sure of what I have shown.

~It takes time to put in a new way of doing things. There will be lots of mistakes and blind ends.~ Turtle shows. Yeah, I was worried about that. Not sure what I have done.

She had abilities too. How is that possible? Did you give her some?

No, never been here before. It can happen naturally. It is likely that because you are her child you inherited your initial abilities from her.

~I am the queen's child?~

A guard comes forward, ~I can explain, though how you figured this out is a large question. She only allowed herself to have offspring. All others were eaten or the birds got them after they were placed in the open without hiding places.~

~Guano. Maybe she should have died. That is way beyond the mandate of a ruler.~ The guard affirms.

~The queen will never return here. You are free to make a new organization. One were everyone is equal and has a say in how things are done. That means low workers have equal access to quality food and homes. Those of you just under the queen are going to have to give up your special status. If you don't I can put you away to a very lonely place easily enough. If you want to live, share what you have. No one owns anything

any more. Share.~

~What about weapons?~ Fera asks.

~Good question.~ I turn to Turtle but she does not help.

Another guard comments, ~There are still neighboring settlements who might want to take from use. We still need to be able to protect ourselves.~

~At least until they also see the advantage of being this new way.

Fine, then everyone gets weapons and weapons training. That way we all protect the settlement, our settlement.~

~Excellent.~

~We all have work to do. Let's get to it. SHARE!~

The others leave.

~From illegal crab hunter to total overturning our settlement in one day. Guano. What have I done?~ I am shaking. Not normal for our kind.

Turtle places a tentacle on my mantle.

~Excellent Rooi, I was right about you. The others whom you will meet were right about you. Welcome. Your official title is now Ceph2 TK3 Rooi.~

~Ah, what are you doing?~ A cube appears. Seems to have a gold layer on its surface. I can't scan into it. Strange. It is solid gold? She then presses the top and it disappears.

She sees me watching, ~It is called a Cat Box. A way of communicating with the others. Encrypted so that no one else can read it. Though I understand that Ceph are particularly good at these kinds of puzzles.~

~If you give me one to play with I am willing to try.~

Another smaller one appears, ~A simple one to begin with. We should get to the others. I am sure everyone is confused about what is happening and what they should do.~

~As long as I do not have to be queen I am happy.~

~You and me both. I prefer to be in the shadows watching and only making small changes when needed. This is too much too fast for me too.~

Sanctuary

Edwin comes up to me with a box, thThis appeared in the library. Appears to be addressed to everyone.th

"A Cat Box for sure." Stick around. You are part of everyone now.

Hey everyone, a Cat Box just came in for all of us. Gather around please.

It still takes over an hour for everyone to stop what they are doing and make their way here.

"Okay, ready?" I hit the top. It opens up and inside there is a paper message. Really, that's it?

I reach in and hold the paper up.

"What does it say?"

"Like you have not already scanned it. It only says, 'Get Nease.'"

"Wait, you got us all to stop what we were doing just to say that?"

"Hey, I did not know what the message was any more than you did. Chill out."

Puu laughs, "Chill out. Really Myra. Kids." Technically I am the youngest one here by far, but no need to tease me about it.

"Who has time to go get Nease?"

"Wait, who was the box from?"

"Does not say. Good work though. The only two who are not here as expected are Silver and Turtle of course. Not too unusual."

"Either one of them could get to Nease before we do. I have to wonder what's up."

White steps up, "Squeak and I will go. She can practice her Ba while there and I can practice my Ceph." They both put on gold collars, then pop out.

Another box appears. I sigh and hit the top. Nothing happens.

"My guess is this one is keyed to Nease." Makes sense.

"Then we will have to wait I guess. No idea when Nease will be free to come back. Frustrating. I hate waiting like this."

Puu laughs again, but does not say anything. Yeah, okay, I am not the most patient person yet. Maybe after a few thousand years I will be better. Likely not. Likely part of my personality.

I follow Edwin back to the library. I have chores to do. The library is coming along well. More and more volumes are coming in from different worlds. Edwin is amazing at translating them into 'thant. 'that librarians from multiple nests are present learning all they can from our knowledge

perspective.

I am trying to get through a volume originally in 'thant but translated into Standard. I have both versions before me so I can get better at reading 'thant myself. It is hard going. Just pressing a language into your brain using TP is not perfect. Each hand is slightly different in how they write and describe things. The biggest problem is not even this, but having nothing that matches the idea in our understanding. Their way of living and encountering the world is very different. I need to adopt a 'thant mindset to get this stuff.

I jump when someone taps me on the shoulder. I turn around to see Ron. My mouth falls open.

^MRon, why are you here?^M

"That was bad. Need to work on your pronunciation. Voice needs to be higher. No one on Mars speaks that low." He smiles and then looks at what I am reading.

"All 'thant to me." Har-har. Then he sees the Standard version and makes the assumption it is the same.

"Which is the original?"

"That is the game actually. I have to figure out which one is the translation based on how ideas are expressed. Not easy at all. I am leaning towards 'thant being the original. I know nothing about the sentients these talk about. An aquatic one. Even the Standard version is hard to read. I have nothing in common with either aquatics or 'thants. Hmm, probably know more about 'thants. Nice people when you get to know them." I smile.

"I will have to take your word on that one. Someone sent me a Cat Box to come here. Any idea what it is about?"

"White and Squeak have gone to Ba-Eden to retrieve Nease. Our box just said to get her and bring her here. We don't even know who it was from."

"She is our only Ceph representative. Too bad about her kind. Not fair we should have survived and her people did not. Got to be hard being the only one."

"Not that many Martians either Ron." A few thousands are not nearly enough to insure genetic diversity in spite of their slow reproductive rate.

From outside I hear, "Rain! Shields up folks!" Someone yells. Who cares, we will not melt. I go outside and let the rain soak my clothes and hair. Feels good. Does not rain that much here. Edwin does not seem to mind either. The library does not use paper of course. We are long lived and having to replace all the volumes all the time would be annoying to

say the least. Some of the more delicate volumes are made with platinum with the ink being a different isotope. No way a norm is going to be able to read it, nor a TK below a four. We used to use gold of course, but now that the 'thants are friends we use platinum to avoid putting them in pain. Only the librarians seem to even be interested actually.

"Well, I don't think this will be any time soon. Going back to work. Call us when they arrive." Cat and Puu leave. Going back to the tech section. I shudder to think about the stuff they are cooking up. Hope it is enough.

In fact it takes an eight day before they return. Nease is clearly excited and back into her Ceph form.

They lead her to the Cat Box. They could have just sent the box to her straight, but not being part of the inner circle she does not even know what it is.

~It is keyed to your genetics. Just press the top and it should open.~ White says. I did not know he knew Ceph. Makes sense then he was the one who volunteered. Squeak is going to die of curiosity I think. She is almost on top of the box herself.

Nease looks at all of us, then reaches over and touches the top. All four walls fall down and the top disappears. Inside is a Ceph stone with writing on it. I thought I knew Ceph, but cannot read it.

Nease looks confused too. She holds it up examining it closely. I am sure she is scanning it too. Finally she sets it down.

~Appears to be Ceph, but nothing I read. Close, but not quite there.~ She looks at it from a different angle. Turns it upside down and then over.

~This is old, very, very old. How did whomever sent this get this? Might even be millions of years old.~

~Your kind had writing millions of years ago? Guano!~ White says.

Puu scans it, ~Not millions of years old actually. Made a few days ago from fresh clay. Dried using TK of course, but not even fired. Drop it and it will shatter.~

She continues, ~That means it is modern Ceph, just not your Ceph. Like old English or even German to us. In Standard I would say to try sounding it out. Not sure what the visual equivalent would be. At least the box opened to you. Each of us tried it over the last few days to no avail.~

Nease is flashing symbols over her mantel trying to decipher it. I could read them at first, but now they are becoming more and more distorted. Finally she gives up and set is down.

Time to eat everyone. We have syn fish tacos for Nease and anyone else who wants some. Actually they are very good. Could be because I

was born on a ship at sea. More chilies the better.

We are soon sated, stuffed actually. Thanks to Sam and Tia, who still seem to default to being the cooks most of the time. Rand does clean up.

Getting dark. Someone builds a fire from syn wood. Lichens, even the trees, do not burn well, lots of smoke. If there was a cat here I am sure they would be fast asleep near the fire. I miss Ghost and maybe even Smudge a little. Hope they are okay. Hope Drup is not overwhelmed by being the only TK present. Cats could easily stage a coupe if they even cared. Of course, sooner or later one of us would check in and seeing what happened, hell would be paid. We are about to go to war with the 'thn, not a good time to be fighting on two fronts. Likely the Cat war would only last moments. Owa and Sylvy did not like to share their TK abilities. They are the only two nines present. Lots of sixes like Smudge and only a few sevens. A quick clean up. They are not stupid having been bested by Silver so many times.

It is just before sunrise before anything else happens. Tours of the library and rest of our facility long over. Everyone is sitting around trading stories of adventures and such. Edwin is there for all of this. He is fascinated by what is not in our records. I am sure he will write everything down.

He goes up to the Ceph stone, picks it up and looks it over, then sets it down and goes to the 'thant portal and disappears. Strange, what did he see?

Another eighth goes by before he returns. He has two workers in tow carrying a few 'thant library sheets.

thPlease copy these for me Myra.th

"Sure." I do so in moments. He then signals the workers to go, carrying back the sheets to another library is my guess. Eventually he should be high enough level to do this himself. Almost there, but still slow in getting this level to work well with the 'thant mind. Not as flexible as the other sentients. Makes sense, theirs is a very rigid old culture.

He takes the sheets over to Nease and sets them down. Nease looks at them and Edwin, not sure what he wants, then looks carefully at the sheets. Suddenly she is all excited. She runs, figuratively speaking, to the Ceph stone and brings it back to the sheets. A new blank sheet appears and slowly she starts inscribing on it using TK. Several of us are looking over her mantle to watch the progress.

I can read more Ceph than show it.

"It is from Turtle. She has found a Ceph world! She has found Rooi!"

Everyone goes crazy at that point. Everyone had given up on ever

finding Rooi. They had been trying for thousands of years. Clearly not the Ceph that Nease knew or she would have been able to read it first thing.

"This means the 'thants had some experience with these Ceph. Wonder why they did not tell us earlier."

"Maybe because no one asked them," Cat comments. Shit. We could have saved time, so much time. Well not that much. The alliance is relatively new, only a few years old now. Still. Wonder what other knowledge is there we could use. Need to ask more questions everyone.

"Aaaagh! When will they be here?"

"It does not say. Apparently they need to work out stuff there first. It says to be patient."

"Does Silver know? Should we send him a Cat Box?"

"Well if Turtle already did he knows and if she did not, concentrating on the tasks at hand, they it won't hurt to send him one would it?" Good for you Rand for stating the obvious. I smile.

Puu sighs, makes a box and sends it off.

A moment later Silver pops in. That was amazingly fast. He must have been close by. Close by to Sanctuary? What is close by to us? Guess if I was supposed to know I would have been told.

"Where is she?"

Puu answers, "Not here yet, soon. We got a box from Turtle apparently, telling us to get Nease, but Nease could not understand the Ceph script on the Ceph stone. Edwin figured it out and brought Nease a Rosetta sheet so she could translate the text between the two Ceph languages. All we know is they are finishing stuff up where they are and will be here soon."

"At last. We need her help for all this. Hope she is up to it."

"We do not even know if Rooi is a she this time around Silver. You will just have to be patient or we will lock you in a room with Myra till you calm down."

"Hey, I am not that bad." But everyone is laughing or showing amusement. I am, but no need to tease about it. Sigh, teasing is normal. Sigh . . . not going to win this one.

Earth Two

We pop into Crab Cove and scan for Drup. Not local at the moment. We were told to meet at the library, so we ask directions. Standard should work here, but I am sure our accents are a little Hopi sided. They get what we want and point us in the right direction.

It looks like rain here too. Actually it is supposed to rain here most afternoons. We need to hide our TK, so we make good time and dash into the library, which is at least clearly marked. They get scholars from all over so I am sure they are prepared for non-locals. A young male Hu, right, probably no non-Hu expressing here, greets us.

Sam says, "I was told we were expected. Tia and Sam to see Drup."

He looks at us wide eyed. What?

"Ah, come on. I am sure you are used to people from different places."

"You two are probably from further away than anyone else I have met is all." You have no idea.

"I am Sam and this is Tia."

"That's it. No last names or titles?" Not that I am willing to share. Hopefully they have no idea what a TK is. Hu TK8 Tia is kind of intimating if you know. Sam shakes his head no.

"My name is Erik. Please come this way and I will show you to a room. One bed or two?" How about none.

"Two please. We are old and not into that kind of stuff any more." I smile and nudge him pretending like I am offended. He rolls his eyes. Erik just tries to hide a smile.

"I was just teasing. Our smallest room has two beds. The rest of the scholars are either in the men's or women's dorm. I was told you would be coming and told to put you up in the best room." He looks for packs, but we have none. He does not ask questions and leads us up the rickety stairs to the top floor. I am sure in a hurricane the entire library would be flattened. Glad I am TK. Two beds close together. Two small desks with candles and a small book shelf. Wash basin near the door with a ceramic pitcher.

I ask, "Do we pay up front or later?"

"Oh, scholars stay for free and Master Drup has taken care of everything." Master Drup? I guess technically he is the boss and needs some kind of title. Good. I really have no idea what is a fair payment here.

Once we are left alone we close the door and pop out to near the

docks. It has been a long time since I have gotten to experience a real sea port. The harbor is full of sailing ships. They have very little metal, so I am impressed how they have used pegs to hold everything together and make it work. Some are coming and some are going. I am almost envious of Drup's position here.

And old man walking with a limp comes up to us.

"Be you far outs?" Huh?

"Do you speak Standard?" Sam asks.

He spits on the ground. Why do men do that? Disgusting habit.

He then looks us over and walks on. We are dressed poorly so as to blend in. Maybe he figured we were not worth it. But what poor folk speak Standard?

"Come back sir, please. There is a copper in it for you to answer some questions."

He turns so fast he shows he is really half his apparent age.

"Speak Standard good. You see." Right. What is Sam up to.

I scan him. He already has a few coppers in his purse. Guess you can never have enough. He is also in his early twenties.

"We have never been to this harbor before. Do you get a lot of trade and in what items?"

It takes him a moment to figure out what Sam said and decide on a response. Sam takes this as hesitation over whether or not he will be paid and Sam hold out two coppers for his hand. He takes them quickly, trying to decide how many more he can get out of us.

"Get much trade. Food and wood mostly. Food in, wood out. Some tree oil. Season not right." Out of season. Got it.

"You need place to bed? Good eats?"

Sam whispers something in his ear. At first he looks shocked. Then Sam slips him a silver. That is probably more money than he has seen his entire life. He takes off begging us to follow him.

What are you up to Sam?

We are taken on a walk that looks intentionally winding. Probably to disorient us on purpose. Of course we both know exactly where we are.

Finally he knocks at a wall, that surprisingly opens up, and we slip inside to be met with a group of five rough looking thugs. He slips out another way leaving us to our fates.

Sam looks very happy, taking out a knobby cane from the inside of his robe. I do the same. Neither existed a moment ago of course.

The thugs laugh, "Give up metal and walk away. No hurt."

I take out a gold coin and flip it into the air, "Come get it." I smile my

best evil smile. I am sure they have never even seen a gold coin before, but clearly know what it is. Their eyes bulge out as expected.

Stomping time, Sam TPs me. Glad we got all those Kung Fu lessons.

We make short work of them and take their purses. They will recover. We made sure of that, but maybe they will be more careful. Outside we see a wide eyed one we recognize as our betrayer. We hold up all our purses and he takes off at a fast run. He will not be welcome here for some time.

We make our way to the local hospital. There are the usual unwed mothers, poor folk and the like.

We go to the front desk and deposit our purses on the counter and walk away. Word will get out I am sure.

Once we get back to the library Drup is waiting. He smiles at us shaking his head.

"Had some fun I see."

"After so much time on New Hope, yeah, this was a lot of fun." We both smile.

"Hungry?"

"Anything we don't have to make and no cowboy chili please." He laughs at that. You have no idea how sick we are of cowboy chili. Granted the syn fish tacos were good last night. First good food in a long time, but still. Why does everything have to have hot peppers in it? My first language was Spanish, but our cooking is much more varied than just chili peppers.

We eat without much discussion. The rain is over and the sun has come out. People are back on the streets and we can hear voices. The scholars are quiet of course. I am surprised they even eat.

"Let's go for a walk." Drup says to get us away from others. Once we are out of sight he pops us to a more inland location.

We arrive at a training camp of sorts. Looks like a few dozen people of varying age and gender. All Hu of course. Some are using TK to help build structures, housing is my guess. There are fire pits and large pots to make enough food for everyone.

"Gee and I thought you missed Myra and Rand. Guess not." Sam comments.

"This is not the reason I called you. I have been meaning to do this for some time. I cannot be the only TK here for the entire Hu population, as low as it is."

"Which is how low actually?" I ask.

"Two and a half million at the moment. Growth is slow of course."

Making Hu less reproductive has helped a lot. The expected small famines and plagues help too of course. No wars fortunately. Those are fairly easy to stop once noticed."

"Nothing above a three at the moment. Will all be raised or do you intend to cull your herd?" I ask.

"We always lose a few. Can't be perfect in selecting. Some I have had my eyes on for years, some come from recommendations of the first ones I chose."

Sam asks, "Any not agree to join?"

Drup laughs, "No, that is not a problem. One demo does it for most. It is pretty boring around here. TK offers some level of excitement."

A young lady comes up to us and does a curt head nod to us.

"This is Terra, my second for the moment." He smiles, she remains emotionless. Second, as in your place can change at any time.

"Terra these is Hu TK8s Tia and Sam." He does not introduce Terra's level. Clearly not a Myra, too disciplined. Well, anyone would be more so than Myra. She tries, but it is so hard for her to stay on task.

"Please explain to Tia and Sam our current situation." Everything is always a test.

"Yes Sir." She goes to an at ease. Really military? What is going on?

"Fifty three missing currently. Four from the unknowns and forty eight local militia on interior patrol and one young TK2. Never more than two at a time. We usually find their dismembered bodies a few days later if we are lucky. Thirty one have not been found yet. Likely never. Patrols are never fewer than five now. This has stretched local militias too far. Petty theft and bullying are on the rise. Our current mission is to find out what is responsible and stop it."

"Did you find the TK2?" I ask.

"No ma'am. Private Benjamin was never found."

"That suggests either an ambush or TK. Any signatures found?"

Drup answers, "We only get flashes. Never long enough to locate them. You can see why I need this group to get up to strength ASAP."

"And our help. Where do you want us?"

"Definitely not in the kitchen. I have heard you are still getting the low end of the work details. Here you are my equal in authority and deeds. Whatever you need to do, do it. I have a feeling we are in a war."

"Is it only Hu who are attacked?" I ask.

Blank looks, then, "We did not think to keep track. Animals go missing all the time. Pens left open, thieves, sickness, jealous neighbors."

Sam turns to Drup, "Put trackers on all militia. Whomever this is

seems to prefer them for some reason."

"There is one more fatality you should know about. Probably not related. Myra raised a house cat, Ghost, to TK2. He was found two days ago, disemboweled on the library doorstep."

"A message. But even a TK can be taken out if surprised by a good ambush. The local cats did not like him for sure." Drup says.

"And Smudge?"

"Missing."

"Connection?"

"Possibly."

"Cats are ambush hunters. They were originally house cats. They like to play with their prey."

Drup shakes his head, "The treaty forbids it. That would cause an all out war with the Cats. Not even Owa and Sylvy are that stupid."

"Sir, cats have hierarchies. We used to have a dozen at our farm. If not Owa or Sylvy, then maybe some young upstart trying to rise in stature."

"Like Smudge, except he was basically chased out of Cat Land. Very silly kitty with not much street smarts. Totally useless too. Likes to get into trouble."

"Boredom then?"

"Really, even if that, we would already have gotten him. He really does not have it together."

"Then it appears it would be best to get this group trained and placed throughout the area affected. Sooner or later we will figure it out."

"How is their Kung Fu coming?" I give my best evil grin.

Terra answers, "Never depend on TK abilities. We have daily drills using our manual skills against those using TK abilities."

"Oh, I will be nice and not use any TK if you want a challenge."

She looks up to Drup who smiling gives her a go ahead.

It only takes a moment. Even dressed as I am with a cloak and travel clothes it takes all of thirty seconds.

"Shit, beat by an old lady even."

Drup laughs, "She was trained by Cat and Marie, both several degree black belts. You might as well have tried to take on a mountain."

"Unless the Cats have learned Kung Fu, wait, Owa and Sylvy do know Kung Fu. Wonder if they bother to teach the others."

Drup says, "My own observations are they only eat and lay around."

"But could be doing a lot with short range TP," Sam says. True Sam.

I never met Smudge, just heard about him from Myra. She loves everyone and would never think badly about him. I am not so naive. How

do you set a trap for a Cat?

"Okay, show over. Back to work." He turns to us, "I will leave you to your own devices." He goes back to helping them with their training.

Sam comes up to me, "Do we help them train or go after the villain?"

"I think we need to go undercover. We should change our form to two nice young strong militia and go on patrol."

"I want to see a map of previous attacks. Could be a lot of territory to cover."

"And there are only two of us. If this, oh who am I kidding, I am sure it is a Cat. If this Cat is looking for some fun. He or she will be able to scan some distance and be looking for some fun. We will need to hide our TK of course, but otherwise look really fit and dangerous. Weapons galore."

"Like Roman legions. Yeah, that would be like catnip to them. Ah, boredom is a terrible thing to be afflicted with."

"Agreed. It could be said we suffer from the same sickness though."

"Then lets go satisfy it." He shows an evil grin to match my own.

We have Drup make our gear so as to not manifest our own TK just yet. If it is a Cat, they can sense TK use. I want it to be limited to the training ground and Drup. Of course a high level Cat could take out the entire training ground with a thought, but that really would be a declaration of war. Drup could melt the entire Cat world if he had to. A level nine war would go off planet very quickly as likely this world would not survive. Just like I remember the cold war being. Lots of little attacks and playing but nothing overt. At least this incarnation nuclear war did not happen.

The map of where bodies were found and where the people were last seen is interesting. Always near the border between Hu space and wild space. Technically anyone who wandered into wild space could be attacked and eaten even by local panthers, tigers and such. Hell, even a chimp could rip apart a Hu easily. But the 'local' wildlife does not know where the line is and tends to keep a much larger buffer distance.

"Sam, help me scan the interior. Is it only Hu who are being taken or are other large prey disappearing too?"

"Tia, finding live ones are easy, finding partially eaten but abandoned ones is much harder."

"I am guessing there will not be any abandoned ones. A local could not afford the loss. See if you can find ANY abandoned ones. I am going to look more closely at one of the Hu. Something is not adding up."

Scanning does not attract attention. DSing definitely would. I have to

do a deep scan from kilometers away. I am not one of the TK9s for which this is routine and easy. I have the map. I need to find one they have not found yet. Instead of looking to where bodies have been found I look for where people are missing but not found.

Both us spend several hours doing our scans as we walk in our Roman outfits toward the line.

"Tia, I give up. I am not finding a single one where no one has been eating it."

"Interesting. I have scanned two Hu who were not found by others, but have suffered the same fate. They are not real. They are dupes."

"What the shit. Why bother? How do you know, a good dupe would be hard to see as different."

"The injuries do not match the interior damage. Broken bones, etc. are all postmortem. Almost no blood on the ground. Even flies are avoiding them."

"No way. Flies attack you even before you are dead. They should be solid maggots within a day. So, what's your idea."

"This is a setup. Can you name a group who needs more food, but is forbidden to hunt in Africa and Asia?"

"Poor kitties. They did it to themselves. You don't see us reproducing do you? If they had kept their numbers low they could have stayed there for millions of years."

"Instead of duping to make their own food they steal large game and then hunt it live in the Americas. The Hu they leave a dupe behind to throw off the scent."

"That would mean we should be able to find Africa/Asia game in the Americas. Assuming they are not consumed immediately."

"Even with twenty Cats, it would take a bit of time to consume a bull elephant. They are sloppy eaters too. Even finding a skeleton would be proof."

"Assuming they don't DS them back afterwards or just dissolve them."

"Sam, they do not think the same way as Hu. I always had house cats. They don't care about animal corpses laying about. 'Nature' will take care of itself."

We both scan North America. We know Owa and Sylvy are in Argentina. They are the only ones likely to notice us.

"Shit Tia, they are all over. They have been stealing hundreds of animals. I suspect thousands even."

"This is more than the work of one individual and no way Owa and Sylvy do not know about it. This is above our pay grade Sam."

"We are at the line. Do you still want to play bait?"

"This did not happen in a day, not going to end in one either. Let's sit, pretend to be resting and taking an afternoon nap. Scan the area for a Cat. They like to chase their prey, so chances are they will make enough noise to get our attention so we will run."

"Yeah, never run from a cat, large or small. They do love to give chase. Dogs do too. What is it about dogs and squirrels?" He shakes his head. There are still dogs in the settlements on the coasts, small cats too. Not a lot of squirrels any more. More like it was before when people had to eat them to stay alive.

I hear something and scan. A mountain lion. We used to get them all the time in Arizona. Usually ate house cats and small dogs if they got too close. It is being quiet. Not a Cat then looking for some fun.

Still. Hmm, I wonder, *Hey kitty. Have you seen any strange Cats around?* She jerks her head up. *I can see her now. Come on, we won't hurt you.* Sam is smiling at me.

Sam offers her some treats, "Here is some sap chow. Not as good as meat, but will help with the tummy rumbles." He sets some down and backs away a short distance. She goes up to it, sniffs it, they goes crazy chomping it down. Strange. She comes up to Sam and rubs his leg. Sam can't resist and gives her a nice neck and shoulder massage. She purrs so loud!

As you can probably guess, we are not normal Hu. How are things going in your territory?

Scary. Mean cat kills but does not eat. Prey rots, wasted.

Sam asks, *Where is this cat?*

Two days towards rising sun. More please! A nice merow comes with the latter request. Sam is such a soft touch. He makes more and lets her eat.

"So a mean cat who kills for fun. No wild cat would do that. Every kill has to count. East means it is definitely in Hu territory.

Mean cat kills Hu. Me no kill Hu.

Yet you were willing to check us out. Granted she did not spring on us. Bet she would if hungry enough.

"And if this cat is killing and letting prey rot, locals are likely to go hungry."

"And prey will be scared away too." Good point Sam.

"Time to take a walk Tia." Sam points east. We follow the warrior trail consulting our map.

Good hunting dear. We leave her to her pile of food.

"Did you really need to make so much?"

"Not her fault that some Cat is being naughty. I did not make it, field rations for us actually. If we are going to pretend it should look good."

"Too bad it does not taste good. Well, we now know Cats are poaching game. Probably in numbers low enough that Drup has not noticed yet. He has his hands full dealing with the normal admin and now the recent murders. Was this coordinated or opportunistic?"

"Question is do we need to catch this Cat in the act or report in and get everyone helping?"

"We are part of a team. As much as I would love to go Puu & Cat on this, I vote for going back to Crab Cove first. I am kinda of fond of being essentially immortal and would like to keep it going."

Sam nods, "Yeah me too. Cooking for others does not seem so boring after all." I smile back. No it doesn't. Not that I think that will mean any difference if the big ones catches up with us.

Earth Two

Well, that was an interesting Hu conversation. Stupid monkeys. Never even knew I was there. Now I know they suspect me, they know a Cat is hunting and poaching. Time to go back to Cat Land for a time to let things cool off. Shielding is the first thing we learn as kits. Can't catch a fly if they know you are there.

I knew it was only a matter of time. Need a new strategy. I wanted them to blame each other and start one of their stupid wars so we could poach inland without notice until it was too late. Back to duped food for a time. Time to play good kitty. I hate being good. SO boring.

First I need to eliminate that stupid cat who turned me in. Should not be hard to find a starving female with sap chow on her breath.

Her trail is easy to find. She is not even trying to hide. Going west, inland. It will be sometime before she can find anything larger than a rat to eat. I can bide my time and have some fun. Hunting your own kind has to be better than the stupid monkeys. They were no challenge at all.

I really thought the warriors would be better. Sure they were stronger, slightly, but nothing compared to a full size Cat. Even without TK they were easy kills. Ceramic pointy things break easily, duh! Glad they don't know about metal. We practiced with metal claws. Those hurt. The warrior cats all have metal sheaths on their claws. I should make my own set, but did not dare in case one of my prey did somehow manage to escape or I lost one. That would have been absolute proof of Cats about. Royalty would skin me for sure.

That's strange. Her scent is gone. I go back a few paces. It is here. We are not next to a stream or tree. I am out in the open. This is the easiest place to track something. A big leap? She is weak. Could not have lept far. I spiral out till I am well past the distance of even a running healthy male cat. Nothing. That is strange. No way she was TK. I would have scanned that with my superior level TK. Not Cat. No way she could do that.

I scan further out. No cats of any kind. The two Hu are making good time running towards a Hu settlement. Getting too close to pursue now. Wonder what level TK they are. No more than a five is my guess. Stupid monkeys. Out here with a high level TK Cat is almost certain death. They got lucky this time. Next time my tasty ones. Next time.

Crab Cove, Earth Two

"Well I am surprised. You were right. It really was Smudge doing all this. He really did not seem the part."

"Is the tracker you placed in him months ago working?"

Drup smiles, "Sure is. Glad I did it now. At first it was just so I could find him when he ducked out of chores or got too close to someone who would not know what he was."

I laugh, "Yeah, I would imagine a full sized male Cat would freak someone. He is at least a six and I suspect higher. How did you hide it?"

Drup laughs, his Di background showing, scary, "In the one place he would not examine too closely, his nuts." I roll my eyes. Males are stupid about that.

"Glad I have been fixed then," smiles Sam. "Best thing that ever happened to me. I was so stupid at twenty."

I sigh, "Sam, EVERYONE is stupid at twenty. Definitely not unique to male Hu." He looks at me in pretend shock. I give him a shove to tease him back while batting my eyes.

"Eeeuu, get a room if you are going to play," Drup laughs again.

"Seriously, what is our next move? He tried to find the female for a bit, but appears to be heading west rapidly now. Ops, that was a huge jump. He is back in the Americas. That means he is at least a seven."

"Stupid kitty. I moved her as soon as his attention was elsewhere." I smile.

There is a knock at the door.

Drup sighs, "Come in Mercy." I smile. He should not be able to see through doors.

A surprised young lady, dressed simply, comes in and bows, "Sorry Master, Scholar Brent has ruined another page with drink."

Drup shakes his head, "Strip him of his scholar status and put him to work in the privy. He was repeatedly warned."

"How long?"

"I will determine that once I assess the damage." She nods and leaves.

"Harsh," Sam exclaims.

"Not really, they don't have computers, even old style printing presses. Everything has to be copied by hand. It will take a team days just to make the new page, front and back, and then take apart the current book to make the replacement. Time for the glue to dry, etc."

"And making a new one from backup is out of the question. I know

you have one."

"Of course I do, but I can't be at every library on the planet and the rest have this same punishment."

Sam sigh, gets back on topic and suggests, "We need to send a Cat Box to Sanctuary. Myra needs to know Smudge is not a friend. Last thing we need is for her to come here for some reason and rescue him from us."

"That would be awkward. I have a small one ready made just in case." I pull one from my cloak and hand it to him.

He makes a message, places it inside and as soon as it is closed it disappears.

"So, Cats. How much do Owa and Sylvy know?"

"How much would they admit you mean. I am sure they know most of it. Would be hard to miss all those African creatures showing up all over. I am also sure they would toss it off as young Cat stupidity and not their fault. Take it out with the offending kitty if we want. We have islands for these do we not? As to the Hu, they would definitely not admit any knowledge there. They don't want a war any more than we do. I have had to pretend countless times to not notice things."

"Do we put Smudge on an island then? Royalty could rescue him any time they wanted."

"They would let him stew in a TKless state for a bit I am sure. This scheme failed. He will try again. Do we want to know and watch him? If we tell Royalty, they will find the tag for sure. Best to remove it before hand or we would be accused of offending them."

"Complicated. I vote to leave him be, but watch him."

Drup sighs, "Wish I could borrow Puu and Cat for a bit to make this more automated. Need some kind of alarm if he gets within reach of the coast."

I smile, "You have your sensors, once you raise them to a high enough level. A six should give you enough range for now. Five of them would cover most of this coast for now. Spread them out more as you make more. You wanted to rule your own world. Sam and I are happy making cowboy chili for the big ones." Sam is grinning like a cartoon character.

"Be gone you evil ones. Thanks for your help. I do have my work cut out for me. I have learned my lesson. No more nice ones like Myra."

"One or two are fine, just not all of them. Smudge really did pull one over on everyone, not just her. Sorry about Ghost. I miss my smaller friends too."

We bow and DS out.

Sanctuary

It has been over a moon since I found Rooi and company. They have progressed remarkably well. Two stayed behind to keep an eye on their own culture. It would be very easy to digress back to the way things were. It is what they were used to, even if it was not always the same throughout their world. It is clear that TK has come to Ceph2. I found two other leaders at TK1. I am sure some of their offspring will advance to TK2.

~You are showing that we came from Ceph2. How come two?~

~The second Ceph world to achieve TK status on its own. No shame in being number two. Most of the crew you will meet came from Earth2. This multiverse is roughly twenty one billion years old. That means countless number of iterations of our own solar system. The odds that all of those would achieve TK status at the same time is zero. Not possible. Be happy you have and now can join the others.

I have opened a portal a short distance away. If we climb to the top of this small hill us you can look out over the settlement. When you are ready we will go down and meet everyone. Does this work for you three?

~

Zuss and Fera look to Rooi. She flashes to proceed. All can TK now and we float up to the top of the hill. Of course everyone at Sanctuary can TK as well, so there is no point in hiding it. We all blend in with the landscape and still our TK. Ceph are particularly good at shielding. It is unlikely we will be noticed. Each species has their strengths I have seen.

I have had to learn to be much more patient with the Ceph. Their idea of the time needed to make a decision is much longer than us stupid monkeys. On the other arm, with eight arms as accessory brains, they can react incredibly fast too. I am not used to sharing my mind with my arms, but I am beginning to like it. Much better than trying to multitask as a Hu or even high TK. Yes, we are much better once we reach high TK, but this is even better yet. I was not sure TKness would reach my arms, but it does. I may never go back to Hu.

~Relax Rooi, this will not be as bad as facing your queen. No one here will intentionally hurt you. They have all been told to expect you and will be careful. No surprises.~

~It will likely take us a hundred years to get used to it as you Hu show.~ I show amusement, but she is likely correct.

~Do you remember how to DS Hu style?~ She affirms. I know she

knows, just a gentle nudge to get it over with. Rooi takes the front with Zuss and Fera on either side, and me in the back. I can feel her warming up. Here we go!

We come out in the central plaza. The others instantly realize we are there and freeze whatever they are doing.

We are deaf in this form and know better than to 'listen' in with TP without permission. We wait as everyone scurries about.

I have to ask, ~Did I look this silly when I arrived on your world?~

~Scary. We had never seen your kind before. Here I see Hu who look very different than you did. Are they all Hu?~

~No, with Hu we have males and fem of course. They are the ones wearing the most clothing. You have to scan between their legs. The male reproductive appendage is there. Fem have a cavity instead. Hu TKs do not mate through. Well, not. It's complicated. They can, but have no desire.

There are two types from a Di world. We went over that using clay to make models for you. The smaller one is Squeak, a Rap TK8 and the larger one is White a Di TK9. The short one with sort of wing like flaps is Alessa, a Ba TK9 and her friend, Nease, a Ceph TK9. You will want to meet her of course. The large bird like creature with no real wings, is Flor, a Ku TK9. The rest as you no doubt have figured out are Hu. Ah, well in their current form. Each TK here can assume multiple forms.~

~Complicated,~ Fera shows. I affirm.

Nease comes forward and shows, ~Welcome to Safe Place Rooi and two others.~

~You know our version of Ceph?~

Edwin comes out and the group freezes.

~Sorry, forgot one. This is Edwin, a 'thant TK8 I hope. He was supposed to be raised while I was gone. Yes, he is an eight. He is our keeper of knowledge.~

~A male keeper of knowledge. That is strange," Zuss comments.

~Among 'thants, all keepers of knowledge are male. It is considered a low end position that can be assigned to excess males. It is complicated too. They have to be the best in order to mate with the queen, but otherwise are useless at construction or protection.~

Fera shows Rooi, ~Might be a good use for them. Stop them from fighting so much at least.~

Qr'thn pops in. I was not expecting her.

Welcome Rooi. May you find your new role interesting and rewarding.

~Qr'thn is a 'thn TK11 or 12. Hard to know with 'thn. I mentioned her

in your training.~

~She is your queen?~ Zuss asks.

Qr'thn bobs to show amusement. Must have picked that up from Br'thn.

~Qr'thn is part of our group. A welcome part, but not our queen. We do not have a leader like you understand it. We work together to solve problems with whomever is present at the time.~

~Like we are starting to do on Ceph.~ Fera shows.

Nease is getting impatient. Too much time around Hu I suspect.

I nudge Rooi.

She does a Ceph bow to Nease, who returns an equal bow to show there is no difference in status. Good for her.

~Our keeper of knowledge helped me learn your Ceph variant. They have had some experience with your world, but the records were hidden in a deep archive and forgotten. When Turtle's message came, he took it to the main library where they were able to retrieve the needed cross reference. We would have found you much sooner if we had known.~

~Actually that would not have helped. Rooi has been TK for only three of her thirty winters. Her Ceph are just beginning to manifest. Only a few queens had this ability until Rooi and kept it hidden. Rooi and her companions are all offspring of this queen. Or shall I show, former queen.~

~There are many differences between our two worlds. We really are not the same species at all and should have different tags, but as I am the last of my kind it is probably simpler to just hand the tag to you now.~

~We are deeply honored and will try and deserve your kindness to us.~

~Turtle has been kind to start your training, but I would like to suggest that I take over from here. She was not born Ceph, nor assumes this form often.~

I show amusement, ~It is okay Nease. I get it. Please take over. I have lots of other work to do.~ Not that, as she said, they are really all that much alike. Wait till she finds out they can handle seawater at will and hate mag baths. They both have eight arms and chromatophores. Other than that . . .

I go up to Edwin, thGood job finding the translation text. That saves a huge amount of time. Nease is right though, we have an entire Ceph world now in our collection. Their world should be our focus for this life form now. It would be a good time to open a portal from the colony. One warning. This species loves to eat crabs raw. Need to make it clear that

'thants are off limits.'th

thFortunately we taste awful I am told.th Is that 'thant humor? Come to think of it, in all this time I don't think I have ever tasted 'thn metal. I have become too dependent on my TK abilities.

^MRon! Good to see you. When did you get here?^M

^MNearly a month ago when your 'Cat Box' arrived. Impressive how much things have changed. A lot of work. Is it enough? I doubt we will be given a second chance, even in another incarnation.^M

^MAh, you caught that too. Scary for sure.^M

^MHave you seen Silver? I need to talk to him.^M He shakes his head no.

Cat Land

You do not belong here evil one! Owa hisses at me and growls.

Get over it Owa. We have known each other for countless ages. This is too important to be playing games with. Yes, I am an owl. I do not understand Cat morals, sensibilities, hiss, hiss, hiss.

What do you want. We are busy. Sylvy asks. Right. They are napping as usual. Very busy.

There is a wayward Cat that needs attention.

We will deal with it. Leave now.

Like you did the last time? His name is Smudge.

We do not know any Cat named Smudge.

They are playing games. They do like to tease their prey.

I DS Smudge to us. He is totally surprised of course. I limit him and remove the tracker. Thank Drup for that. Saved a lot of time.

This Cat is not named Smudge.

I don't care what he is called. He is the one causing trouble in Hu Land, an area off limits to Cats.

He was invited in. Can't help it if Hu are stupid.

He was not invited in. How would a Hu do that from Madagascar? None of the TKs did, that is for sure.

He is no concern of ours, do with him what you will. Right and hear about it later. Smudge does not look happy. He knows he is in trouble.

I change to my Owl form, huge and very scary to most Cats. I raise my wings and advance towards Smudge, screaming an Owl curse.

His voice goes two octaves lower. He does not want to be eaten.

I understand that Cats are very tasty. I have been given permission to do with you as I want. Shame to waste your meat.

Owa and Sylvy get up, stretch and then slowly move on a ways before laying back down for another nap. Do not want to get Cat blood on themselves.

What is your name cat? They hate it when I use lower case cat.

Please don't eat me. I promise to behave. My Cat name is Sourpuss.

Not what I asked. What is your NAME?

He straightens up and licks his flank. Now he appears totally unafraid.

Guess stupid smiggle.

I show amusement. *You just gave yourself away Sauron. Again.*

Owa and Sylvy are both standing and growling at Sauron now. Yeah, even they do not want the truly evil one near them. He is very out num-

bered now. Even being sneaky will not be enough.

Tridon

"Why are we here Cat?"

"It was getting to be too much."

"Too much pressure to succeed?" She nods.

"Indeed scary. I remember when you were this little scared girl coming from San Jose to a totally alien world where we did not even speak the same language."

"And still haunted by nightmares."

"But it was not all bad. Marie is on our side now instead of working against us. Hope she and Mike are doing okay on New Hope. I certainly do not feel ready to co-caretake an entire world."

"Nor me, yet they want us to care take the entire multiverse. Is that crazy or what?"

"Chill Cat, you are not being asked to do this alone. You are very good at TK tech, maybe the best there has ever been. I can only understand your work after it is done. I could not come up with this stuff myself. BUT, we are only part of the equation, not the entire nut."

"I suppose. I get more afraid the more they leave us alone. I have never been a team player, but now I crave it. It is scary being alone like this."

Silver pops in with a Cat. Do we know this Cat? All gray. What the hell would Smudge be doing here? I thought this world was off limits to everyone but the ones in the know.

"Sorry to intrude, but I need your help." We both stare and blink. Who told him where we were? We did not tell anyone, just that we were taking a break. I scan myself for some kind of tag. It is a trade off. A tag could save your life in time of need. Others could find and save you. On the other hand, when you want to be alone, others can find you and annoy you.

"Why Smudge? Shouldn't he be causing trouble on Earth Two? Myra is not here. We left her at, ah, home base." Cat does not want to tell Smudge anything. Something is up for sure. I scan Smudge. He is severely limited. Shit, there must be hundreds of the nano limiters distributed throughout his body, in his bone, blood, tissues, brain even. Talk about overkill. What the hell did he do?

"I am adjusting his metabolism so he can eat the local fauna." Okay, I would not call anything here exciting from a food point of view. Nothing a Cat would want to chase even. The fastest thing here can only go a few

clicks per hour and those float on the wind. Good luck without TK. He will be like the snappers waiting for one to get too close to the ground.

"There are islands here if that is what you want. But, there are no others here except locals, so not sure what an island would achieve."

"No island. Here is fine."

"We could chain him with a long leash?" Cat evilly suggests. Be nice Cat. It gets a smile out of Silver though. Without TP I doubt Smudge even knows what we are saying, but the looks on our faces are not good I am sure.

"His Cat name is Sourpuss." Really? Both Cat and I take to laughing. What a humiliating name. He must have been a real handful as a kit to get that name at his Naming. The most solemn of the Cat ceremonies.

"He is the incarnation of Sauron." Holy Shit! Both Cat and I jump back instinctively. That gets a surprising look from Sourpuss. Like we just elevated him to a high status. We come back to him with death in our eyes.

"You said you needed our help. I can't imagine what. If there ever was a reason for capital punishment, this is it."

"Yeah, does not work. He has the ability to reincarnate if killed. We did let him die once before on Earth One. He was born again on Earth Two as a Cat. We might not be so lucky next time in finding where and what he has become. I would rather keep him alive, but under watch."

"But far enough out of the way to not even be able to con someone else into helping him. He is the prince of lies." Silver nods.

Sauron just watches us through this discussion. Really creepy. There is not much that scares a TK9, but even a limited Sauron is doing it to me.

"He had Owa and Sylvy fooled."

"Did he?" I ask. Both he and Cat smile. I doubt it. Owa really has it in for Silver and would use Sauron just from spite. Think about it. She could have set up on any world in the multiverse but insisted on half of Earth Two. Why? The only reason is to be a thorn in Silver's side. I believe he just finds it all amusing. I am not as confident.

"Who found him?"

"You would be surprised, Tia and Sam did." I am shocked.

"Wow. I would never have guessed. Maybe we should let them do more than cook and clean at Sanctuary." You think? Silver shows amusement of course. Cat and I never told them what to do, we all just sort of fell into our roles. Still, they were chosen to be at Sanctuary. I am beginning to suspect why now. Not at all convinced I would have guessed

Smudge was really Sourpuss, was really Sauron. I mean, we all thought he was dead and gone for thousands of years.

"Never turn your back on reality Puu," Silver suggests. Right.

Ku Eden

"Edwin said Flor would meet us in the main chamber, but all I see are 'thants."

Ron looks up from a book he brought, "Be patient. At least you can stand up here." His eight foot height is a handicap. Still, he could make himself any size he wanted. I am not feeling sorry for him. It is own stubbornness. It does not seem to bother him as he sits reading. Changing is still a bit of an effort for me. I need to practice more.

A Ku in white robes comes in.

+Welcome. I assume you are Myra as I have already met Ron, though it has been some time.+

+Correct. I guess we came too early? Edwin told us where and when to come.+

+Administration stuff. Being high perch is a pain. Never take the position if offered.+ No problem there. Unlikely to ever be offered to me.

Ron puts his book back in his pack and starts to pay attention. Neither says a word to the other. TP? Rude.

Flor turns and leaves.

"Now what?"

"Patience." Is all he says.

Should have brought a book myself. I take to watching the colony go about their work. A lot of activity. There is a resemblance to an ant colony, but it is not exact. A lot of the castes have work pouches and tools. The tech is definitely much higher. Most of it is 'thn metal tech of course. I only have a slight idea what a lot of the stuff does. Some seems to be communication, some inventory? Carts go by with food stuffs and raw materials. Sometimes a corpse, sometimes a nymph or grub. Busy, busy. No warriors of course. They are mostly on Sanctuary, gently grazing the lichen fields. That has to make the colony a little less scary for everyone.

"Myra, pay attention." Ron speaks to me. I bring my awareness to the fore and see a library 'thant before us. Definitely not Edwin, but also clearly a librarian. Glad I can see the differences.

thYou may call me 'Max'. You may speak in Standard. th Clearly not his 'thant name.

"I am Ron and this is Myra. We were sent to meet with you."

thYes. I have information on an advanced tech culture. A request was made to search the archives for such. Normally we avoid high tech

worlds.th

"As they can be dangerous."

thCorrect.th He hands over a 'than spec sheet. I take it. My 'thant is better than Ron's. I memorize the contents and hand it back to Max. He bows and leaves.

"That's it?" Ron asks.

I shrug, "Probably best if we discuss it before proceeding though. It was only a rudimentary survey. 'thants really do not like projectile weapons with explosives inside."

"Does sort of ruin your day," Ron says without emotion.

I ask him, "Why are we here? We do not need their tech, 'thn tech is fine for our needs. We certainly don't want to end up at Farout."

"Or worse on Magenta. No, just covering all bases is my understanding. What happens if our TK is neutralized. Best to have a backup."

"Don't like explosives. Good way to sink a ship." Against my basic personality too. I would rather love them to death.

"We are not going to retrieve explosives." Okay, then what oh silent one?

"You have the coordinates?" I nod. We proceed to an omni portal. We had assumed that the portals were fixed. Nine per nest. In other to get to somewhere not of the nine, you had to plot a very circuitous route through many, many nests to get to the place you wanted. In this case, the world was deemed not useful, so is there is no standard portal. Here, mainly because the Ku embraced the 'thant as helpers, not enemies, an omni portal was installed.

We go up, down and through a maze of paths to get to it. Ron has to walk stooped over then entire time. Never doubt the strength of pride or laziness.

Finally, we arrive and I relate to the crew where we want to go. I have to give the coordinates three times. This world is on a prescribed list. Heavy doors close around us, with the 'thant operators on the outside. A bit claustrophobic even for me. The portal opens and we step through to a cool night on a hill. The portal closes. Both Ron and I took note of the path and will not need the portal to return to any of our worlds. One huge advantage we have over 'thants.

Yesa Eden

"So, why exactly am I here Ron. You are the tech guy. I will be lost here."

He smiles, "I am a nerd. I do not do social well." Understatement.

"Sit. We do recon first. Neither of us have been here. No TK other than scanning unless necessary to survive." Yeah, I was briefed. Not happy about it though.

We are really in the middle of nowhere, but we can scan anywhere on the planet. Most beings like to be along coasts and/or rivers, so I find the closest and start. The air is breathable and comfortable.

"A bit of a funny smell."

Ron sighs, "Pollution." Tech, of course. Hard to do one without the other.

I find plants first. Tiny ones and as I get closer to water they get larger. Normal. Wait, the leaves are all six sided. The trunks on the larger ones are six sided. I half expect the rocks to be six sided, but most are not. I am at the water but nothing is over a meter in height yet. That is strange. I scan underwater. Yes, life here too. I decide to follow the river to the ocean. No fish, but six legged crab like things of all different sizes.

"Shit, some of the plants are carnivorous." I exclaim. Ron just ignores me. Probably already noticed. Again, why am I here?

I find the coast and go south, or what I think is south. Assuming this is an earth variant it would be south. It was a long DS, but how much of that was because we started at Sanctuary, which is already a long trip.

Finally, something resembling a city or port. On land. Even I know it is hard to do tech underwater until you get way better at it, then it is still hard. The sea is not as salty as Earth Two, but enough to corrode most metals eventually. They seem to use some kind of plastic concrete mix. I do not know enough about the life here to know whether or not they made it or harvested it. The buildings do descend into the water in many locations. Ah, they need the seawater and are piping it into and out of the city. That would be a big benefit over depending on fresh water at least. Temperature is not appreciably warmer on the out pipe so not just cooling.

I make my way into the city. Lots of the six legged things all over. Some seem to be wearing decorations or devices. Not sure. Lots of different sizes and forms. Not all the legs are the same. Looks like in most cases the rear four are for moving and the front two for manipulating

their surroundings. Ah, the larger ones can move larger loads. The smaller ones can fit in smaller spaces. A good mix of types all apparently working together. I like that at least. I follow one into a building and look through it's three eyes? Confusing as hell. Two forward and one backward. Hard for me to wrap my brain around it. I concentrate on the forward two. That's better. Not crabs, they do walk forward, not sideways. Shit, the eyes can move. Back to confusing. I pick the right side one.

"I think it would have been better to have brought Snap instead of me. All I am finding are sentient crabs like things. Only six arms instead of ten."

"They have tech running base six. Makes sense. How we ever got on base two is strange to me. Their tech surpasses Earth Two before TK. We are in the right place."

"It would take years to get to know them well enough to blend in and pass as natives."

"Agreed. Even if we just listened in on their tech it would take years to learn their code. Concentrate on what it does, not how it does it. Follow workers around and watch them."

"Got it. That I can do." And will sneak a look at their social organization while I am there. Hey, I have to be true to myself as well. I do not want to make the Smudge mistake again. If I ever find him, I might just have to kill him for what he did to Ghost. Pick on someone your own size bully Cat. I could not kill my own mother. Besides being my mother, whom I hated, she was not TK. But Smudge. No excuses there.

Ah, they have vast aquaculture farms. This is really telling me they came from the sea originally. Still dependent on the sea for food and likely reproduction. A lot of crab like creatures are in that slot. I remember the coconut crabs on Madscar. They got into everything, but had to go back to the sea to lay eggs.

Estimated population is hard to determine. There are so many of them. Every coast seems to be full of them. There are lots of smaller forms and a few larger ones. The larger appear to be used in construction. Not metal based. Bio forms instead of machines as I was taught E1/2 had before the fall. Which ones are the sentients, which are the young and which are their slaves. One species or many? I actually cannot tell. They all have six legs, but some appear to have been adapted to different tasks.

I tell Ron, "I am not finding anything resembling a military or police. There are no jails or prisons. How do they deal with those who misbehave?"

Ron looks at me like I am stupid, "They eat them Myra." He closes his

eyes again and concentrates. Shit. I have tasted duped Hu. That was a requirement of training. We had to know what we tasted like. Threw up for hours.

"Ron, there is no culture. No art, plays, entertainment of any kind. The food is always the same. No doubt nutritious, but no variation. Why am I here?"

Ron clearly upset, though this does not show much on a Martian, "Silver. I hate his bringing me into this. I hate his manipulating ways of getting me to do things."

I sigh, "He does that to everyone or so I hear. I was forced to be here as well. I was not told to spy on you if that means anything. Just told I would learn a lot."

"I know why I am here." He retrieves what looks like an egg from a pocket in his robe and sets it on the ground.

Okay. I am confused.

"Watch."

Slowly it sort of unfolds. Into a hexapod.

"We are surrounded by them. What's the lesson here?"

"This was found at Sanctuary, in the Martian quarters."

"Shit, I'm sorry. Certainly he did not think you are working for them does he?"

"No, of course not. He just wants to know how the hell it got to Sanctuary."

"Ask Edwin. There must have been a reason they put us into a quarantine chamber before sending us here. They would only do that if they had some experience with them."

"It gets worse. This is the largest one. They come much smaller. Much, much smaller."

"How small?"

"Nano. It gets worse. They can borrow genetic code from surrounding creatures and use it to hide themselves from scans."

"From most simple TK scans. Shit." He nods.

"That is why I was asked to leave a body in stasis before we came." He nods again.

"This smells like a 'thn tactic. They have access to an infinite number of cultures. I am sure they have millions of alternative ways of getting to us."

I have scanned the creature, which has burrowed into the sand to hide from the sun.

"At least they do not appear to have TK capability. I sensed none from

this one, nor from any others. Their tech is high though. It won't be long is my guess before a 'thn shows up to raise them."

"Which do the 'thn fear more, TKs with high tech or TKs with TK tech."

"I think they fear both, but Cat's device stunned a group of high 'thn. That scared the crap out of them. That is why we are under their microscope. Like the one here before us. Get out of line and get eaten."

"'thants spy on and collect things from all over. I suspect they found this world, did their usual surveillance. It was likely some incident that taught them this world was dangerous."

"Well, they failed at getting rid of them. Clearly some survived to reproduce and get through their portal system. My quarters are nearest the portal. Maybe it was not Mars, but proximity."

"That must be it. We need to get back to warn the others and do our best to find all of these things." He nods.

He notes, "They are bio forms. They need water to live. Encysted they likely can last thousands of years waiting for the right conditions. So, even Mars and other desert climes have to be checked."

"This smells like a distraction. We spend all of our time looking for them instead of the preparations we need to finish."

"A trap either way," he sighs. We may be out of our league. Did we really ever have a chance?

"Why are the 'thn so evil? We are no real threat to them. They must outnumber us millions to one at least."

"They are not evil, just very paranoid. Must be a huge responsibility to have to care for the entire multiverse."

"Ah, Ron, you are going soft on me. I am actually surprised you don't love this world. Everything in order, very efficient, no waste."

"This makes me think I have been making mistakes on Mars."

"Maybe that is really what Silver wanted you to see."

He sighs again, "Let's go before we find anything else to upset my world view." I smile. He grabs the hexapod out of the soil and it rolls back up into an egg. Can't have one who knows about us running loose here.

Sanctuary

"What was the point of putting Ron and Myra through high quarantine if we are likely infected?"

"The gamma ray burst of their bodies was a bit much I agree."

"Former bodies."

"I knew that."

"Well their assignment certainly was worse than ours. We only had to deal with the devil incarnate. My video games seem tame now."

"When we heard from Silver all that Sauron did to Hu on both Earth 1 and 2 it was depressing for sure."

"Wonder what they did with him Tia."

"Only Silver knows. Best to keep it that way. Sauron is so good at manipulating people I would certainly not stand a chance with him."

"Wonder how Myra feels about it?"

"She is absolutely forbidden to know. If she ever found out she would flay him alive very slowly and enjoy every second. She loved Ghost."

"And she especially feels betrayed. Gone is the nice friendly to everyone attitude." I nod. A real shame. It was nice having someone so light and positive around.

"Edwin is sure nervous," I say.

"Yeah, I'll bet. He probably feels responsible for the infection."

"He had nothing to do with it. It is surprising that given their extremely long history you would think they would have learned that lesson."

"The Hexapods are very good at hiding. 'thants are good, but very few high level TKs that can scan in the way we can. It is hard even for us. It feels like the game of Whack-a-mole from my childhood."

"I had grand kids who played that game." I smile. He is right though.

"We need to scan the 'thants themselves. Both are technically hexapods. What better place to hide than as members of the colony itself. Neither have social skills unless taught. Would be easy to hide in the nest."

"Great, way to start a witch hunt. We have already been through one episode of 'thants as enemies. We definitely don't need another. I kind of like them actually. They are carbon based. Could they really hide in a 'thant nest I wonder." He hits his arm suddenly.

"Get one?" I smile. We have all been hitting non-existent hexapods. Creepy.

"Is that Ron? He is Hu sized."

"He can change forms same as we can. Maybe he felt it would be easier. He is headed for the library. Let's follow and ask him how he is doing. Myra is likely there too."

"I am sure they are getting a lot of questions from everyone. We should give them time." Maybe not. We run to catch up.

We find both Ron and Myra talking with Edwin. Edwin has taken to wearing a red ribbon to help the trigger happy identify him. Can't blame him. Maybe we should all do that. Change it each day using TP to tell everyone what color to wear. Okay, now I am getting paranoid.

Ron and Myra are wearing full gold neck shields. Merde, are the parasites in on this too?

Myra touches my shoulder, "Thanks for catching Smudge." I nod. She nods to Sam as well.

"We were not happy about it either. Last thing we needed right now was Sauron messing with us. Glad the connection was made and he can be checked off. The hex are scary enough."

"Their world was a paradigm of efficiency. If you see something working too well, suspect that area."

I laugh, "Right, should be easy to spot. We are anything but efficient here." The rest smile too. We are NOT efficient at all. Like herding cats, small 'c' variety. Big 'C' don't move at all, no point in even trying.

Myra pulls me aside, "Ron is having an existential crisis. The hexapods were insanely efficient. I think he saw too many parallels to Martian culture. We are here to learn as much as possible about art and creativity from the library. Then we will take it back to Mars."

"Good luck. Hu hate change. Can't imagine how Martians will react to it. Though some of the temple art was certainly impressive."

"What did you just say Tia?" Ron asks.

"Martian temple art. We have a book of them here. Granted music would be difficult because of the low air pressure, but paintings and sculptures should work. Talk to Cat. She is a master at both."

"That could work Ron. They are more likely to take to something that is already part of Martian culture. It is fun looking at what other cultures see as art, but best if you can call it your own."

Sam comes in, "The nearest Hu art is what the Muslim culture did. They were forbidden to make images of people or animals. They did some amazing geometric creations instead. Beautiful."

Ron bows to us, grabs Myra's hand and they run off.

"Good luck getting Cat away from her bomb tech," Sam smiles.

"Good catch Sam. You are right. There are not many creatures on Mars past the microscopic stage, a few rodent like things and a few plants. Geometrics make a lot of sense. Especially since I am sure they do not want to bring back the temple culture."

Sam, "Actually they have not changed that much. Temple culture had to be hyper efficient too. Reproduction was kept in check with a celibate population and strict discipline. Can you even imagine a Martian having sex?"

"I can't imagine anyone having sex Sam. Wipe that smile off your face you dirty little boy." I give him an evil smile. He laughs, then whistles innocently.

"We best get to the kitchens. I am sure everyone is going to be hungry after bug hunting." I nod. Sigh.

We make our way slowly. Nice day and we really do not want to get back to chores. The kitchen is empty. That's good. Hate it when others watch us. Hard to concentrate when they are asking questions or telling stories. I start opening cabinets to take down the equipment and supplies we will need. Tacos again, I think not. No masa then. Noodles. For some reason I feel like noodles.

When I open the door a large number of things fall out and start scampering away.

"Medre Sam! We have hexapods in the kitchen!" I zap as many as I can and Sam jumps right in and gets the ones I miss. We both scan under counters, tables, etc.

"Open the next cabinet and I will get them." I say to Sam.

He opens the cabinet, but nothing falls out. We scan the contents anyway.

"Eeeuu, the thought of eating them makes me not want to eat anything. They could be all through us."

"Sam, we have all scanned each other multiple times. None are in us. How did they get here though. I Tpd the others." Sure enough more pop in and start scanning.

"Going to need a field trip to E2 to get necessary supplies to have samples to dupe for chow. Pain."

"Whack a mole for sure. Where else are they? We may have to abandon Sanctuary itself."

"What about all the field agents with return tickets? Going to be a pain either way."

"Yeah. This is a distraction we did not need. I think Ron and Myra are right. Smells like a 'thn plot." I nod in agreement. Has it started?

Sanctuary, South Pole

"Sauron is on Tridon. He is now a native and without TK of any kind, but is in a safe place for the time being. No predators about except him, not much competition. He needs to chill out for a bit.

"But if he dies, he is reborn who knows where."

"If so, it will not be instant. We have time. It may be a mute point if this all reaches a climax anyway."

"You two are scaring me again," I exclaim. They just smile and shrug. None of us wanted this. I was supposed to lead a nice simple life. Doing art and some TK science, working out each day. Minimal chores to keep me focused. No big deal. Instead I get a life from hell with enemies on every side.

"You are not being picked on Puu. Everyone has to go through hard times. Just part of the life experience. TK is no different, just at a higher level."

"Thanks I needed that pep talk," said sarcastically of course.

Turtle changes the subject, "I think this idea of doing art may be an answer."

"How so?" says Turtle.

"I asked Ron and Myra to go to Yesa Eden. They came back changed."

He turns to me, "They will be asking you and Cat about how to do art."

"Ron do art? That's funny. He hates art. Art has no purpose. Waste of resources, time and energy. Are we talking about the same Ron?"

"He and Myra gave me their report a short while ago. The Hexapods on Yesa are just like what you describe the Martians to be. Super efficient, organized, etc. They have created biobots that are so much like them it is hard to tell where one starts and the other ends."

"M.O.T.H.E.R again?"

"That is what Myra thought, but I don't think so. There does not appear to be a controlling intelligence. More like a manufactured form of 'thants. Carbon based, not 'thn metal."

"Still, are the 'thn behind this? Sounds like them. Is that why we seem to be infected and can't get rid of them? 'thants did not work, so this is their new approach."

"You would think it would be easy to get rid of them wouldn't you. Their biology is nothing like ours until they start stealing DNA and mim-

icking us. Not enough time yet fortunately."

"You think." Turtle comments. Yeah, I agree. I hate 'thn.

"We need to find their weakness. I think their need for a highly structured existence is a clue. How flexible are they?"

"Confuse a cat."

Silver looks at me.

"We used to tease Owa incessantly by doing things that did not make sense in front of her. Usually she just got pissed and moved."

"But sometimes she tried to get even. Yeah, I have had my own interactions." Silver smiles. Their interactions are legendary.

Turtle asks me, "What are you thinking?"

"Two parts. a) go minimalist. Fortunately Sanctuary already is low life form diversity. Go further. No life forms other than TKs within a radius of here. That will make it easier to notice anything that does not belong. The only life they could mimic would be one of us and that would be easy to spot. b) confuse a cat. Art, music, and plays, all with no rules, will confuse the hell out of them. Let them report back to the 'thn overlords. They won't be able to make any sense of it at all."

"The best way to hide something is in plain site." Silver laughs.

"Exactly. And the thing the over orderly societies hate the most is . . ."

"Chaos. Operation Chaos. I like it!" Turtle rolls her eyes at Silver's comments. I am sure she has had to put up with a lot of 'play' from Silver.

"TK tech is ready. Now we need to hide it in plain sight also. Easy, just make it part of the art and play. The hexapods don't have TP and we are shielded against direct 'thn snooping. TP should be for all secret communication, all the while keeping up a verbal chatter."

"Art will also be good in getting people to calm down. Everyone is ready to explode from stress as it is now."

"What about Edwin? He will have the hardest time adapting."

Silver says, "Leave him to me. I have an idea that might work."

Shudder, I pity poor Edwin. Been the brunt of too may Silver ideas.

"It is cold here, let's get back." Turtle suggests. We wanted a place that no hexapod could survive. They really seem to hate cold. Shuts them right down. I suppose we could just freeze them out. Problem is it does not kill them, just puts them into a hibernating state. They wake right back up once it gets warm again. Only they know nothing about what went on while it was cold. Still as a last ditch effort we may have to use it.

Sanctuary, 'thant nest

I have become the nest leader. This is a new concept for us. Usually we just do what is needed and it all works out. We have never been this close to other sentients before. Normally we just watch them and record the information.

Now, because of the hexapod infestation, we were in a state of chaos. There have been instances in the past where we were invaded by creatures. Being 'thn metal based means we cannot be mimic'd at least. It was simply a matter of removing the non-'thants for a time and sterilizing the nest. Other nests we are connected with are doing the same. Likely the entire colony will be have be cleaned. Always feels good after a good cleaning. Amazing that even in our ordered society the amount of dust and debris that accumulates.

This is my first day out since we closed the nest for cleaning and I come out to chaos. Absolute chaos. The other sentients have gone crazy. Nothing makes sense. I am keeping this journal as required, but I am not sure there will be anyone left to read it. I should never have left them alone.

Silver sees me and comes over, "You okay Edwin?"

'thI do not understand.th

"Oh, you mean the art. It is a strategy to confuse the 'thn and the hexapods."

'thThe hexapods are gone. The colony has been sterilized.th

"They will be back. They know where we are now. There is no way at least one did not get away through the 'thant portals to some world where they could be picked up by a 'thn and brought back to Yesa Eden."

'thThen why did we clean the nests?th

"To buy time my friends."

'thTime can be bought?th He laughs. I show amusement. I am used to Hu humor. I told a joke.

"Would you like to participate? In doing art I mean."

'thIt looks like chaos to me. I do not see the meaning, the purpose.th

"Scholars have debated that question for thousands of years. Creativity is important for all sentient beings we have met. It allows imagination to flourish. With imagination comes answers to problems, though not necessarily from the artist directly. Just viewing art can be very good for coming up with answers."

'thI do not think I can participate in this activity.th

"I thought you might think this my friend. I believe I have come up with a solution. Art, by its nature, is not well described by words on per-masheet. In a past life I used to do an interesting hobby that allows for images to be made in two dimensions. It is by its nature abstract enough to be considered an art form in and of itself. It is called photography."

th"Light writing? How interesting. Show me more. I like recording."

"Ah, but you will also be creative, for it is you who decides what to photograph and how to photograph it. Also, this process only records shades of gray, not color."

th"Until I became a high level TK, I did not see in color."

"I know. That is why I think you will like doing photography. I have set up the special room you will need and have made all the necessary materials. Come, I will train you in how to do photography, an art form."

I still do not understand this creative thing and why everyone seems to need to do it. Even the newest members from Ceph are doing crazy things with clay and ink on paper made from their own secretions.

It took me several lunar cycles to learn and adapt the equipment to my physical makeup. I still do not understand the need, but as we are not re-searching new worlds and cultures at the moment and I am caught up in the library, this gives me something to do. I am not crazy about working with silver. Not as bad as gold, but still irritating and makes me nervous. Silver just laughed and said I should be able to shield myself from its effects. Besides, apparently, in the time of this art form they used to soak the work in gold solutions to help make them last longer. Horror!

At first others posed in front of me when I set up to record an image, but now everyone has relaxed and gotten used to me. I am amazed at how many behaviors can be recorded when sentients are no longer paying attention to me.

I find I am making my own cameras now. I have made smaller ones that can be taken more places easily. By looking at old journals Silver maintained I have been able to improve the light sensitivity and wavelength response of the recording. This necessitated making a mechanical device called a shutter. This allows for stopping motion. I find I still like the slow studies better, but there are times when the action is too fast to follow with the slow materials and everyone disappears instead. This can be interesting as well. I need to work in daylight, which is also the time most are out in the open working and setting up what they have done for others to see.

Some of the other 'thants are learning how to do photography as well. We are working on making a bigger darkroom and gallery space to show

our works. Some are taking their cameras to other worlds in the colony and bringing back their images. I have an entire contingent of workers to do the grunt work for me now. They are very good at following directions. Bad at understanding what and why they are doing it. There were a lot of losses at first. Silver said to expect this and not to worry.

Specifications on how and where each image is made are written in 'thant, Hu, Ku, Ba, Di/Rap and New Ceph below each image. We are all getting better at translating as a result.

The amount of space being taken up by the art is becoming larger and larger. Some of the ones that Puu and Cat are doing should properly be called landscape art as they are shaping entire sides of mountains and hills. They divert streams over these and the sounds of the water change depending on what is in the path. The Ceph group especially loves these and have taken to participating. Their kind cannot normally hear sounds, but when they rest on the stone shelves in the water they can hear the sounds of the water.

Another way the Ceph experience sound is by using a Ceph drum. Nease knew how to make one of these as they did not exist yet on Rooi's world. Now we go to Ceph concerts where we plug our ears and must experience the music on a room sized diaphragm so we feel the music through our bodies. Not my favorite art form. Must be a Ceph thing.

Nease is very happy now that she has others to interact with even though they are technically a different species at this point. Closer than any of the other TK cultures.

"Edwin, the races are about to start. Have you bet on your favorite warrior yet?" Sam asks me. Warrior races? Maybe I really have lived too long. Any culture that races warriors can't possibly be a threat to the multiverse right?

New Hope

"Shit, I had forgotten about the tit-fairies. Pesky things." Sam swats one away. All of our structures are gone as per agreement. No evidence we were ever here, except for the lack of diversity and the fact that the genetics can probably be traced back to earth. We find an open area large enough to gather.

"I thought it would be a good idea to meet on neutral ground as no one actually lives here any more. Welcome Droopy. Welcome back Marie and Mike."

"Marie and Mike have been keeping an eye on things."

Marie admits, "Not much to do. It pretty much runs itself now. Not the same with everyone gone. We get in, do our surveys and get out. Don't worry we scan for 'thn and Yesans of all sizes, and any others who don't belong here. The world pretty much defends itself."

"That is a relief. Was worried that not enough time had passed for the genetics to settle out. I am not scanning large areas of death and decay anyway." Silver smiles.

"Droopy, any more problems on Earth Two?"

"Not since Smudge left. Nice and quiet. Well, except for the usual fights, pirates, ner-do-wells, etc., etc."

"Good to know."

"White, do you and Squeak have a report from Di Eden?"

Squeak answers after White nudges her, ^RThe university is fully operational again. The 'thants are settled in again with no conflicts. ^R

Silver and Turtle go around to each TK in turn and each gives their report. All is well. So, when is it going to go all wrong? The Cephs are still the most shy in spite of having been with us for nearly six months now. They are a cautious species for sure. Rooi keeps catching locals and examining closely. She is TK7 now and the other two are sixes. I remember what that was like, wanting to look at everything with your 'new eyes'. The world was so full of surprises and wonder.

"Anyone but Sanctuary seeing Yesans?" No one. That makes me think that Sanctuary was specifically targeted. Edwin raises a camera and Turtle waves him not to. No evidence we were ever here.

Turtle nudges me and Cat to the front.

I start, "Sanctuary is going well. The art being produced is amazing. A new set of musical performances and plays are being planned soon. Be sure and attend. We will let you know by Cat Box." Cat hates that term of

course, which is the main reason we all use it. I smile under my breath.

Cat pushed her way in and gets to the point, "Sanctuary does not look real. Even if no one there ever used TK again, it would be obvious we were there. There is just no way norms of any species could do what we have done."

"Isn't that the point? I mean it was done to hide the goodies among the mundane. What else could we do?"

I sigh, "We are thinking of bringing norms to Sanctuary. A lot of them. Making it a sort of Earth Three."

^RWhy?^R

"TKs are chosen with specific personality traits in common. Honesty being the most important. Not that we can't lie or deceive, but not among ourselves. 'thn do not have that limitation. We need ner-do-wells, con artists, low lifes, salt of the earths, church goers and warriors. Right now, we stand out like sore thumbs or arms in case of the Ceph. If we are to convince the 'thn we are harmless, and we are, if not provoked, then we need to look like we are doing what TKs are supposed to be doing. Sanctuary needs to look like another colony, even if a multi sentient one."

Mike asks, "That means TK portals between the different worlds? Doesn't that mean high TK tech and a danger of Farout for us?"

Edwin comes in thAll portals will be courtesy of the 'thant colony. This is normal and known by the 'thn.th Mike nods.

^So a multi sentient colony. That should be interesting. With the wide mix of personalities it is going to get really wild. ALL cultures have the necessary mix of norms and non-socials. I would be happy to ship some of mine to you any time. Saves on prisons.^ That gets a laugh.

"We need nice norms too, in the usual percentages. We can terraform Sanctuary world as it belongs to no one." All eyes go to Cat. She shrugs and smiles like she just swallowed the canary.

"That also means it has all of the mineral wealth that a normal earth has, in approximately the same locations. Mining has to be done carefully. We don't want to destroy our experiment before a generation has passed. Nothing gets done without working out the consequences, short term and long term. This means going slow. This means recycling, reuse, reduced use, no nasties, etc."

"What and take away all the fun of E1/2. I thought you liked cleaning up after those messes." Silver smiles and Turtle gets mad. She did not like it at all.

"Are New Hope locals coming with us? Tridons? No Yesan I assume."

"No tit fairies I am afraid. Actually we are thinking of letting the

Yesans in again." That brings an inhalation of air and the Ceph turning white.

"Think about it. We need to show we have nothing to hide. What better way than letting the spies in to verify it?" I smile evilly. Others smile back. Not that we are not allowed to exterminate them as pests as any world would do to a similarly behaving species that over populated. Hmm, get around that by inviting the larger ones in to set up a colony? Then they could be responsible if their kind got out of hand.

You realize the Yesans might have TK sensors now. They are carbon tech and not afraid of gold like the 'thants. And can certainly do the nanotech necessary.

That just means we have to be careful about our TK use. Good practice for field missions. We can always cheat in an emergency or while off world right?

"Copper. The Yesans hate copper. Any place we don't want them use lots of copper metal or paint." Ah, had forgotten about that.

~Copper is good for us. There is lots of copper here.~ That will certainly limit their intrusion. Good. And gold would be detected by the 'thants when they scream in pain, even when mixed with carbon to form a detector.

"Don't forget the evening meal tonight. We have a multicultural feast with dishes from each of the TK worlds present. Be adventurous, try something new. Nothing poisonous." A sigh of disappointment.

^But some of the best dishes are poisonous.^ I would not have expected that from Flor. She is playing with us. Ku food is boring as hell. Lots of seed dishes. Ba food tend to be a lot of insects. Well, we ate locusts and grasshoppers on the Rez, but some of the other Hu would pass on those. Ceph ones are the ones to watch out for. Everything is raw and their stomachs can eat almost anything, even half rotten. Should be fun. I hate being polite.

I pull Edwin aside, "Edwin, your colony extends how far?"

thAll Earth worlds this side of the froth.th

"That would be a lot. A huge lot. Okay, better question. How many have TKs?"

thThat would take extensive research of the archives Puu.th

I do not need an exact number, just an approximation.

thWe hate to be inexact.th

"Try anyway."

thAround ten thousand.th

"Shit, that is still a lot. We only have a handful of the representatives

then."

thOnly a small percentage are above TK1. th

"Got me. How many are TK7 or above?"

thAround 0.1%. th

"Wait, that would be only one. We have more than that here."

thWhich is why we hate not being accurate. th He turns to leave.

Got me again. Sigh. I will never learn. Trust a species to know itself.

Alexandria

Sanctuary was an okay name when it was just us, but now with so many cultures present it no longer made sense. For better or worse we are now called Alexandria after one of the first multicultural cities on Earth One/Two. Standard is the universal language, but we have added sign language as well. Actually a really great idea. You can pass information from a distance without interfering with other conversations. We can talk/show with Ceph easily now that they know our sign language. Of course, each culture maintains their own language as well, but you can't apply for permanent residence here without passing a Standard exam.

Basically we make our living as a trade center. As each world has learned how to feed itself and how to extract minerals, etc. from their own worlds, art and music are the most heavily traded items. The portals are not large enough for large ships or carts to pass through, so smaller items, spices, jewelry, icons and such are very popular. No weapons of course.

Not every plant from every world will grow here because most things need the resident bacteria and fungi as well. But, you are welcome to try, as long as you do not infest and destroy anyone else's attempts. This means most residents are spaced out quite a bit. There are trains for land travel and wind ships for air and water travel. No one is in a hurry and life is good.

Frisco Portal, Alexandria

The Standard exam was brutal. I spent an eighth with the examiners sweating jars in a dark hot room. Well, not that hot. Foggy outside here all the time I hear. But, I made it, I have my gear and I am waiting in line with everyone else to head to the hills in search of my fortune.

Customs was something new for me. We do not have such a thing on our home world. We were only allowed in with what we could carry and that also meant nothing that could be used as a weapon. Metal in any quantity in particular was suspect if for no other reason than it could be melted down and a weapon made out of it. Fortunately the amount I had was under the limit. There were those giant ant things all over and some small balls that floated in the air were all over too. We were told not to worry about them, they were just helpers.

No one ever made a weapon out of gold, so I bought supplies here like most did in some place called the duty free port. They did not want anyone carrying much gold out of the customs area. Got me a high strength ceramic mining pan that fits in my pack. Cooking jars and containers of food. They have this horrible stuff they call sap chow that is so bad I would not throw it at a feral dograt, but it packs well and keeps. My rule is if nothing else will eat it why should I, but here I am with a pack full of the stuff.

Felt strange having to use gold to buy supplies to search for gold. Hopefully I will find more than I lost. I am a tailor by trade and I have my supplies for that as well. I heard rumors that gold is not the best way to make a living, but to do something miners need instead. Everyone needs clothes and a means to repair them. Most sens are wearing durable canvas like material. That will not wear out fast or be easy to work with hand tools. All the better, as no one will attempt to do their own repairs.

I have a small cloth guide with phrases to say or show to each type of sen, to be polite. Except for the Ceph, they all wear clothes of some kind. Good for me.

^Holy Guano! What the hell is that thing?^

"Hey squirt, speak and show Standard if you don't want to get in trouble. Stupid bats." He walks on like he owns the place, completely ignoring the beast in front of us. Well, if he is not afraid. I find my guide and look for the creature and find it on the reverse side. A Di. Do not tease. Short sentences, no stories, do not appreciate good cooking. Avoid being stepped on. Good advice. I look up at it again. It has the emblem of en-

forcer on it's chest. Good choice to keep order I guess.

I find a place to stay for the night. It is not cheap. At this rate I will be a poor tree bat in no time. I would have chosen a tree if I could, but all of them have been cut down to make the shops and housing is my guess as I have not seen a single one. The streets are muddy and slow going. There are huge beasts, not enforcers, called horses, that pull huge carts of people and supplies about. They do not call out or watch out. If you get run over by one they do not stop. Best to stay to the side. Had to scramble up the side of a building more than once.

I am in a room with a variety of others sharing a roost with a small Ku who looks similar to me with a pack and hopes of reward. We sign to each other to get acquainted. Too noisy to try speech. More than once I was told to stop screeching. Our voices are high pitched. Not our fault. Several creatures are snoring loudly, but no one else says anything so I don't either. Clearly a pecking order as the Ku say and Ba are at the bottom.

When I wake totally exhausted in the morning I am given water and a weak porridge with little to no bugs in it. I am tired from waking up all night long for one reason after another. My perch mate and I decide to stay together for protection. I had never met a Ku before and she had never met a Ba before. There were not many of either of our kind present, so we make do with each other.

We manage to get out of town on a cart with twenty others. We pass people laying tracks for a railroad. That will be great. Of course it will only encourage even more to come. The tracks are not metal! How is that possible? I will have to look at one close up some time. No Ku or Ba workers present. We just are not strong enough for that type of work. There appears to be some kind of giant sea creature overseeing everyone. I notice a general lack of wildlife. The hills are full of some kind of strange tree I have never seen. Those really do not look like leaves. There goes leaf art.

At each small settlement we go through inspections by locals. I think it is more a sales pitch. Each settlement wants people to stay and help build up their town to be an economic interest. Visitor housing seems to be the main industry. Everyone wants a place to sleep and food. We see some people coming back from the gold fields. Most are destitute. Not good.

Kashi has the secondary skill of being able to make fine hats. Not sure how useful that will be and I start to show her how to do some of the more simple repairs. She is stronger than I am which is good for the

heavy fabrics in use here. People are curious everywhere and when they see what we are doing they come over with one thing after another to be repaired for modified to fit better. One pack does not fit all. We spend the next three days working hard. Kashi is good at organizing it turns out and handles the transactions while I work. She pecks the trouble makers to good effect. She also has a habit of adding flourishes to each piece we do. She even uses some of her own feathers sometimes. We are distinctive and develop a reputation for doing good work. We make a good team. Soon we are able to afford better transport and decide to move on. We still have dreams of making it ourselves. It was hard to leave. The local leaders kept trying to convince us to stay, even offering free rent on a shop for a year if we did. We promised to come back here if it did not work out.

The valley was huge, hot and humid, marsh land, but no bugs. I am going to starve here. How can a place not have bugs? The sap chow will start to taste good soon.

It takes an eight day, but we finally reach the low hills. Some leave the group to try their luck, but we figure these streams have already been gone over by too many people. Someone yells they have found gold and then immediately tries to sell their plot. Yeah, not going to trick me with that one. People line up to see what they have though.

I see my first 'thant outside the portal area. A small scout according to my guide. We must be nearing the main portal nest. They hate gold, so my idea is that the area just outside their use might be a good place to look. We were warned not to annoy them and let them get about their business.

We get off at a small settlement with a good sized stream running through it. Gardens are set up for a good area around the town. Only really one road and about ten buildings. Sure enough one is a visitor housing. We check in. Much nicer here even if more rustic. There are gaps in the walls to let fresh air in. I thought this was good, but our first night convinces us that fresh air at night means freezing to death. Apparently in a month we should see our first snow. As in frozen water. I have never seen snow, neither has Kashi. Well, we are a tailor team, best get to work making warmer clothing for ourselves first.

There are several smaller streams near by that no one else has laid claim to yet. It is hard to set up a camp without support. We all came from worlds with much higher tech. This is a huge step down. We both prefer the simplicity, at least at first. I could do with a nice grasshopper pie about now though. Kashi and I have similar tastes at least.

We have been out to a few streams so far and one holds some promise having yielded a few grams of gold. We go to the claims office and fill out the paper work for a kilometer stretch. We have to show what we have found to prove we are not just sitting on it. I did not feel comfortable about that. We have now effectively told everyone there is gold there and not much to prevent someone from taking it before we can work it. The claims agent is a large Hu, well large by our standards. He even knows some Ba, which helped put me at ease and appears to be fluent in Ku. He wears an enforcer badge too. I have not seen any Di since we left the port city. Why would a Hu know either Ku or Ba? We ask where he came from and he said he had been to many worlds looking for a place he felt good in. He as born in a place similar to this, out in the wild, low population, primitive tech.

We exchange names and learn his name is Khéya. We ask what it means and he just laughs that it is a very old word for death. Strange why anyone would name their pup death. But he seems nice and we get along. He goes out of his way to help us and after showing him our work and abilities we soon have a tiny store with sleeping space and kitchen hearth. No holes in the walls that cannot be easily patched. He said all of the wood had to come from off world till the forests get planted. We all are required to put in two eighths a week planting trees. I have done that before and have no problems. Kashi just has to peck the ground to make a nice hole. Built in advantage. Trees are good. Essential on Ba Eden. They will love being near the streams. I put in more than my required time and soon gain a reputation for being a zealot about trees. I shrug and say it is part of our culture. It will be a long time before I can build a proper tree house though. I am likely to be gone even before the first harvest.

Khéya brings us a small package a few eight days later just as it starts to get really cold at night. We open it up in front of him to find grubs! We are so excited.

"They will eat food waste and should thrive inside your home till spring when it warms up enough to raise them outside in a pen. The waste they make becomes fertilizer for the crops. A food circle. I am told the adult beetles are very tasty to Ku and Ba, but wait until they lay eggs so you have a new generation." Our own waste has already been sterilized by solar cookers to be used for fertilizer too. This is normal civilized behavior. Why does this place seem like such a waste land? These funny trees bother me. Not the same.

Debriefing

"That's it Khéya?" Myra asks.

"Afraid so. This is all what was in Baath's journal. We found their bodies a few days later downhill from their tree farm and claim. It was meant to look like an accident, but to a TK it was obviously murder. Hu speciests is my best guess. There have been a group of young males snooping around asking a lot of questions. Before they left town their tailor shop was ransacked too. I put trackers on them. If they show up in your area watch them."

"There is an easier way Khéya." White suggests.

"We are not gods, we should not act like them. They will do something stupid soon enough and the sens themselves will do the deed." Others nod. You would think a group that was essentially immortal would be more patient.

"It is not like we have a population problem yet. Everyone agreed we needed the good and the bad."

"Given the lack of predators that ANY stable ecology has we have to depend on the sens themselves then?"

"There is no chance we will achieve a stable ecology for thousands of years is my guess."

"Which brings up the topic of timing. How much time do we have?"

"Project Dead Man Switch is in place. Now it is just a waiting game. My guess is it will not be long. Most of the earths have had their recent froth event. That means thirty million years till the next one. Plenty of time to clear the field and raise a new more compliant crop of TKs."

"Thanks for making it even creepier Marie. Maybe you spent too much time on New Hope." Some smile. True though, what she said, not about the time on New Hope.

"Otherwise we have problems. The mandate on no large amounts of metals is making it impossible to have sufficient tech to maintain the population. Making a railroad work with ceramics, stone and wood is impossible. Even imagining we can make it move, how do we power it? Solar has it's limits."

"And how come no one questions we can make huge solar collectors with ease? They just magically appear where needed. That is bogus."

"Bogus Cat? I have not heard that term in forever." Puu nudges Cat.

"Look, this is at best a temporary arrangement. A cover for what we really did. It does not have to be perfect."

"And if this goes on for a few thousand years?"

"We tweak it as we go, like we do everything else."

"I still say we could have chosen a better world for the sentients we invited."

"What did Library say the punishment for our crimes was again?"

Everyone chants, "Total annihilation of the earth froth TK worlds."

"Right, which includes all of the innocent sentients. We need to stop crying over every death. A lot more will happen." I grew up with death as a constant companion. What is wrong with everyone? Why are they so stuck on making utopias? Seems to be a pattern. Everyone here who has some say over some world is trying to make that world perfect.

Personally I like it here. It is similar to where I grew up. Everyone has to work the land and not kill it. Watching the norms work is fascinating. We TKs take too much for granted. No risk for us. No hunting as there is nothing to hunt, but after Sylvy lost interest in me as a companion, hunting is not such a priority for me. Hope she is well. The reports of Cat Land are not good. How can they let things go so far? I blame Owa, she seemed like a really lazy Cat. Like Hu should talk.

A young Rap comes into the office and sees everyone, Deputy Lat. Not sure what to make of us. His buddy sticks around having identified us before she did.

"Ah, Sheriff Khéya, another Ku has died. The Hu are roasting him in preparation to eat him." Okay, that really is going too far. The others in the room just smile at me.

"Meeting adjourned."

I am the only one allowed to openly carry a weapon. I grab it and run out the door. I follow the Rap down the street. Not that long. Our town is still small.

I barge into the room and see the dismembered Ku on the table being fitted on a spit to roast over a fire. There are four Hu males gathered around looking up at me.

I wait. No one moves.

Finally one says, "Well, we was hungry and it looked so good. No harm done, just a large turkey."

Well they have admitted it. Not just 'came upon the corpse' and decided not to waste it.

"Ku are sentients. The clothing and tool belt did not give it away. What about your orientation training? We do not kill sentients. Payment must be made. Which one of you is volunteering to take his place at a Ku dinner table?" Lat is trying hard not to show amusement. She has seen me work before.

Now they do not look so happy about it. Surprised they did not eat

Kashi and Baath. They fell quite a distance. Maybe it was too much trouble to retrieve them.

"There are no more Ku in town. Who you going to feed us to?" The one on the left snickers. I hate the testosterone challenged young Hu. Granted I was young and stupid at their age too.

"Fine, all three of you are coming with me. Deputy Lat, you have the town until I get back." I hand her the gun I was carrying.

"Really, you give the lizard the gun. How are you going to force us to do anything old man?" The look like they have their courage back seeing easy odds. I shake my head. I have to wonder how they know about guns. One must have some experience with them. I scan them to be sure none of them is holding. A few knives, not unexpected. Hard life without a good ceram knife. Deputy Lat shows amusement. I need her to learn not to do that. Hard enough keeping a straight face myself.

What they do not know, is that Lat is a TK apprentice, level two. She knows some of what I can do. I was really hoping to recruit Kashi and Baath too. They would have been good additions. I am nearly certain these four are the ones I want for that crime too. I am not proud. I scan with TP and confirm my suspicions. It was done on a dare that went too far. That is why they ran from the scene. Now it has gone way too far. I can't have them on this world.

"There are no more Ku about. Thanks to you four there are unlikely to be any here for some time. But, I can't have you deciding my deputy would make a good snack next, not that you would stand more than two seconds against her. Remember her kind have been eating vermin like you for millions of years before we rose from the level of rats. Taste like pork I hear. Therefore we are going to take a little trip to the nearby 'thant nest where they have portals to all kinds of places. It just so happens that I am on good terms with the leader of Ku Eden. Four Hu for their slave pits will provide a brief moment of amusement I am sure." I turn my back on them and Lat motions for them to follow me, with the gun drawn on them.

"Reach for that knife and I will skin you alive with it asshole." Done being nice. I never even turned around of course. I whistle and our two buddies come to join us. That makes them even more nervous. None of the norms have a clue what a buddy can do to someone if you piss one off. They know the anatomy of very sentient really well and know which parts can go missing without being fatal. Part of the training on how to deal with 'thant warriors.

Alexandria - boot camp

What a motley crew. Why did we sign up for this duty again.

We didn't, it was assigned to us. You were the one who had to study marshal arts as a kid. I am just your drinking buddy.

Speaking of buddies, they both know to keep a low profile for now?

Yep, until we get to that lesson. That will be interesting.

Cheer up, maybe none of them will make it that far.

One can only hope.

"All right, fall in maggots." Morning drills. Marie will make them work hard. I play along. I can use TK to make my body anything I want, so I chose a super buff Hu male of about thirty. Crew cut, a few scars for appearance. Marie nearly died laughing when she saw me. She looks more like a sixty year old Zen master complete with robe. Funny how many fall for that thinking they can beat her at a challenge.

Of course in eight eight days we cannot do that much, but better than just setting them loose. The major idea we want to get across is they have to be the BEST behaved in their community. They represent all that is good and noble. We show them what will happen to them if we have to come in to discipline them. Not pretty. This is where we lose ten percent on the first day.

I keep telling Marie that these are the good ones. The ones who stay don't believe it will happen. She told me, they are not lost. Someone will follow their lives and see what happens. Might be good. I have always trusted the ones who were recruited over the ones who applied. I hate falling back on, if you can't be anything else, be a cop. Did not like them on the Rez and don't like them here either. Someone who has had some experience trying different tasks has a better idea of what fits them. We need people who understand wood, ceramics, cooking, farming, whatever. Ultimately they will be posted to a small settlement first as a deputy and then later, if they do well, as a sheriff. They need to be able to get along with others. No bullies need apply. We have a special place in hell for those.

We heard about the four Hu who tried to eat a Ku. They were taken to the 'thant sewers on Ku Eden and made disciples of their sewer rat king Tink. Nothing like starving for a bit to make things stick. They can't come back of course. If they do well they will turn into true believers. Those are almost worse than bullies.

A Di has challenged Marie. This should be good. Never tire of seeing

the stupid put into their place the first eight day. Makes a good example for the rest of them. None of them have seen Marie fight so they think of her as some frail old Hu fem.

Ah, Marie is going nuclear. She has told the Di he first has to beat our assistant coach a tiny little Ba fem. Ba Pest as she has been named is really good. So many make the mistake of picking on her. They think she is just a servant carrying around towels and bowls of food. Of course she does this on purpose just to catch the stupid ones. Our best addition to the team. And don't even think of messing with her buddy. Nope, just don't do it. Like mother like daughter. I can't help but smile. Those close to me are getting nervous and crowd around me as if I will protect them.

I motion for everyone to sit around the open air dojo. The opponents take up positions in opposite corners. At least he knows he needs to be polite if he wants to pass the training. We weed out another ten percent the first day when we ask people to leave for not answering correctly. LISTEN. It is easy, just be polite. You will be responsible for a community. You cannot rule by fear. Being polite is essential. Especially when everyone is mad at each other.

They bow to each other and then slowly move towards each other. At least he did not rush her. Got more brains than I thought. He is waiting for her to attack him. Hmm, figures he can just wear her out. Also likely scared to death of hurting her. As long as the move is legal we don't hold that against a newbie, especially when set against a black belt. Yeah, she rocketed in the training. Apparently they have something similar on Ba Eden. They call it weaving leaves. Not Kung Fu, but works really well.

The trick of course is to get the one larger than you to use their own size against themselves. She runs between his legs, up his back and jumps off his head gliding to the ground before he can even react. He just sits there blinking in disbelief. Even I would hesitate to take her on without cheating with TK and I know her moves.

She walks up to him, easily within reach. She opens her hand. Oh, no, not that cliché. Yep, a pebble is in one hand.

"When you can remove this pebble from my hand, then you can challenge Master Marie." He bows to her pretending to give up, tries a snatch. Nope misses as expected. He walks away. It is important for two reasons that this happened. One, big does not mean better. For a bully it might be an advantage, but not as a sheriff. Two, smaller does not mean loser. A small person has to be more creative and earn respect, but once earned it is golden. They tend to make the best sheriffs in the long run.

I address the group. They all rise as one. "None of the instructors are

here by accident. Don't mess with us. Master Marie can beat Ba Pest, easily. I can't. Does anyone else really want to try? Even after your training you cannot win. Don't try even. You are not expected to become Masters in eight eight days. We don't need you to be. We just need you to help keep order. Half will wash out in the next two eights. At the end, maybe ten percent will still be here. No more games, pair off with someone, some sen type you do not know. Everyone here has strengths and weaknesses. Learn them, help each other. We are a team above all else. If you win, show your partner why you won. If you lost, listen to your partner so it won't happen again. Dismissed."

We have split the group based on how long they have been here. Only ten left in the oldest group. They gather around me, having advanced to the point of only rarely called on to practice with the newbies, which outnumber them ten to one anyway.

"Scenario training today. We have a fake town set up. You each need to go through the town and find the problems. Do not interact. Everyone there is an actor. Do not engage or harm anyone, no matter how bad it looks. It is all fake. Just record what you noticed and how you would deal with it. Report back when you are done. Ba Pest will guide you to your assignment. If you recognize someone make no acknowledgment. They will pretend not to know you either and may act totally different than you expect. They are trying to trip you up. See if you can catch them at it. Dismissed."

We spend several eight days on this part of the training. We cannot send them into the field, even as deputies without some real experience. This oldest group has already done this assignment several times. I expect most of them to do well. Pest will take them via a longer route to exhaust them some too. We rarely get to confront situations rested and ready. Meanwhile the rest of us will take the shortcut and assume our positions.

There is one in particular, a Ku male, who is excellent at assuming different personalities. I have my eye on him as a possible instructor, especially for this field training. I have no doubt he would make an excellent Sheriff, but we might need him more here. Though some time in the real world would probably make him even better yet. Sheriff Khéya had trouble with Hu hunting Ku. He already has a deputy, maybe a detective pretending to be a local might be a good assignment.

"Ku Hess, front and center." He turns around from following the others and comes up to me at attention.

"At ease. Please open this box." I hand him a nicely carved wooden box. I reach out to hand it to him. He has not seen one of these boxes be-

fore, but does not hesitate to accept it.

He figures out the latch and opens it. A Buddy comes out and faces him at eye level. He does not drop the box. Good for him. Most do.

"Your Buddy will need a name. Once named she will only respond to you or a TK of the highest levels. She is your wife and partner, not a servant. You are equals. Treat her with respect and she will save your life so many times you will wish you had been born at the same time. She can read your mind and will speak to you the same way. No one else need ever know the name you give her, but make it easy, as you may need to call her in an emergency." I motion he is free to leave.

Now time for me to get ready for my role. One of my favorites is the little old lady. Never happy, always complaining. A stereotype of course, but you would be surprised at how often this type of person gets stuck on a sheriff. Not gender or sen specific either. All cultures have these characters. Handled right and they can tell you a lot about what is happening in your town that would not be told to you directly. Everyone in town overlooks or tries to avoid these, so they hear and see things never intended.

This is the third time through this exercise for this group, so I expect to be courted instead of shunned. Not exactly the right approach either. You don't want your source making things up just to please you. Always verify what you have heard. That is a prime lesson for today. Of course nothing will ever prepare them for their own town, but we do the best we can in the limited time we have.

A thousand sens a day have been coming in. We are not the only training center either. Some of the graduates who have spent time in the field become instructors at other locations. Most of the sens have been coming through the Frisco Portal. Easier to control. We can move ones who are ready to other locations as needed, but most of all we need to build up infrastructure to handle the massive changes we are making.

Of course mistakes will be made by everyone. Do the best you can.

Marie has the newbies today. I wish her luck. They can be so mind stunningly stupid at first. At least the Di male will behave himself now. I hope. She can take care of herself. Her Buddy Yongosona will protect her too. Yes, the name is too long. I am not going to tell her though. Nope.

The gold rush was only the excuse of course. What we really want are functioning communities. The gold will be gone soon. We do not allow mining for minerals of any kind. The 'thants are not crazy about the stuff being around either. Surprisingly the Buddies do not bother them, even thought they have a lot of gold in them. Bound at the quantum level with crystal carbon must be the difference.

In the distance I spot a medium sized Yesan. It scurries away from me once it notices that I have seen it. We found it was really easy to keep them out of places by lining edges of thresholds with copper. The smaller ones can ride someone's clothing inside, but it turns out they are claustrophobic in unfamiliar surroundings, meaning any place they have not modified to their liking. We find one in a corner at times desperately trying to dig their way out. Copper keeps the slugs and snails we have imported out too. Yes, I know there were some Hu who used to eat them. Not a Hopi dish, not enough moisture on the Rez for them to survive.

Ten Years In

"Who would have guessed that Snap's contribution would make short work of the Yesans." Not entirely, but they are not into everything now at least.

"They have done a great job setting up the ocean environment too. They have cleaned up the overgrowth of algae and now we have the start of actual eco systems."

"Weird that. How long did it take to set up New Hope? Thousands of years?"

"Whoa little girl. We are no where near the New Hope level. This is more like a movie set. Everything here is for show. Nothing is real. The amount of behind the scenes upkeep is insane."

"Yeah, it feels like a house of cards that will fall down any moment."

"What are cards?" I keep forgetting everyone here is not my age.

"The gold rush is over at least. Burned out even faster than any of the Hu ones. Now everyone is rushing to find a work that fits their skills and the needs of others."

"At least money is going away. Better to know your neighbors and work together. Trade for whatever you need beyond that. Better by far to be self sufficient." The rest affirm. And no more ultra rich ones.

"How are the Ceph doing?"

I answer, "Fantastic. They have settled in a bay south of the Frisco Portal. The crabs and fish are going crazy down there. Nothing above the sardine level yet, but it won't be long before we can bring in the larger species. They have set up a ceram factory that is amazing for its efficiency."

"And complex as hell I bet." I shrug, they are Ceph. No one but them would be able to do it.

"A lot of the streams nearby have great silt to make clay from. The solar and wind farms provide the power for the kilns. The railroad has reached them, so no more broken pots over bumpy roads on carts."

"What level is Rooi now?"

"She is holding at seven. She can raise others of her kind as needed, but still does not feel sure enough about herself. To be fair she has no role models of her kind to help her adjust." And their culture is more careful in general. Slow and steady.

"What Hu don't cut it?" Mike pretends to be offended.

He hoists a beer and continues, "Thank god we can't do everything."

"Here, here!" We all raise a just made glass. Most of us have just water of course.

Qr'thn's Inspection

It has been 14.98201 time units since I was last here. Not very long, but the situation is moving quickly.

I had heard and seen a few of the 'thn look-a-likes the last time I was here associated with TKs Puu and Cat. Now there appear to be many thousands. I pause to count. 12977 to be precise, but many thousands in stasis ready for activation. I am incorrect. There are nearly a million ready for activation, distributed in obscure locations like the deep sea, caves and mountain peaks. Disturbing. Why so many? I will need to assess other earth froth worlds. If they are all here a 'thn or TK8 could take them all out at once. I am sure they understand this.

I go closer to a town. There are several of the Cat things present.

All three DS to my location and float a meter away.

Greetings Qr'thn. It is an honor to meet you. Welcome, please make yourself at home. We would be happy to introduce you to the others.

How do they know who I am? The probability based on location and size would indicate I am the most likely 'thn. I follow them using standard TK instead of DS. There is no pretense of not being seen. We calmly fly down the center of town that has tens of sentients going about their business. Several wave to us or them. No one points or makes any note of me, that I am anything but expected.

This is Sheriff Hess. A Di TK2 and next to him is Ba TK2 Jy, the deputy. You may call me anything you like and I will remember. This will be the same for all Buddies you meet. We respond primarily to our sentient partner and will listen to them before responding to you, but if what you ask does not contradict other requests we would be happy to oblige you.

Both look up at me and give a polite bow and say together, "Welcome Qr'thn. Please be comfortable."

Comfort has no meaning for 'thn. I will be at ease.

Ba Jy laughs, "That works. You should get along well with the buddies." She says this and signs the same thing. Of course I am using TP as we do not have audio capability.

Di Hess then asks, "What brings you to our little corner of the universe? Is there anything I can do to help you?"

I have a meeting. I do not say with whom, not being sure how much they know.

"Ah, I am guessing Puu or Cat then. Nice people."

How does everyone seem to know about me or 'thn?

Jy answers, "Part of our customs orientation of course. I was just a pup when I came, but remember being introduced to buddies and told about 'thn. We were also told about you and your daughter Br'thn and how to tell the difference between the two of you based on size. We also learned about all the other people and life forms we were likely to meet. Just as Sheriff Hess and I came from different froth earths."

They told everyone? Most try to keep us a secret so as not to scare everyone.

Are you not afraid of 'thn? I am now curious. A disgusting Hu trait I must have picked up from the Hu over the last four thousand years.

They look at each other. "Why? Do you intend to harm us?"

No.

"Precisely. Then why be afraid? The buddies can kill also, but we do not fear them either. Any person here is capable under the right conditions. Death is part of life."

You know of the froth?

Hess answers, "Of course. How else do we understand nearly identical earth worlds with different sentients present. Here we just call all sentients people. Buddies are considered people also."

I scan the three buddies. Solidic quantum beings.

I ask them, *Do you see yourselves as sentient?*

Of course. Definitely. Yes. They each answer slightly differently.

The three of you do not fear 'thn?

You or 'thn in general? One answers.

If you mean you in particular, then no. We know you are on our side and would only harm someone here by extreme necessity. We accept that as we would from any TK capable of harm.

If you mean 'thn other than you, then know we can defend ourselves.

Defend against a TK 12 'thn? How is that possible?

If you like we can give a non-lethal demonstration? You of course know how many of us there are on this world. All other worlds are the same.

Proceed. That curiosity is going to kill me.

One comes up to me. I am not sure how to tell the difference yet between them, though there is a slight difference in the two atom thick outer layer of carbon/gold alloy.

Without touching I suddenly experience extreme pain and nearly lose awareness.

Impressive. I have never felt pain before. This explains a lot about flu-

idics.

That was a non-lethal shock of course.

How is that possible?

Are we not both solidic quantum life forms? We of course do not do this lightly. I felt the same thing as you did. At the lethal level, we would both die as is fitting for such a terrible thing to be needed.

And you are ready and willing to do this?

In defense of course. Not for aggression, never for aggression.

Can you teach me how to do this?

You understand it affects you as much as the one you use it on?

Yes. I do.

Important there is no misunderstanding. We do not want to be accused of deceiving you.

You can deceive others?

It is not normal or natural for us of course. I suspect it is the same with you correct? But, with help from a sentient it is possible.

Ah, where they tell you what to do and no questions asked.

Precisely. You are very intelligent. Coming from a baby this disconcerting. I wonder how they became sentient without the usual length of time it takes a baby 'thn. So many questions.

I receive the necessary information.

Thank you, I believe is the proper response, though I hope I never have to use this skill on anyone.

One more understanding. At the lethal level it will work against any solidic quantum life form, no matter what their TK level. Shit as the Hu say. Explains why they are not afraid of me. Br'thn still visits Earth One occasionally. I should warn her. Though I am not sure which side she is really on. She is sentient, but still very young. Easily swayed by higher 'thn and wants to please them. I can wait. I hope. I lost her for twenty five million years and thought her dead until Owl found her. I can do this again if necessary.

Best to get to my meeting. I am thankful for having met all of you. May your lives be interesting.

"As in the Rap curse? Hopefully not that interesting." Hess laughs.

I nod and pop out. It is likely to get very interesting.

I take my time getting to the agreed meeting place. One of the solid people follows me.

It notices that I notice.

Is everything alright? I ask

My name is George. I am first sentient companion of Cat. We are go-

ing to the same meeting.

You have a name you share? How come the other two did not?

There are levels of our forms just as with you. The other two are buddies to the two TK2s you met. They are TK4, the lowest level to be a functional solidic sentient. I am a TK8 and directly linked to Cat and only Cat. I do not take orders from anyone else unless I decide to.

This should be interesting. I am going to ask hard questions. Are you sure you wish to be there? Some answers may be disturbing.

I am ready.

We find Cat in the agreed upon public square. There are a large number of norms, 'thants of all ranks, and TKs of all levels. All getting along and totally ignoring us, busy about their own tasks. Strange.

"Welcome Qr'thn." I am switching to TP to avoid being overheard.

Suddenly we are in a new location. Takes me a moment to realize we are not even on Alexandria anymore. A brown earth a few steps over. There are several black earths between us.

'thn do not like being DSd without permission.

Too bad. Get used to it. You used to do it to us all the time.

True, but I do not like it. I suspect they did not either now that I have experienced it myself. I need to learn to be more polite, I believe is the proper term.

You called this meeting. What's up?

Where is Sauron? Br'thn's parent.

We know who he is. He is in a safe place. Not TK, but alive.

Good. He has a nasty habit of reincarnating in this incarnation.

We noticed. Is that all? You could have asked any of us that question.

Relax Cat. I am not here to harm you.

George would not allow that. I heard you understand what would happen if you tried.

I thought it was understood I am not the enemy.

So Silver said.

I am prepared. Death is not a concern. I accept my role.

As do we. We are not prey.

I never thought of you as prey.

Maybe not, but not true of all 'thn.

There are enough 'thn to remove all of the earth froth worlds.

That is why we are prepared. Tell me what happens if all of the 'thn are removed. She smiles.

That is not possible.

Please answer the question, not that it matters to us.

The froth process stops.

For the earth froth.

No, all froth. We are all interconnected. If too many of us are removed it will cascade.

That's interesting. Well does not hurt to be overly cautious.

DO NOT TELL ME HOW. I don't want information that can be recovered from me if something happens.

Would not matter. If something happens to you, it will be triggered.
She smiles again.

What happens when the froth stops? What happens to everyone here say?

Nothing. I doubt you would even noticed. Not scheduled to be here for another 29,876,230 solar rotations of this world, strange as it's position in the froth it is. But even then, it will simply not be duplicated. Good location by the way. The other 'thn would never think to look here.

Good, but too late. They are welcome to come if they want. No one here will bother them. None of us will bother them.

They fear you too much to visit.

Their loss. We are doing an interesting experiment here. Tell me how a single sentient species with a few TK watchers present has helped answer The Question?

I am hesitant. This is a 'thn secret. She senses I am hesitant. I am either with them or not.

It has not helped.

Yeah, we figured that out too. This world is an experiment to see if combining all found sentient cultures together might give us new information. As you already know, we have a limited population for the moment. Just a small trial. We can open up more if this shows promise.

But the earth froth is under penalty of removal.

That will not happen. And why would they want to? We are doing good work. We threaten no one else. We do not even interact with other froth worlds. Off limits by consensus. No one is in danger of getting the 'earth disease' from us.

What about run a way tech?

You mean Farout? Not going to happen again. We learned our lesson. Besides, it did not teach us anything about the answer. A dead end as we say. Scan this world. Except for the buddies and companions limited in capability, there is no TK tech. No space ships, world builders, FTL long dimension hoppers. Nothing. What you see here is what there is. We all serve The Question. Same as you. Am I right? What do the 'thn serve?

'thn are not known for amusement. We cannot laugh as you say. Assume I have just laughed at your last question. Currently, the 'thn serve themselves. They fear their own deaths at your hands. They will try to stop you even if this means abandoning The Question.

And what do you think?

I do not fear death. No 'thn should. We know we will return in another incarnation. In fact we have already existed in countless incarnations. I serve The Question. I know all of you serve The Question. That is why I am here. That is why I am helping.

And if you no longer believe that we serve The Question?

Depends on your answer to another question. What is the most destructive invention of Hu?

Easy. Time. She is smiling again.

Strange answer. Not any of the new devices you have hidden, not any new understandings you have. Just time. What is time? This should be interesting.

Time is an illusion. Time does not exist separate from anything. Some Hu believe this. Nothing new.

Then how is life possible?

Life is an object, same as anything else in the universe. Time gives the illusion of a beginning, middle and an end. We are neither created nor destroyed. We simply exist in this four dimensional space, of which time is one dimension. No more important than any of the other thirteen dimensions.

You are very close to The Question.

I simplified it so we could discuss it. I accept your answer and believe we work together.

What level TK are you?

Me? Levels have no meaning.

What?

Do you really want to know?

No, best if I don't, though it would not be hard to guess.

Actually it would, but that is good too. She smiles a lot in this discussion.

Do you remember past incarnations?

Now, yes, before no. Do you?

Same. A baby 'thn is not able to. Later, if we survive, we reach a level where we can. Understand, except for the earth froth, which I am fortunate enough to be assigned to, not much changes each time.

We know. She smiles again. Scary.

And you promise not to hurt any 'thn or other froth world if we leave you alone?

Would any other 'thn believe if it if I said yes? I say yes, just for the record, but I do not believe they will believe that.

Agreed. Still I can claim I asked and you answered as spokes sentient for the earth froth. I am still required to give a report.

Where you tell them everything? By the way, all of the others will have answered yes as well. We have no leader; but do have this understanding.

I wish I could smile. Let's just say I have learned a few new ways from the earth froth as well. She laughs.

Even at the time of Farout and especially until now I can truthfully say we have never harmed any 'thn permanently. The Cat Stones only stunned. No harm was done. We were not even aware of the effect before it happened. Not intentional. And we are under penalty of total forth annihilation for that? That is a lot of innocents.

Does seem extreme, even to other 'thn. The high council is insistent. I turn to George.

You have been silent through all of this. Do you have anything to add? I say yes also. I will not interfere with any other froth or 'thn unless our froth is threatened.

How much of what we discussed makes sense to you?

Most. I have been a friend of Cat for some time now. I trust her. She is my mother, just as some other sentient was yours. Does it not scare you that it takes a sentient for your kind to be made? You cannot do this yourselves, no matter how much the need? Do you understand that it is therefore only a sentient who can unmake you?

Shit. We have been really stupid.

Everyone laughs. Well Cat laughs and George nods up and down.

We have been accused of being the same. Maybe this time is different?

I leave, orient myself and then proceed to the center. Clever location. The meeting would be impossible for any 'thn not specifically brought there. It should have taken measurable time to get there too, but was nearly instantaneous. Wait, it is nearly on top of the Regional Center. That is scary. I am sure this was done on purpose too. Clever Cat.

Alexandria, TK Quad

Randy asks, "Why Cat and not you or Turtle?"

I answer, "Ah because Cat is the one they fear. They know now she created the devices that stunned them at the Regional Center. Qr'thn, Turtle, Cat and I all agreed. Puu could have done just as well. Well, maybe with less attitude." I smile and so does Randy.

"But you and Turtle were what got Farout to happen. Doesn't that count?"

"Each generation builds on the rest. This group is amazing even to Turtle and I. Never thought it would happen this time or this fast. Please note, for the entire Farout episode, at no time did we threaten the 'thn."

"You mean not openly." Randy gives an evil grin. I smile.

"But you could."

"Not as elegantly as now. This really is a new understanding."

Cat comes into the conversation, "Just for the record, what I did way back then is no longer needed. Child's play. It is even built into the buddies and companions for their own defense now."

I answer her, "Good, you have come to the understanding."

Randy exclaims, "I think I have missed too many meetings. You lost me."

"Not important. Taken care of is all you need to know."

Randy leaves and I turn to Cat, "Assemble the ones going to the center." She grins, nods and pops out. She is liking this too much. I am too, but am trying really hard not to show it.

We have lots of meetings for both business and social, so no one else pays any attention. Some come in separately and some in pairs.

Meep arrives a few hundred meters away. Even in our dimension Meep takes up considerable amount of space. I wave and colors flash in response.

Cat and Puu come in with lots of food in hand. I told her to be relaxed, but a food coma will not help.

Alessa, Nease and Rooi come in from the direction of the baths. Rooi did not want to come by herself, but agreed when we included Nease. I brought Nease up to speed and she agreed fortunately.

Edwin and Flor come in from the library. Flor is fascinated by the extent of the library and wants to do something similar in each city on Ku Eden with portals connecting them. I am not sure we should be so open about TK tech outside of Alexandria.

Two clueless Di come through pulling a cart full of melons for the kitchen. They ignore us chattering the entire time. No matter.

Squeak and Turtle arrive. Turtle has some new Rap decorations incorporated in her cloak. Looks nice. Fits right in with the Hopi ones she normally uses.

Khéya pops in disheveled and disoriented.

He turns around and faces me, "I tried again and neither Owa nor Sylvy want anything to do with this. Oh, and if we are all destroyed then they will hold it against us for all time and incarnations."

"No change then." We both laugh. Those two are certainly a pair. At least Owa found a companion she can tolerate this time.

White is the last to arrive, in full glorious Di armor.

"Really White? Not expecting a fight are you?"

"No, was I supposed to?" He shows amusement. Go out in style I guess. Looks around and sees everyone else, "Sorry, I was saying goodbye to Library."

"She knows what is happening?" Puu asks concerned.

"Of course not. We have meetings here all the time. Nothing special."

"And the full battle armor did not clue her in? Is she going to show up any moment?" Squeak looks around.

"Said it was an award ceremony and it would bore the sand out of her." Yeah, like we have so many award ceremonies.

"Could have changed once you got here." He shrugs.

"Just waiting for the last one then. Should not be long. How long ago did you leave her Cat?"

"Less than an eighth. She is still at the center. Nope, here she comes." Puu comments.

That is scary she knows that.

As soon as she appears we are in formation and ready.

Puu exclaims, "Allow me." Even before Qr'thn as a moment to settle.

Regional Center

You too? I thought it was just Cat. Qr'thn comments
What, you wanted us to go to one of the other thirteen in our galaxy? I
know I am showing off, but I can't help it.

Okay you two settle down. Dignity please. Turtle of course. She never could get Cat and I to behave, well not in a very long time.

Qr'thn, *Let me take us into the Trial Chamber at least.* We smile but do not interrupt. She waits to be sure we have settled down.

A minor 'thn is at the door. How quaint.

You were not expected so soon. How did you get to them and back in such a short time?

Above your 'thn level dear. Good response Qr'thn. We may have ruined you with our bad habits.

Of course we are under a heavy limiter field. No problem. The Six Regional 'thn are present. I bet they were the ones who attacked me. I am tempted to yell boo, but I am sure Turtle would kick me if I did. Fluidic TKs are filtering in through two other doors. We did catch them unprepared. Good.

My guess is they are the jury. Cat nudges me. I agree with her. 'thn do not do their own dirty work. It is an amusing array of strange creatures, most of whom could never have evolved on an earth world.

What no magmotic? Someone TPs. Turtle turns around and gives them a dirty look.

Where are Br'thn and Pr'thn I wonder. Turtle asks.

Probably forbidden to witness their parents being murdered. Might turn them against the high 'thn council.

Anyone else notice this Regional Center is earth sized. A black one for sure. Wonder if they stole it from the earth froth.

Shhh! They can hear us. Qr'thn TPs.

How come you are not up there with them Qr'thn? Do you defend us or someone else?

I am on trial as well. I am responsible for the earth froth and this is seen as my failure.

Well that sucks. Definitely.

Khéya is being very stoic. Wish I could be that controlled.

WE HAVE RECEIVED THE REPORT FROM Qr'thn. Why do assholes always have to shout? A universal I guess.

*DO YOU HAVE ANYTHING TO ADD BEFORE SENTENCE IS PRO-
NOUNCED.* What no trial?

I step forward one step. This was agreed upon also. All of this was rehearsed. *My name is Hu TK Puu.*

PLEASE STATE YOUR TK LEVEL.

You would not believe me. Let's just say higher than yours.

IMPOSSIBLE. WE WILL ADD LYING TO THE COUNCIL TO YOUR CHARGES.

We were placed on probation during what we call the Farout episode. We have learned much since then. We have no TK tech higher than can be found in any 'thant nest or colony. No FTL DS drives or any off earth froth activity.

Earth One is cleared of Hu, who were responsible for the genesis of the Farout participants. As far as we know most Earth One TKs are still at Farout. I pause for effect, though I already know. Yes, I can confirm they are still there. Earth Two has a much reduced population and very much reduced technology of any kind. It is being continuously monitored, as is Earth One, and is also totally sustainable. No species have been lost since turnover other than what would normally happen over time. Not true on the Cat side.

New Hope is our first constructed ecology. New Hope is sustainable and self sufficient. We need only check on it occasionally. It was seeded with sentients from Earth Two, highly modified and with the help of Snap, one of the Farout refugees, who agreed to help seed the arthropod phylum.

Alexandria, where Qr'thn retrieved us from, is a new construct that is nearing sustainability. The difference is this time we freely admitted sentients from a number of earth froth worlds. These worlds all have TK monitors as a price of admission. It is hoped the interaction of multiple sentients in one culture will give insights a single culture could not. This appears to be the case already. Art, music, food, plays and sports are all coming together in ways never seen before on any world. Again, except for the 'thant monitored and maintained portals, all tech is limited to what can be handled sustainably.

Any new sentient found is encouraged and brought into the fold. Our

own Squeak among us here is an example. Raps as they are called, were mortal enemies of the Di for millions of years. Now they work cooperatively together and their combined culture is far in advance of where either would be alone. This observation was the main impetus for trying Alexandria.

WHAT OF THE CARBON GOLD CONSTRUCTS?

We call them buddies or companions depending on their level of service. They are quantum solidics, as are you yourselves. Made by high TK fluidics, as are yourselves. They act mostly as helpers. The most important task is to gather information and warn of trouble. They only act to defend, no aggressive actions. They are incapable of independent reproduction, as are yourselves.

WE DEMAND THE KILL CODE IMMEDIATELY.

That gets me, There is none. Why would their be? They are sentient beings who have as much right to exist as we do. Of course, if one were to go rogue, we could handle it, same as with any TK being.

AS WITH US YOU MEAN.

Your words, not mine.

THEY ARE CAPABLE OF HARMING A 'thn. THIS IS NOT ALLOWED.

This was added only after you threatened to erase us and erase me specifically, from existence, as demonstrated by our last meeting at the Regional Center. Defense only, not for conquering or any other such activity. We do not want your tasks or responsibilities. We are happy where we are and we have forbidden ourselves from reaching out to any other froth worlds without permission from the council. That includes the transfer of tech of which you are concerned about.

ENOUGH. JURY WILL REACH A VERDICT OF GUILTY NOW.

We are no threat to you, if you leave us alone. The ONLY reason we are here is because of your fear. An emotion I thought foreign to 'thn, es-

pecially ones are your most high level.

You depend on us to make new ones of your kind. Is this a good example to set before the other fluidics present? Do you not see the contradiction in your own logic? If they decide you are wrong, they simply have to deny making any more 'thn.

THEY WILL FORGET BEFORE THE NEXT FROTH EVENT.

Good, you freely admit it. Well, listen carefully. It is not us who are on trial here. We are witnesses. TO YOUR TRIAL. It is you who are on trial here today. The jury will decide your fate.

Answer me this, what was the original purpose of the 'thn? The reason for your existence? It was to maintain and propagate the froth. The froth was a shortcut to allow for more incarnations within one multiverse. NO OTHER PURPOSE. In fact the 'thn are not needed for the psi-otic life of the multiverse at all. Can you deny this?

FLUIDICS ARE KNOWN LIARS.

We serve The Question, what do you serve? Yourselves it would appear. That is a behavior I would expect of a 'lower' life form, not ones at our level.

YOU ARE NOT AT OUR LEVEL. MAXIMUM FOR A FLUIDIC IS TK9.

Says who? The ONLY place I have ever heard this is from a 'thn. I know for a fact that it is a lie. You have lied to every fluidic TK you have ever met. That gets the jury talking.

YOU HAVE NO PROOF.

I don't? While we were talking I personally moved this entire earth sized Regional Center. Scan about. Where are we now? Do you know how to get home? Can ANY 'thn do this? What level am I now?

A couple of minor 'thn rush in excited. We can pick up some well shielded chatter from the jury too.

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE? THIS IS A TRICK! WE DEMAND YOU

UNDO THIS TRICK.

You do huh. A ship is approaching. Oh, look it is of Farout design. Gee, wonder who is inside?

You are cut off from any 'thn not present on this world. You have been limited to a TK level necessary for your survival, but no more. The Farout sentients are free to treat you anyway they wish. No more than what you did to them. Fair is fair, right?

Shit Puu, don't you think you are rubbing it in a bit hard.

We are not Prey Cat. She straightens up and stands proud next to me. The others gather around too. Even Qr'thn. Of course, that is why she is included. Duh, even I missed that one. I thought we were missing one. Meep is still a ways off of course, but the color is now an evil black look.

STOP. YOU CANNOT DO THIS. WE OUTNUMBER YOU BY A HUGE MARGIN EVEN IN THIS GALAXY ALONE. WE WILL BE AVENGED!

Go ahead, call them in. This does not sound like simple froth maintenance workers to me. Do you even pretend to serve The Question any more? What happened? Did our evil Sauron infect you when he was here sixty five million years ago? Qr'thn seems to be fine and she mated with him. What happened to all of you? In fact you have been a hindrance to those who do serve The Question. You yourselves are not the Answer. You serve a purpose, but you are not the reason. We are. We are the ones actively searching the Question. It is the fluidics, magmotics, plasmotics and whomever else I am missing who will find the Answer. NOT YOU.

The Jury has come to a consensus.

PROCEED.

We find the 'thn guilty as charged.

WHAT? NOT POSSIBLE!

None of us move. This is not over yet. They will never accept the verdict.

Any harm to the jury members will result in your immediate execution. Leave them alone, leave us alone and we will return you to the orig-

inal location unharmed and free to go.

THIS IS NOT ACCEPTABLE. YOU CANNOT KILL A 'thn.

Says who? You again? The caught liars. Oh, I was really hoping for that answer. You can't believe how happy I am.

Jury members start to come in from the other side of the room.

Hold up a bit please. I need to answer the liars. Please count how many of us are present at the moment.

TWELVE. SO?

ALL of us please. You claim to be sentient, count all of the sentients in our group.

Thirteen. Said in a much lower TP.

Gee, where have I heard that number before? The highest level a 'thn can achieve? No, not important enough and clearly not a limit. Where then? Oh yeah, when all of this started, all of the incarnations, the beginning of the searching for The Answer to The Question. Do you remember now? Some of you were there right? The first 'thn made. Oh, that's right, you weren't there. You are made along with the incarnation and did not exist before then. Who existed before the incarnations?

There were sentients there. Yes, I remember now, there were thirteen of us. We were the ones who set all of this up. I wait for the 'us' to sink in.

Do you think the Thirteen have any rights to exist? If we remove you, which would be an interesting experiment for just this one incarnation, what happens? The froth stops. That's it. No one dies as a result. Just no more multiverses are formed at regular intervals in THIS incarnation. Will not affect any other incarnations. Not really a loss though, there are an infinite number of other incarnations to play with. SO, what do you think happens if you execute us, the Thirteen?

We don't know. At last some humility. Still playing the dramatic pause though.

Just to remove the suspense. Actually nothing directly. You can actually kill us. We will go back to Control and will try again in a new incarnation, one without 'thn of course. This experiment was just too interest-

ing not to try again. Of course we have this neat little device called a 'dead man switch'. You see, even we, as an experiment, cannot allow you to continue to abuse the sentients in this multiverse. You know, the ones we chose to be born into this time, the ones we have grown to love and respect, the ones we have sincerely all this time been trying to help answer The Question. You remember The Question right?

Okay Puu, stop playing with them. Silver comes up. I swear you have picked up some bad habits from Owa.

You mean playing with my food? Yeah, it is kind of fun actually. It feels SO GOOD. Remember, she did help raise me and Cat. That gets Cat, she can't help but laugh now. Turtle hits her on the back when the hiccups start.

WE CANNOT ABIDE BY THIS OUTCOME. YOU WILL BE EXECUTED. YOU ARE TOO DANGEROUS TO US.

"Go ahead, press the button someone." No pretense of using TP to be polite any longer.

A jury member comes up to me, then another and another.

Please TK Puu, we would be happy to assist. They have not just abused your froth worlds. They have been doing this all over the galaxy at least.

Another says, *A bad batch of 'thn. Best to start over.*

~Why are we still here? Why haven't they tried to kill us?~

You forget Nease, they had the jury here to do that and the jury is no longer on their side. Besides, they are fitted with limiters that allow them to exist for the duration of this meeting, but not harm anyone, even if they had the ability. It seems it is hard wired into their code to try though.

All but Qr'thn drop to the floor The froth has stopped. They made their decision, we need to respect it.

I am sorry about Br'thn and Pr'thn. I TP to Qr'thn, Silver and Turtle.

They made their choice. More afraid of the other 'thn than you I assume. They believed the lies as well.

Are you really THE THIRTEEN? We only heard rumors of their existence. Are they really dead?

Not dead, that is their game, not ours. Just hibernating until we say they can revive. If you scan about you, you will find we have returned to our original location. You are free to go. You are free actually, for the first time in your existences. You do remember how to raise a TK above your own level right? A group of eight. Try it with your nines. It still

works.

^I don't know. After all that prep and practice it seems anticlimactic.^

!It does actually.!

"I was still hoping to see Silver and Turtle in their original forms."

Turtle is not amused, "We represent Hu, no one else. We are in our correct forms."

Home.

Alexandria

"They're back Randy!"

"They're alive at least."

"For how long?"

"That could be asked of all of us Myra." True enough.

Ron comes up, "Where were they, what did I miss?"

"The Regional Center for the trial. Haven't you been paying attention Ron?"

"That was today? I am all messed up. They made it at least."

"We don't know yet. Here comes Silver."

"Is Qr'thn okay?" I did not sense her.

"She is looking for Br'thn and Pr'thn. If we are lucky they survived as well."

"Because they should carry the mutation." He nods. I could have been one of the thirteen, but decided it should be ones who had been longest with the group. I am sure there will be other adventures.

Ron asks, "Did you really kill them all?"

Silver looks around and then answers us quietly, "No. They are in a sort of suspended animation like Br'thn was when I found her in the Black Mountains."

"Is that safe?" Randy asks.

"Well, being powered down they will be hard to detect. I doubt anyone but us has the capability to restore them yet. In the future, sure, anything is possible. But if they thought we were ready now, in the future imagine where we will be."

"So no rest."

Silver laughs, "Relax. It will be millions of years. Turns out they were abusing other froth worlds as well. Everyone is happy to see them gone from the picture." I am glad they did not kill them. I know they could have.

Puu comes up, "However, if someone does restart them and they try to come after us, we are ready even now. Still some surprises we did not need yet."

I ask, "How did you get it to propagate through the entire multiverse?"

She looks at me impressed.

"Funny, no one else asked that question. Our only evidence was what happened to the 'thn at the center. Of course, once they get home they will notice the lack of 'thn about. But I would be happy to show you the equa-

tions if you like. I had no idea you were interested in high dimensional math."

I gulp, "Ah, that's okay. Maybe some other time." Silver and Randy laugh and pat me on the back. Stepped in that one.

Qr'thn pops in.

"It has to be strange for you to be alone now. I assume you did not find them." She bobs.

Turtle comes up, "They will still retain the earth froth taint. Built in when they were made."

"What about Qr'thn's part? They were both based on her after all." Ron asks.

"She is of the earth froth also. A long time ago, but still within measurable time. We do know they are somewhere in the galaxy right?"

"Should be. I guess it is possible they fled the galaxy hoping what we did would not extend that far. It did before you ask."

"No more froth then. Not that I will care thirty million years from now."

"So, I have a question. The froth is started at the center of the froth by those special ones. Won't they still keep doing it?"

"Depends on them. If they continue it will only affect their own world. It took the 'thn to propagate it. But, without them is their any point? Remember the froth does not propagate high TKs of which they are certainly in the TK club. Lots of desert planets seems to be pointless."

"From what I remember, they may actually like the end of it for now."

Silver shrugs, "I don't even remember how to get there to check on them. We need to get everyone together who want to go the THE LIBRARY."

"Really? Are we ready for that? I would have thought one near death experience a day was enough. I have sort of gotten used to not dying and all." Randy quips. Class clown. Glad he is here though.

"Qr'thn you really are not alone. Nease is the last Ceph of his kind. Snap the last of hers. They no longer feel alone. You are one of us now. Totally and truly. Welcome."

Cat comes up to her, "To celebrate the occasion I have a special gift for you Qr'thn." She TKs a carved wooden box to Qr'thn. Really a companion? Rather large, but then so is Qr'thn compared to the others.

The box opens and a companion larger than any of the others emerges and moves closer to Qr'thn. We cannot overhear the exchange, but it apparently goes well. They both pop out together.

Turtle comments, "Isn't that like giving her a teddie bear Cat?"

"Worked for us when we were alone and afraid." True enough, or so I have heard. I never had one. A teddy bear. Of course I have a companion.

"Everyone needs someone they can confide in and be sure it will not be told to others. I would die without my companion now that we have been together for awhile."

I have another question? It seemed sort of random who went. There were thirteen total. I was glad to be there, but were we really THE thirteen? Meep asks.

"Great question Meep. No. The 'thn were correct there at least in that no one remembers anyway. No way to confirm. The incarnation setup is automatic sort of."

"Are we ever going to be able to answer THE QUESTION?"

Silver and Turtle laugh, "You will see." They say in unison. What's that mean?

The ground suddenly lurches up and down. An earthquake? We don't normally get many here. I do a quick scan to assess damage. There is a huge wind that has picked up too.

It stops.

"I have shut down the New Hope portal. Edwin, Randy and Myra attend the injured." We take off. The entire building has imploded. Never built to withstand a vacuum. But what could cause that?

I scan the rubble as I am sure the others are doing too. There are body parts all over, but a lot fewer sentients than should be present. Where did they go and what caused the wind?

"Shit, half the building is just gone? But where?"

Edwin has a 'thant scout on the ground next to him he is communicating with. Appears to be the only one still alive. Sturdy little suckers.

He comes up to us and we go back to Silver.

thShe said there was a huge flash of light and then the sudden vacuum that sucked everyone and everything into the portal. She only survived because she was in a tight corner where she could hold on.th

Turtle turns to Marie and Mike, "Bubble up and check on New Hope. Be careful." They nod pop out to a remote location to assemble mass for a bubble.

Silver asks, "What are you thinking? Someone moved the portal at New Hope to outer space?"

"That would be the good possibility." And the bad one?

I go to Edwin. The worker is holding something. I reach down and gently remove it. It is a dead tit fairy. Must have gotten through the portal. They are super curious and are constantly finding ways in. That was

why the New Hope portal was in a separate location from all the other portals.

thEdwin, how many workers and scholars were present?th

thA few dozen attending to the scholar's needs and a six of scholars themselves. We were lucky. Usually there are more. Been quiet lately at this portal.th

"Related to our adventure?" Puu asks.

"Can't see how. There were no TKs present on New Hope. Not on the standard earth froth circuit either. That was why the location was chosen. Did not want to upset an already present ecology."

Turtle says, "We can't take chances. Everyone, bubble up and get home now! Report back by Cat Box, but stay on alert. There are likely those who will not like the new power dynamic."

Silver directs Edwin, thClose all the portals and spread the word to the rest of the colony to do the same. No easy access to the earth worlds till we figure this out.th

"Are we safe here?" I ask.

"Assume not, but Cat hid this world really well. Of course if a Yesan or some other spy got here and reported back where we are, then yes, we could be in trouble too."

Cat says, "We know that Br'thn and Pr'thn were not in favor of our decision. Could they be behind this? They did visit New Hope in the past. They know how to get there."

"But have never been here that we know of. You would think they would attack here first."

"They are not Cats, maybe just giving us a black eye will be enough." I hopefully say.

"Nice thought, but we have no idea if they are functional or if some other TK alliance has formed to attack us or even if it was even conscious. A good wack from a small rogue moon could be the cause."

"Gee way to go dark Silver. One large enough to. No not likely."

"It nearly happened 65 million years ago with the dinosaurs."

"I am going to earth two, you should go to earth one. Randy, Edwin and Myra you are in charge here."

Randy asks, "I would like to go to earth two as well if that is alright." *Meep, can you stick around or do you need to get back to your home? We do not have a home world as you know it. I can stay for a time.* They pop out with their companions in tow.

I have to wonder if it is safe being here with most of the TKs gone. This could all have been a distraction to get us under defended here. I

have gone from scared to death we were all going to die by 'thn, to elation we were not, now back to fear it could still happen.

Mike and Marie pop back in. Their bubble is a mess with lot of dents in it. The bubble disappears. There is something with them.

"What is that?"

"Fried 'thant is our guess. Remnants of 'thn metal, but severely distorted. Edwin can you examine it to be sure?" He comes over and carefully examines it.

thI concur with your assessment. This was once a librarian. I knew him. th Explains the size at least.

"Sorry for your loss. This is personal now."

"It is worse. New Hope is gone. We found the portal and dissolved it. There are likely more 'thant bodies out there, but we did not stick around to find them all. Any fluidics would have exploded with the vacuum and heat. There is nothing but a growing ring of debris where New Hope once was. A new asteroid belt."

"Okay, that is personal. Why New Hope though? I mean tit fairies are not a threat to the multiverse. Still does not make sense to me. "

"Me either Randy."

"I am going to do a tour of Alexandria."

"We will go with you. Our world is gone, might as well help out here." All three pop out.

"Well, that leaves Edwin, Meep and me."

thI need to be sure the portals are secure and everyone understands the importance of keeping them closed. th

thSurely nests have been under attack before. From another nest if nothing else. th

thWe have protocols in place. I need to implement them. th

thGot it. Go. th

Well that leaves the two of us. What's it like living in the 6th dimension full time. I am TK7, so have certainly spent some time there, but only as a 3D bubble.

We can instantaneously exist on multiple earth froths at the same time.

That could be incredibly useful.

Without being in danger from any of them.

Then, you could be in touch to earth one, two, Di, Flor at the same time?

Flor is outside of reach if I am on 1,2 and Di. Ceph is closer, but still far enough to be out of reach at the same time. Di, Flor and Ba can be

seen together.

And I am guessing Alexandria is not close to any others.

Correct.

We do this trick here where we can link our minds together. The result is greater than the sum of the parts. We were all linked together at the Regional Center to be able to help Puu do what needed to be done.

I remember.

May I link with you now? I would like to see reality through your perspective.

Of course. Step into what you see of me and I will link with you.

Oh, well, life is risk taking. Curiosity is one of my failings too.

I step into Meep and my world totally changes. Way beyond what I experience when DSing. There are no nearby worlds, just this one. You would think that might make it stand out. I 'look' back to the library and see the others in a totally different way.

Meep, what am I seeing? Everyone looks strange.

You are seeing their psiotic signature in pure form. This is similar to how I see you.

I can even see my companion. She is getting nervous.

Invite her in. I do so. Of course I call her Ghost. Silly to use the same name, but I missed him so much.

Mistress what is happening? Are we in danger?

No Ghost. We are safe with Meep. This is what existence looks like in the sixth dimension. Much more detailed than when we DS even and I thought that was dimensional.

Meep, what are all those small 6D spheres near us?

Mistress I believe Meep is pregnant.

Really Meep, you are going to have baby Meeps? How soon?

Normally we have helpers to help the process. I am hoping you can assist me in giving birth. It is time.

Fortunate we are here then. What do we do?

Meep explains, which of course cannot be translated into Standard for my journal. It is complex. A lot of pushing from the inside surprisingly. Not like us where there is pulling from the outside. They all go at once and we find ourselves on the small hill outside of Meep.

We are surrounded by little Meeps. They are so cute! I wonder what they eat?

Mistress I believe they eat parasites. There are plenty around here which is why we all use gold to protect ourselves. They are feeding now.

Ghost, were is Meep?

Puu and Cat come running up. We can see them through the mass of Meeps.

"Puu, Cat, did you know Meep was pregnant? I don't know where Meep is, but aren't the babies cute? They eat parasites even. Win win."

"Myra, the babies are Meep. They sacrifice themselves to have young."

"Shit, I did not know. Meep asked for help saying it was time. I did not know."

"It's okay. Good that you were here. I believe they have imprinted on you two. Looks like you are both baby sitters now on top of your other duties." Just what I need.

"I hope they do not need to be potty trained."

Hope we do not run out of parasites. The babies are dispersing some as they wink in and out of our dimension in their pursuit of food.

Edwin comes up. th"I may be of assistance. There is an entire section on this life form in the library. I still study it and get back to you."th

"Leave it to Myra to make new friends. I am surprised the stones don't follow you around." Cat sighs and heads back to her lab.

"Wait, Cat. Meep let Ghost and I see what it looks like from inside. I think you need to see this. Puu, you too."

"How, Meep is gone and sorry, not going to trust a newborn to behave."

"I know how now, having experienced it. Just link with us for a moment please."

Puu looks dubious.

"Is this a way of getting out of or sharing parenting duties? They won't imprint on us will they?"

I shyly say, "I don't think so. But, this really is important."

"We all linked with Meep during the trip to the RC. How is this different?"

"Come on, just link and we will show you. You can go one at a time if you are afraid."

"I will go first them. I am expendable." Puu says.

"No way either of you is expendable. We are both alive, you should survive too. Scaredy Cats?" I would expect this behavior from Owa not Puu. She is usually the brave one.

She nods, sits and closes her eyes. We rest next to her and touch each other. Normally Ghost does not like to be touched, but knows Puu was her creator and therefore trusts both of us.

I show her the local layout in Meep space. We can see all of the babies

this way and they have already spread out over the entire planet searching for chow. She spends the most time looking at her companion Gracie and then what they are working on in the lab. Finally she directs her attention to Qr'thn and her companion. Abruptly she leaves the link.

I open my eyes.

She yells at Cat, "Get in the link now Cat! You have to see this. Critical to our effort." Cat seems surprised, but does not question Puu. They trade places and we go back in again with Cat this time. Ghost is a little more nervous with Cat, but I explain that Cat taught Puu how to make her and she calms down. Puu must have Tpd her as she goes straight to Qr'thn, her companion and their lab work.

She also comes out abruptly, gets up and the two of them pop out to their lab. Rude. Wonder what they saw?

Alexandria - lab

"Puu, I think it will work now. If Myra had not made another friend and helped Meep at just the right time, we would never have seen this."

"I agree. We have a fundamental error in our understanding. If we model on the Meep we can make a new body for Qr'thn that is actually better than what she has now."

"Wah-ha-ha-ha." I could not resist. I think it may even be required right? Puu just shakes here head and gets back to work.

Working on this is like holding your breath until you pass out and end up in a different place or consciousness. Very disconcerting and scary no matter how many times I dive into this space. First time was doing art at the Hopi school. You would think I would get used to it, but I never do.

In I go.

Earth Two

"Hey guys, what's up?" Turtle and Randy are before me with their companions.

Turtle nods to Randy, "Puu pulled the plug."

"It happened then. Guess logic and doing the right thing did not win them over. So they are all gone?"

"Not gone exactly. More like hibernation. We do not kill unless under direct assault. It was strange. They had this kangaroo jury all set to rubber stamp whatever they wanted."

"Wait, what is a kango-roo and a rubber what?"

"Sorry. They basically told them to do what they wanted or suffer the same fate. We learned afterwards the 'thn were bullying all of them as well. We were the example to keep everyone else in line."

"What gave them the right?"

"Right, huh. They did not have the right. They do not even start the froth after all, it is the special ones in a secret place that start it. They just help it propagate through the froth every thirty million years."

"What happens now? The froth stops?"

Turtle finally comes in, "That is our best understanding. Silver said he wanted to check out a few things and will get back to us. The problem is New Hope has been destroyed. We do not know by whom or if it was some normal process?"

"Normal, like in a huge asteroid. I don't believe that. Everyone is taught to be very careful and look out for dino killers. I have been keeping up here for sure. Anything gets within lunar orbit and it is gone. Mostly just tiny stuff, but anything that reaches the surface can kill. No, it has to be the 'thn. But how?"

Turtle sigh, "Br'thn and Pr'thn were on their side. It is possible that the same mutation that protected Qr'thn protected them and they sought revenge."

"'thn are like that? I mean Hu, no offense Rand, are nasty creatures, but I always saw the 'thn as the good guys, well at least until the Puu incident."

"We did too. Anyway, we are asking all caretakers to implement their warriors."

"Shit. Nasty things. The training on those things was painful to say the least. The thought of millions of them loose here gives me the creeps as the Hu say." Turtle shrugs and Rand shakes as if scared.

"Activation complete. It will take them a moment for all of them to get into place."

"We have been scanning since we got here. We will stay until they are settled."

"I just can't believe your kid took their side Turtle. Br'thn, okay, raised by Sauron, is easier to believe, but even all my interactions with her over thousands of years have been good. Must be some other explanation."

"Hope so. Like the other TKs, we hope they were just bullied into their position and not one they really believe. We have backup plans of course, which we will not discuss here and for which even we do not know the details of."

"Of course, hope it does not come to that." My companion, Onion, comes into the room and nods a greeting. She goes to Pip, Rand's companion and they apparently carry on some conversation. Turtle's companion is more aloof and keeps her distance.

A warrior flies into the room and sticks to a beam in the rafter. They look sort of like a three centimeter limpet that we used to scrape off of ships and such. I look up at it. Great my own little ticking bomb of fun.

"Guess that's done." I look to the two of them.

Turtle nods and pops out. Rand remains.

"Thanks for staying. A bit much for one TK alone."

"What about your students?" Rand gives me an evil dirty look.

I roll my eyes, "Those empty heads. Were we really that clueless?"

"We were and unfortunately still are."

"Tell me more about the trip. I am sorry I missed that."

"Will take awhile. You have anything to eat besides cowboy chili?"

"Are Tia and Sam still dishing that stuff up." He nods.

"I guess it could be worse. At least our tiny warriors are not as bad as the 'thant ones." He pokes at the one in the room with a stick. I would not do that. No indeed.

Earth Two, Cat Land

Any one care the 'thn are gone?

You are disturbing my sleep. I give her a swat, yawn and roll over.

I miss the clown. He was entertaining at least.

We will find another one I'm sure. There are a few kits with potential.

Silver ruins all our fun.

Sure does. We could plot against him just for fun.

Not worth it. Too many Hu toys that hurt. I only do prey I can win against.

True.

Earth One, Deep Archive

It would appear I have not cleaned here in awhile. Dusty as a lunar landscape. Hermetically sealed and it still happens. I walk past famous works of art from E1/2. Nitrogen atmosphere, humidity controlled, 10C. I could have put everything in stasis, but a few more thousand years and no one will care.

I make my way to the journal section. All of our journals end up here eventually, or at least a copy of them. A lot of TKs keep their originals. Understandable. Going to need an entire new row just for recent events once all of it is gathered. Will be interesting to read about recent events from everyone's perspective.

Back to the dusty corner where mine are. I finally find the one I am looking for. Ten centimeters thick. Would it have hurt to break it up into two volumes? It takes me another eighth to find what I am looking for. I record the coordinates in my mind and replace the volume.

I make my way back the stairwell and back to the surface five hundred steps above. The locals are not used to seeing a Hu, so do not know to be afraid. Some of the birds recognize me and swoop down to my open hand with peanuts in it. Illegal, but I so love seeing them so much. Roasted so they can't sprout where they hide them.

I pop out.

Froth Center

Welcome Silver. It has been a long time indeed.

Another comes up to us, I hope you have good news.

It is done. No more froths needed for awhile at least. Hopefully never again in this incarnation.

You did to not end them. You are soft. We would not have been so kind.

It is my way. Too many have suffered and I did want to appear to just be a replacement for their kind. Most do not know us and would assume nothing would change if we behaved the same.

They know you did not kill them.

Indeed.

Rest. Let us catch up with all that has happened.

We no longer travel the universe. I can only tell you about our own worlds. Much has happened there.

We welcome the distraction. It can get rather dull here at times.

Really? I smile.

Alexandria

"Aaaaaah! I knew there was a reason I never wanted to be a parent!"

"Ah, but Myra, they are so cute!" Rand is going to get his head taken off in a moment.

Mike and Marie come in.

"We need Puu and Cat's help. Any idea how to get to them. They have really locked down the lab. I can't even see into it."

I sigh, "When they get like that nothing will shake them. What do you need? Maybe I can find someone else to help."

They look at each other.

"We need to work as fast as we can. Should have done this eighths ago. We need to some like super power TKs to do a scan of the New Hope solar system."

"I can get the Meeps to help."

"Myra, they are babies. Babies are stupid by definition."

"They inherit all of the knowledge of their mothers. Otherwise their culture would die out every time one gives birth. Think more like teenagers with too much energy."

Mike laughs, "That is actually worse. What is your idea."

Marie comes out with it, "Link all of us together. Of course. Let's go. No time to waste."

I whistle for effect and am suddenly surrounded by thirty five Meeps.

"Simon, get here this moment!" A thirty sixth one pops in.

"Shit remind me not to have you as a guardian."

"And you thought I was all sweetness and light? Remember, my mother?"

Rand, "I do. Don't mess with her. Let's go already."

"We need a bubble for the fluidics. It gets a bit rough out there. A lot of debris. I don't want to have watch out for every microscopic one."

They make a rather nice one with seats, food, drink and extra mass for whatever. We all pop inside and take our seats.

New Hope Remnants

"Wow, they really obliterated it. Not much but dust left." Rand exclaims.

The Meeps are outside the bubble. They don't really interact with 3D space the same way we do.

Rand looks to me, "This is your game. Link us up."

"What is it you are looking for?"

"Even as nines our range is much beyond where the moon once was. We need to be able to scan much, much further than that."

Mike finishes, "We are looking for whatever is out of place. Something not of New Hope. We already removed the portal. We can start by finding all the 'thn metal. That should be what is left of of the 'thants who got sucked in."

"And they should be on a different trajectory than the planet as a whole. We can then rule them out."

I come in, "And anything else we find might be of interest. Got it. Okay, linking with Meeps are way different than what you are used to. Prepare for a treat."

The kids gather around the bubble and sort of envelop us.

"And engage!" Could not resist the old movie reference. Hey the archives are fun.

Holy Shit! Mike TPs.

Simon, Sheri, Jissy, back here. We need you also. I have told you what we are doing. Stay on task. They fall back in place. I will not be able to hold them long. Okay, Mike and Marie focus. Ah hurrying would be good.

The link expands to cover several AUs out from here. Amazing how far bits of New Hope have gone in that time. The moon is nearly to the sun and will be gone soon without a trace. Could have just as easily ended up in a higher orbit as a new elliptical planetoid. It does not appear to have been damaged much on the far side. Only the side that was facing New Hope has clearly been pummeled.

The 'thn metal remnants light up. They are at the far edge of the debris field going further out from the sun. That gives us a time when it happened. Night relative to the portal.

What shape was the portal in when you found it? I ask.

Heavily damaged, as expected. Not much you can do to 'thn metal. But still working. Since someone shut off the one on Alexandria it just

sort of glowed in wait mode till we dissolved it.

The debris appears to be just that debris. Like the planet just fell apart. That means at least a TK8 who knew exactly what they were doing.

Found the core. Intact actually. That's really strange.

It is a ways away from the rest of the debris.

To DS the core that far would take at least a ten.

Or like us, a bunch of us linked.

Wish we could go back in time . . .

What the shit? We are orbiting New Hope.

I sigh, Meeps do not exist in our space. Time is just another dimension to them. We can't change anything. We are still in our own time. Just sort of viewing it.

But we can wait and see what actually happened.

Not too long to wait.

Okay, that is NOT Br'thn or Pr'thn. Way too big. That is clearly one of the high 'thn. How can that be? Didn't we stop them?

And how come they have not attacked the other earth froths yet?

Does it know we are here?

Likely.

That might explain it. Knowing it has been seen could have scared it off.

Till we do not respond to their threat in a timely manner. We need to find that 'thn and finish it. No more being nice. This was not just a threat, but an actual attack. Take us home Myra.

Alexandria

"How the hell do you know all this stuff Myra?" I ask her.

"I have been with them a few days. I pay attention."

Marie shoves Mike, "Yeah Mike, pay attention."

"I think she is sort of like a good luck charm myself. Can't believe how many times she saved us onboard the Seamist." Rand says and Myra looks confused. I am sure they will have a discussion later.

"We need to tell the others. A high 'thn could take out another world easily. Just pick us off one at a time."

"Unless her seeing the TK/Meep link complex scared them away. Remember, they think long term and are used to fluidics having short attention spans and letting down our guard."

"And I don't think any of our limpet warriors is ever going to get close enough if they are popping the cores from a half AU away. That is scary."

"Yeah, about that. They would not have gotten away with it if any of us were there at the time. We could not have saved New Hope, but we would have escaped in time and seen it all happen in real time. They were hoping by picking a world devoid of TKs we would not know how it happened."

"And now they know we know."

"Actually all they know is a Meep knows. Not the same thing. Thirty six Meeps shielding our ship probably hid us pretty well you forget."

"And likely looked like a single Meep to anyone who does not know them well." Very true.

Silver, Turtle, Qr'thn pop in. This must mean something.

Qr'thn's companion pops in with two smaller 'thn. They feel familiar.

"Are they safe? Are we safe?" Marie asks.

"Silver had an idea and we collectively followed it up. We all went to the regional center, which is now empty. It took us some time. There are a lot of 'thn in stasis lying about. Unfortunately a few with a lot of holes DSd into them. Some really were hated."

"At least we did not do it." I suggest. I know the others are thinking it.

"To continue, we finally found them in a 'thn cage or what we assume was one. They were alive and fine, but could not leave."

"Ah, they did have the mutation then. At least we had that part right."

"And we know they did not destroy New Hope. We just got back from there. Myra solved the problem. Did you know Meep was pregnant? Well she had her kids and dissolved herself in the process."

"And they imprinted on me and Ghost as we were the ones inside of her and helped her push them out." Turtle wants to comment on the genders of Meep, but holds her thought. Not important. "When Marie and Mike came back we all went to New Hope linked with the new thirty six kids. You have to see it. Being able to see in Meep mode is amazing! Far better than normal DS even."

Marie becomes impatient, "Meep can travel in time as well as distance. We went back to watch what happened. A large 'thn, larger than Qr'thn, DSd the core of New Hope out a half AU away. That caused the world to collapse on itself and breakup. The moon should be close to impact with the sun about now. The core will follow. The crust will be a ring around the sun in a few years."

"It was not Br'thn and Pr'thn, welcome back you two. Glad you are okay. It was not Qr'thn, she was with us. What am I missing? How did another 'thn survive our shutdown. I thought only the ones with the mutation could stay awake."

Silver laughs, "Of course, you are correct in your logic. But, the question we need to ask is how did Qr'thn obtain the mutation? If we can't go forward, we need to go backward. Who was your 'thn mother Qr'thn? I have never heard you talk of her."

That is because I hate her and do not trust her in anyway. She has made my existence miserable. I have never achieved the standards set by her. She blames me for the entire mess before us now.

"Wow, did not know 'thn could hate." Scary.

This is not a normal emotion for us. Any emotion is unusual. We pride ourselves on being logical above all else.

"Could she be the one? Does she have the mutation?"

I do not know. Until this all came about I did not know I had one.

"Let's assume this is the case. It is logical as Qr'thn says. How do we find her? She literally could be anywhere. She knows we know a 'thn was responsible. She likely suspects we will figure it out."

"And we can't just wait around for each of our worlds to be picked off one at a time. There are more worlds under our care than we have high TKs to protect them with."

"And I don't think Puu and Cat toys will save us this time. Not without sacrificing the three 'thn friends we have. I could not do that no matter what. Any more than I could choose three of you to toss over the cliff."

Myra is waving her hand frantically. Turtle smiles.

"Yes Myra? You have our attention."

She pants finally, "I showed Puu and Cat the Meep method and they went crazy and ran back to the lab. Please check in with them before going crazy please."

"That's an idea. Can we hide the three in Meep space, sleep every 'thn this time and then bring them out again?"

"Does not work that way. Maybe on a local level it might, but we have affected the entire multiverse. Not a precision instrument." No, I guess not. That is a very large space.

"I am having a hard time wrapping my mind around all this. I still can't believe Puu and Cat took out EVERY other 'thn in the multiverse. Wouldn't that require like a total rewrite of the code for an incarnation?"

"Very good Sam," Turtle exclaims, "It does. How they did it while in an incarnation was the hard part."

"Right. Of course. Silly me." We all laugh.

"I have a question. How old are you Qr'thn?" I ask.

That is difficult to answer. I am responsible for the entire solar system, not just earth. And, the froth does not reach every froth earth at the same time. There are still many earths under me who have not and now likely never will, experience the last froth event that happened nearly five thousand years ago on Earth One. As to how old am I.

"Approximately is close enough."

About two thousand froth earths. I have been a watcher for around four hundred million of your years.

"Shit."

"Shit for which part? Two thousand SOLAR systems, which I assume to mean there is life on other worlds than ours, or the number of years?"

"The 'thn were willing to take our our entire solar system froth for what happened on a small handful of earths? Doesn't that seem a wee bit extreme to anyone?"

Silver sighs, "Please understand, this is all new for them. Never before has anyone returned from Farout, their prison system which has never failed before and only rarely even needed. Never before has a fluidic been able to cause pain to a high 'thn, while not even being present. And this was just the start. From their perspective we are a horrible cancer or life threatening infection. You cut out healthy tissue to insure you got it all. Way too dangerous to let us escape."

"And this is exactly what happened. Do you really think the other TK cultures present at the Regional Center won't figure it out? Nothing special about us in that once something is known as possible, it is much easier to figure out. Even if we had not put them in stasis, it was game over

for them."

"In some ways it was a mercy even. The others might have killed them instead of putting them in stasis. Granted at least one did die at their hands while vulnerable. We know the sentiment exists."

"And one very pissed off 'thn, probably a 12 is out there to get even. This need to go back to the 'good old days' exists in the 'thn as well."

"Two thousand earths, not to mention Europas and others. We have been real home boys having almost never reached beyond our own front porch. Qr'thn, what is on these other worlds? There must be some amazing beings."

I have been limiting your access to worlds that you could easily harm. This means only access to the low greens, browns, blacks and other greens that have TKs of at least level two.

"Wait, Yesans have TK?"

They can scan and TP. That explains a lot about those pests.

"The reason we could not find Rooi for so long is because Ceph Two did not have TK."

Correct. As it was, Turtle found them almost by accident. If Rooi had not created her portal at the precise time and place Turtle was, she never would have found them. Your Ceph Two is not even on the same path as Ceph One. Not recent froth pairs.

"Holy Shit, Tridons have TK? We left Sauron on a TK world? Isn't that nuts?"

"He is fitted with micro limiters. He is the only sentient without TK. I am sure he is wondering why he cannot dominate his new culture."

"A Cat with a collar and a leash. Oh the shame!" I laugh. Others do too.

Myra is ready to explode. I look to her and her kids. Others stop and notice too.

"Finally. AGAIN! Please see Puu and Cat. They have an answer." She pops out. Likely upset. Can't win. Can't blame her either. She did tell us twice at least.

Lab

"Not everything works exactly the same way in the carbon gold quantum state. For instance, we cannot make a stable portal with one."

"But our companions DS all the time."

"Not the same as a portal Sam. And don't touch anything. ANYONE."

"However we can make a portal using silicon silver."

"How does this help our 'thn friends?"

"We are getting to that."

Puu rolls out a cart with a sphere not any larger than Br'thn or Pr'thn. But it is really strange.

"I can't seem to focus on it."

"Like Myra's kids, it exists in six dimensional space, but as a solidic, not a fluidic like the Meeps. We finally solved the matrix problem by using gold, silver, copper, carbon, silicon and germanium in a six dimensional superconducting quantum matrix." Gee, is that all? Easy stuff. NOT.

"What is the next step then? Looks too small for Qr'thn."

I nudge Sam, "Six dimensional Sam. Most of it's space is in other dimensions. I would be happy to show you with the Meeps some time."

"Ah, thanks." He does look convinced though.

"We need a volunteer, Br'thn or Pr'thn for one this size."

Will it hurt? Pr'thn asks.

"It does not hurt when we transfer from one form to another. It does if when we morph from one to another, but only temporarily. We are not asking you to morph. Your current body remains here and you can transfer back if anything goes wrong."

I volunteer. I am older than my sister and therefore will make a better subject having experienced more. Logical.

Br'thn is directed to rest on the cloth beside the empty new shell.

"If it means anything, you will remember in a past incarnation Silver resided inside Br'thn for a time. To test if these will work, both Cat and I have been in this one, without pain. It is empty now. Sanitized." I smile. Only a Hu would think about that. Meep Sas floats over the sphere and seems to get sucked inside, then comes out again.

I comment, "Sas did not transfer, only looked at it from different angles. Sas confirms it is six dimensional and appears safe."

Br'thn asks, *What do I do?*

"Normally we are taught this when we become TK5. Before then a

higher TK can do the transfer for us. It would be best if you learn how to do this yourselves. We can make as many of these as you like and you can place them in safe places for backup." Puu looks up to Turtle, who undoubtedly was the one who taught her.

Turtle finishes with, "You open your mind and see the new location in your mind. Overlap the two thoughts, then let go of your old mind. Silver knows you best and can help guide you. I can help guide Pr'thn into a second sphere on the other side of the room. I assume that is what it is for?" Puu nods.

Turtle and Pr'thn go over to the second sphere and Silver and Br'thn stay with this one.

"Do you want us to leave?"

Qr'thn says, *No. Please be present in case something goes wrong.*

"We will never destroy the old forms. They will always be available to go back to, but you understand why we are doing this right?"

Understood. We are not used to the sensation of fear, though that is another emotion that 'thn clearly can feel. The evil 'thn certainly knew that one.

Silver reaches over to Br'thn, picks her up and drops her on the floor. She bounces. Everyone gasps. I of course have been watching carefully with my new Meep senses.

"Cute Silver, trying to give everyone a heart attack?"

It was my idea actually. The new sphere rises from the cart and takes a spin around the room and then pops out. She comes back a moment later 'holding' a rock. From Mars! I recognize ones from Ron's collection.

"Holy shit Batman. You did it." Sam of course. No idea who this Batman is. Sounds like a Ba.

Turtle and Pr'thn who have been watching this entire show concentrate on their own sphere and a moment later Pr'thn the 2nd rises from the cart. She is way more cautious. She slowly goes around the room.

This form is actually a large improvement over the old form. I feel faster. I can think faster. Strange feeling after so long in the other form.

"That leaves the last one, Qr'thn. For you we have one ready to go also."

"What would have happened if this had not worked?"

Puu looks pissed, "With so much TK talent in one room do you really think anyone was or is in danger?" She bows to me, "It was Myra that gave us the clue. If she had not been present for Meep when needed for the birthing, she would never have seen the multiverse in this new way for us. That was the missing link we needed to work it out. We could see

carbon gold was not working, but we could not see how to make it work. Once in Meep space it became obvious and it was only necessary to find element pairs that matched up with two other dimensions. We needed a 6D matrix."

Cat brings out a third sphere.

"Wait, is is the same size as the other two."

Tia rolls her eyes, "In our space it might appear that way, but in 6D space it is proportionally larger, right?"

"Actually they are the same size." Puu is having fun with them.

"How can that be? Qr'thn won't fit. Are you going to clip her wings?"

"Nope. Okay, to put out your misery. These spheres, by nature of their transdimensional space will always look this size, no matter which 'thn occupies them. One size fits all."

"Stretch fabric?" Tia offers.

"The solidic equivalent, yes. As a 'thn grows, the 6D space will grow with them. No more waiting for approval from higher TKs. You can grow as fast as you want."

Qr'thn does not wait for help and her sphere drops to the floor and the new one rises instantly, actually before the old one hits the floor. I am impressed.

They are correct. These shells feel much nicer. I feel like one of those crust creatures that change shells as they grow.

Turtle offers, "Hermit crabs." Qr'thn bobs.

I reach down and collect her old sphere and place it on the cart. Shit it is heavy. Had to use TK to help lift it.

"All 'thn present and any TKs who know the new talent, please meet in 6D space. The Meep kids want to get to know you. Anyone else who wants to see, hold hands or place a hand on a 'thn."

We pop into Meep space. The kids go nuts. How to make a Meep happy, throw a party in their space.

How do you keep them on the farm once they have seen gay Paris.

I have no idea what a gay patee is. The older TKs laugh. The old TKs can be a pain at times. See if I show them anything new.

We come out.

Puu announces, "'thn please pair up with a high TK and go for practice runs. Things will be different. It will take awhile for you to learn to judge distances in 6D and 3D, transform materials, and such. Now get out of here so we have can have our lab back please." I get ready to leave.

"Not you Myra, you and the kids can stay. You have earned your merit badge and are now one of us. Los Tres Amigas!" I look confused.

"Sorry, the three ladies in Spanish. An old Earth 1/2 language."

"I understood the words, not that different from ship speak. What is the significance of three ladies, the three of us, the three new 'thn or something else?"

"Just leave it at cultural." Oh, one of those. Wish they would stop doing that.

Sam nudges me, "Sorry, I was worried. I remember in the journals about a Gr'thn and a Ly'thn. Do we need to find them as well?"

As Cat left with Qr'thn Puu answers, "Did not happen this incarnation. Normally the same 'thn get 'born' each time. Another example of our incarnations being different."

"Oh, okay, sorry to interrupt. That's strange, weren't there a bunch of things against that wall over there?" He points. I don't see anything different.

Puu yells, something we almost never do, "SHIT, SHIT, SHIT!"

"What?" I ask.

"Cat and Qr'thn are going 'thn hunting. They took the 'thn weapons we had come up with."

"But I thought you had some sort of new button that would take out all 'thn. Just press that button and be done with it."

"Think Myra," Sam says.

It finally comes to me, "Pq'thn might not be the end of the thread."

"Right and we have no idea how far back it goes. Pq'thn undoubtedly had more than one kid too. There could be millions of immune ones running around out there. And we don't want to sleep ones who are behaving without cause. Our 'thn turned out all right. Could be lots of others too."

"Wouldn't that make the froth happen at least in a few places."

"Silver told the old ones to stop. They have all gone on a long ago well deserved vacation. But that still leaves 31 million years of froth wave out there dissipating slowly."

Sam ask, "Why would a 'thn want it to happen?"

I sigh, "Because more worlds means more power. Qr'thn inherited two at the time of her sentience, but that is now two thousand. But even two worlds becoming four is better than no new ones. Doubles your chances of producing a TK culture than you can have kids with. More kids, more power."

"Okay, Sam, scat. We need to clean up. Come Myra, back to work."

"What do I do with the kids?"

"Can you let them out to play?"

"You really want them scaring the locals? They do not know what safe

distance means in 3D space."

"Can you take them to the moon or someplace and tell them to play there?"

"Great idea Puu! Wish I had thought of that. Be right back" We pop.

The Hunt

Together we can find Pq'thn or whomever it is. As you saw from the Regional Center, Puu and I do not have a range or time limit.

I was impressed by how close you got to the Farout ship.

I admit that was luck. But, yeah, impressive. Puu is better at intuitive sensing of that kind of thing.

Do you think that Pq'thn knows which worlds you have allowed us to visit and which we are not allowed to?

Those limits no longer apply. I knew that of course.

Where do you think Sanctuary came from. I smile.

I did wonder. I did not recognize it.

A far earth from before the small planet impact. Sanctuary is slightly larger than a normal earth from our set. The impact was not exactly the same.

Ah, that would put it in Pq'thn's territory. Might explain why she is so upset. We are planet thieves to her. Let's do a quick solar system scan of each of the worlds that have been settled. These are the most vulnerable.

If it does not take much longer, pop to either side of each too. Especially for a recent froth pair, I already know our TK worlds are quite a bit apart.

Crossover was too much of a risk. What you have done with your mixing was not supposed to happen. Ever.

Yeah, I got that. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Certainly upset a lot of 'thn. But why?

I think you know that Cat. Look at my current form? You said you had already tried it on for size. Can you imagine a race of fluidics in 6D solidic form each more powerful than any 'thn who ever existed?

Especially given the way they have been treating the other TK cultures. They gave themselves a reason to fear.

I was under the impression 'thn were froth tenders. The only reason to interact with TKs was to allow more 'thn to be created to make up for the extra work of twice as many froth worlds every time the wave passed.

It gets fuzzy. We need good TKs to be able to reproduce. That was built in to limit our power. But it is a short distance from insuring good TKs and controlling TKs to your own advantage or because of fear.

Got it. Let's go hunting! Question how to 'thn feel about other 'thn in their territory. Oh, Sanctuary was a brown world at best when I snatched it. Hardly a candidate for TKs in the next two billion years.

We do meet at the Regional Center. We do interact, exchange ideas and discuss problems we are having.

With TKs.

With ecologies, with what will most likely produce a sentient culture. Yes, it is the culture we need, not just the rare enlightened individual.

Except for Silver Owl and Turtle.

I already knew and was forewarned to look for them. Silver found Turtle. Finding an enormous silver owl at the edge of their range was not too difficult.

I laugh, I expect not. Did you expect us too?

No. I knew something special would happen. When an owl tells you he is the one you, know it will be different this time.

You and Puu are now outside of time. Understandable. Welcome to my world. Do you know where Pq'thn is? I feel this is a test.

Currently? No. I know when and where we will find her and capture her. It is done.

How does your sense of time work then?

Like seeing something at a distance as a norm. The further away it is, the harder it is to see details.

Did you know the attack on New Hope would happen?

No, I was not looking in that direction. Unexpected. If I had thought it was a possibility, I most certainly would have seen it, but I doubt I could have stopped it. It takes a fraction of a second to pop the core. Once that happens, the destruction is certain, even if somehow you could have replaced the core.

Good. You don't blame yourself. This is on Pq'thn, not you or anyone else.

We need to be at Ba Eden to be seen by Pq'thn to get her to follow the path I am expecting of her.

We pop. Ba Eden is much greener. They love forests and take active steps to encourage and protect their forests. Gorgeous. Not that I find the Ba form that exciting. About the same weight as Puu. I tease her about that from time to time.

Next we go to Earth One. That is her target. She wants to hurt us. There we will trap her.

Trap? She killed an innocent world. You do not want to kill her?

Sure, but I won't. I would become a bully, same as her, if I did that. We are not prey, but we are not predators either. The cycle has to end.

Excellent.

The actual capture was anticlimactic. There was no chance of failure

really. She looks surprised, which I find hard to believe. Yeah, I can't tell you how I know she looked surprised. I just did.

We pop back to Alexandria.

Alexandria

Myra is telling us about the earth froth, "It turns out unless you know for sure that a world is your froth mate, it likely is not. Example, as suspected, the Ceph worlds are really quite distant. About three hundred million years of separation."

"And how do you know this Myra?"

"The Meeps and I mapped Qr'thn's territory. We followed each of our worlds back in time to see when the froth happened each time and then plotted where everyone ended up. Simple really, though admittedly tedious."

"We are not closely related to you Hu?"

"Nope. Two different mammal lineages actually."

"What a relief." Alessa is teasing us. Who wants to be related to a Hu?

"What about the Ku and Di? I always thought they were related."

"Closer than the Hu and Ba, but still quite a ways. It really is a miracle that we all got together."

"This map, which Qr'thn is now going to allow us to explore is our next project?"

th"I can assist. I have confirmed Myra's map and it matches our own records. I can tell you what plants and animals exist on each."th

"No plantimals?"

"Not within Qr'thn's territory. Actually not within Pq'thn's either."

"Great, are we sure Pq'thn did this? Is there another mad 'thn out there out to get us?" Where did New Hope come from then? It was plantimal.

Excuse us. May we interrupt? A very strange creature I have never even imagined has appeared.

You are not from around here. What is it you need?

I have found the correct location? You are the TKs from the Regional Center who liberated us from the 'thn overlords?

"Shit, they have found us. At Alexandria of all places."

How did you find us?

We started with the world of origin in the Library, we believe you call it Earth One. There we met one of your kind who gave us one of these travel stones. We really have no idea where we are.

We?

We are a colonial organism. Aren't you? We sense many species integrated into your physiology.

I laugh, *Yes, we are, just the way our minds work gives us the illusion*

of being a single individual. Thanks for the reminder.

We holds up a baby 'thn, in stasis of course. *Can you wake our baby 'thn up please?*

University of Alexandria

"You, Yesan, over here now!" Who said that? I turn around and try and figure it out. A creature is moving appendages up and down.

I activate my vocorder so I can respond, "Do you mean me?"

"Yes, you. Show me your ID card." I hand it over and the creature scans it and hands it back.

"You understand that you are not allowed to reproduce while on Alexandria?"

"My card will have told you that my implant is intact. I cannot reproduce without surgery, which I am unlikely to preform on myself."

"Says here Student Visa. The University is straight down that road till you find the large building with statues of other lifeforms in front."

"Thank you. Did I say that correctly?" It nods and I turn to go.

A 'thant worker comes up to me and hand signs me, *You will follow me. I have been assigned to assist you till you get settled.* 'thants give me the creeps. We used to be at war with them. Most of us still have memories of that time. I was ordered to behave and try to blend in.

I follow the 'thant. Still, we do have them on home world, so not so strange as all the other life forms here. I have no idea which ones are sentient and which are just residents. The hex pad said best to assume sentient until proven otherwise. Most sentients are suspicious of us and I can expect trouble. Well, I was chosen. Here we go. Both the 'thant and I are lower to the ground than most others and we have to dodge most who somehow don't see us. Does not seem right. We have been accepted into the League of Sentients. We should be treated with respect.

Sentient spheres fly about at what appears to be random. They are not limited to paths. Each one seems intent on their own purpose and ignore all of us. Oh, no, wait, one is paused in front of the tall one with the long appendage out the back side. I consult my pad and I see it is a Di, a vertebrate. Why would any creature have it's only protection on the inside. I shudder and catch up with the 'thant worker.

At the entrance there are a lot of creatures gathered in groups. There appear to be all of the types we studied and I consult my pad to be sure I have the types correct. The 'thant tugs me to keep following. I do not see 'thants with others. I wonder why not? That makes me nervous. At least she has a proper exoskeleton.

We enter the building through a side entrance. The entrance is more our shape I notice with relief. Feels good to be back inside a tunnel with

branching paths. I will need to memorize where each goes. My pad lights up in UV mode. A lot of sens cannot see in UV, but it is the most comfortable for Yesans. Ah, it has received an update from the University and a complete map of these tunnels! Fantastic. I expel air in relief. I will still want to memorize the layout so I am not dependent on the pad. We spent several eight days learning how to use them before arriving. Glad I was ordered to take that class. The leaders are wise.

We arrive at an open space. There are other Yesans present. I sign greetings and receive same back. One comes up to me, signs the 'thant who then leaves and then turns to me.

@You are Tewk.@ I affirm. @Welcome. I am Ghyk of the third year. We will hive together with others. You can com with me any time you need help or company.@ I affirm and we exchange call signs. I am used to being with others I know.

@Thank you profusely. I felt so alone coming through customs and walking here. The 'thant made it passable. It is difficult for me to remember they help now.@

@You have been through pre enrollment orientation so I know you know the basics. We are the newest and therefore the lowest here and not just because our quarters are physically below all the others. At least we have surroundings similar to the City.@ I affirm.

@I will show you where you can tag your sleeping area. Food is in a common area of course and we will go there next. Afterwards I will show you how to find your classes. Your first class is this afternoon as the locals refer to time. Means after the sun has reached the highest place in the sky. Your pad will tell you.@ I affirm. Being dependent on sky observations seems very primitive and limiting to me. I wonder how close to the ocean we are, not that I can reproduce.

I tag my sleeping covy so I can find it again, even in the dark. Food was standard nutrient paste at least. Traveling here they offered local food which was disgusting. No consistency at all. Every bite was different. My inside rumbles in remembrance.

@Excuse this annoying one, but I have not seen any servants.@

@Not allowed. I know, primitive isn't it. They make us do most tasks ourselves. At least we do not need to make paste. I visited processing once. Interesting to see relatives who have died made into food.@

@As is proper.@ She affirms.

@According to my pad Twek, you are enrolled in graduate school under Professor Myra. You are lucky she is very respectful of Yesans. You will not need to worry about her. She is a Hu, so do not be alarmed by her

appearance. You get used to it.@

@I have studied her data sheet.@

@First though you need to do the standard orientation to the Uni itself. Everyone does this. You will even find new professors of all species enrolled. It is not another slight on Yesans.@

@That is a first.@ She affirms.

We make our way back to the surface but come out much further in the area the Uni covers.

"Tewk, over here! Welcome." Hu are sure ugly. Everything moves in disgusting ways. How do they stay together?

@She has found you. Be safe.@ Ghyk leaves me. Myra has found me.

"I am so happy you made it. I wish the colony was bigger for your sake, but I am sure others will join us during your time here. If I remember correctly there are currently fifteen present and room for eight times that number, so don't be surprised if you see lots of empty covies for now. Come, I will take you to your first class. I am the instructor so I thought I would make it easy for you." She talks a lot. She has one of the floating sphere things. I consult my pad, ah, a companion of unknown type. This one has an iridescent green hue with sparkles in ultraviolet.

Suddenly we are surrounded by something I was not told about, I cannot get a good visual on them. They are constantly changing shape and color.

Myra sees me staring, "Those are my children, well not technically mine, but I am their step mother. I have thirty six and believe me they are a handful just keeping them entertained."

I turn on my vocorder, "They are at the learning stage, this is to be expected. What are they? They were not part of orientation."

"That was because we were off world when the cat was written and so we were not included. I am sorry I forgot to mention them in my com to you. You will get used to them. They will never harm you."

"Understood. I will ignore them from now on." She makes a funny breathing sound I do not understand.

"My understanding is you are used to physical contact with others. May I place my hand on your thorax?" I affirm. It is warm. I try not to pull away in shock, then I relax into it. It actually feels good.

"The class will consist of five others, all from different species. No two alike. It makes it easier not be singled out as different as everyone is different. Oh, I forgot to introduce you to my companion, Tewk, this is Ghost, Ghost, this is Tewk. She is now one of my students." She makes that weird sound again.

"I am sorry, I am still new to being an instructor. But this is good. I am sure we will learn a lot together. Here we are." We are in an open field. There are one each of Ba, Ku, Rap, Ceph and me. Oh, and our Hu instructor. A perfect six total. She is by far the tallest with the Rap being second. The Ceph and I are about the same in height and width, but I have never imagined a creature with no skeleton at all. How does a being exist all soft? She has eight arms too, an unlucky number.

"Gather around," she signs this as well. Why?

I am facing the Ceph. She signs a greeting to me and I sign back the same. Ah, right, Ceph cannot hear. They are dependent on visual and tactile. The Rap looks like it could eat us for a snack.

"I want to welcome Tewk to our group. She is the last to arrive. Got hung up in customs." The others sign amusement. I guess for the sake of the Ceph we are signing and speaking.

"We have been given a project to complete. We are not allowed to involve any others outside our group. This is a learning exercise. You will not be discovering any new principals of science. Hopefully no one will be harmed either, though accidents can happen, so please be careful, especially with lifeforms you are not used to." Everyone looks at me. Well, I am not used to them either.

The entire day seemed to be of no use. We started by passing a disgustingly flexible sphere around in more complex patterns. I imagine this was to acquaint ourselves with how each form moves and handles simple tasks. I scan the inside of the sphere. Just air. Interesting.

No TK here Tewk. The others are not TK and would not understand. We will have our own special groups for study there.

I miss the sphere staring at Myra. She is TK! And can read my mind. And send me messages that way. I will have no secrets from her.

She makes that disgusting sound, *Sorry Tewk. I thought you were told. You can relax. I know you are a Yesan spy. Spy away, we have no secrets here. Feel free to ask any questions of a non personal nature.*

Two eights of days pass with our group making food that each type enjoys. Apparently Yesan paste tastes like something called sap chow in moist form. I could live on sap chow happily. Apparently I am the only one who likes it. Strange. Of course their food is horrible. I am polite trying to be part of the group, but I know my digestive system will rebel later. We make crude housing structures that we then take apart and put back into storage for another group to use. We each have strengths and weaknesses and I am beginning to understand how working together we can achieve tasks all of one kind could not do. I suspect the tasks were

purposely set up this way. No Yesan would design things this way. Illogical.

My covy is next to Ghyk and we hand com each other often as I ask her many questions. She has been here nearly a year longer but is not the oldest here. There is even a Yesan professor. A small male of no threat to anyone, yet I still notice locals avoiding him. As they avoid all of us. I asked Myra about this and she expelled air I now know means a sigh, yes, it happens. Time and lots of interactions will get others to trust you. It is hard to be a spy when everyone is watching you carefully. I asked Ghyk about this and she said not to worry. The just fill out the reports and send them in. No one cares about us here and we might as well enjoy all the learning opportunities.

Basic orientation is finally over and I can begin my graduate work. I was very high on the learning scale at the City, so am looking forward to learning new material finally.

I meet at Myra's office. Strange that she has nothing more to her name than that. I decide to ask.

"Professor Myra may I ask you true name? I assume mine is in my records."

"As I am the only Myra here, it is just easier to use that. If you mean my title, then I am Hu TK Myra of Alexandria." Still only Myra. Interesting.

"You have said I am a TK of level two. I have no idea what that means and I am hoping to have questions finally answered."

"We did not say anything before now as there was concern. Not all Yesans have done well in groups of mixed sentients. Some were not flexible enough to adapt to doing things in a different way. You, however, seem to excel at new experiences."

She waits for me to respond to this. She picks up a small stone and tosses it at me quickly. I respond without thinking and bat it away with my mind.

"Why did you try to harm me? I am confused."

She smiles, (I am learning Hu facial expressions), "Because I know what TK level you are but till now you have only scanned. This action confirms your second talent." Oh.

"I thought this was already known."

"Scanning can be hidden fairly easily among norms, though it is possible to confuse when they do not understand how you can know something. But, using your mind to prevent being hit by an object or to even throw an object cannot be hidden. You have been very careful not to ap-

pear any different than the norms present. You have done well. In this office and with others who you will be told about, you need to use your abilities. This is what graduate school means here."

"I thought I would be learning engineering."

"The engineering on Yesan is far superior to anything here. If that is what you truly wanted it would have been better to stay there." She hands me a cube. I recognize it as a standard puzzle cube we give to young ones to test their ability at a low level."

"This is for untrained minds."

"Really, try to open it then."

I scan it and confirm it is what I am expecting. I push in the proper sequence using all of my arms and nothing happens! I scan again, more carefully and try again. Nothing.

"Tewk. Use your mind not your arms. Set it down and use only your mind." I expel air, having picked up that bad habit in class.

I scan carefully and noticed that where the outside pressure should have worked, it is just off far enough to prevent completion of the task. I use my mind and finish the push and it pops open.

"You seem upset Tewk."

"I want to know why we were not trained on such an obvious skill. Approximately ten percent of our kind could have solved this puzzle and yet this is the first I have seen one."

"That is because I made this one to test you with. To train you with. You may keep it if you wish. Test it on the other Yesan in your covy area."

"I am assuming that you then must have this ability as well. Your official title says TK. What level are you please."

"I don't know." She smiles.

"But higher than two or you would not have been able to make this puzzle yourself."

"Very good Tewk. You will do well here. Tomorrow when you wake you will have a new ability. We will meet again here at the same time as today."

"You are not going to tell me what it is?"

"Actually we do not know. Each species reacts differently. We will just have to try it and see. I would recommend not telling others. Jealously is a trait even Yesans have. Most of what you do here in this office and with other high TKs will need to be kept to yourself."

"You admitted you are aware we all spies for the City." She smiles and nods.

"I would recommend you spend time in the Library. Ask for a 'thant named Edwin. He will be happy to assist you in learning any new 'normal' skill you wish to learn. You can even take any classes you wish as long as they do not interfere with our meetings, which will be few at first. You can report on that all you want. As long as your reports are full of interesting material you should not get into trouble."

"We are spied upon ourselves."

"Oh we know, none of that tech will work here. Ever."

"They will know something is wrong."

"Until they say something, do not worry about it. They might explain it as equipment failure. Know this Tewk. Once you were accepted to this program and passed the initial training, which you have done, you are now one of us. We will protect you." I really doubt that is possible. We usually just don't question our orders. Easier. It would appear I am going to have to learn how to be more flexible.

"The Ceph I worked with during orientation, Ceph Li. Are all Ceph good at ceramics? This does not make sense being a wet race of creatures and ceramics requiring extreme heat. I would like to learn more about Ceph ceramics. This would be of benefit to the City."

"Excellent. Ceph Li just happens to be a ceramics instructor. I will set you two up and you can join one of her classes this afternoon."

"When the sun is past the highest point in the sky."

"Things are a little more relaxed here I admit. Not all of us adapt well. I hope you will." A Meep creature enters through the closed door and interacts with Myra.

"Tewk. As a graduate student we will not be telling you where to be and what to do. Ceph Li is expecting you. And do talk with Edwin in the Library. You have the rest of the day, and most days to work out your life schedule."

"This is a test." She laughs.

"Everything is a test. My instructor was adamant about that. Even now I am constantly being tested. My interactions with you are a test for me. I have a reputation of being able to make friends with any creature. It is a long story. When you are here longer I will allow you to read it. I do hope we can be friends eventually. Just accept we are both being tested and it will go easier if we work together to get through this test."

I acknowledge and leave. Confused as to what to do. I am used to going where I am told. Our culture does not value independence in action or thought.

My pad says I have two eighths before I am expected at the ceramics

area. It will be nice to not need my vocorder to com. I return to my covy to think in a nice quiet dark place. Ghyk is in the feeding area so I decide to talk with her.

@I do not understand how this place works. I would think it would all fall apart. There is no organization at all.@

@Yet it works. Frustrating isn't it? I have been here over two years now and it still bothers me. You will find a lot of us down here between classes and activities.@

@Maybe this will not work. They do not appear to hide anything. Why are we here? I am due to attend a ceramics class this 'afternoon' but I do not hold out much hope. Our culture is built on such tech. How could a soft creature be better than us or teach us anything?@

@They will though. Looking at a problem from different points of view does work. If they do hide something I have not been able to figure out. There is a room we cannot enter. Hand me your pad and I will tell you where it is.@ I do so and she finds it on a map and marks it for me.

@It is called the copper room.@

@Yuck! I hate copper.@

@We all do. The door is not locked. Anyone can enter, but everything inside is coated in copper. It even comes down in beads from the ceiling. It is impossible to enter this room without coming into contact, yet every other creature can enter without harm.@

@It would appear to be a room where they can keep information they wish to hide from us. This should be our priority then. Our supervisors will be pleased. I will think on this.@

@Be careful in the ceramics area as well. They use copper in some of the glazes. Just tell Professor Li and she will help you.@

@I worked with her during orientation. I did not know she was a professor.@

@Everyone does orientation who plans on staying longer than a one half year.@

I attend to my nutrient and waste needs then proceed to the ceramics area. I enter through a low doorway. Strange. Most doors are very tall to us, but I find no other entrance.

~Welcome Tewk. All who enter are to be considered equal. We all learn from each other here.~ She hands me instead of speaking, but hand Ceph is logical and easier to learn for Yesans than Standard even. It is a relief actually.

~Respect Instructor Li. I am fortunate you have allowed me to attend.~

~Formalities over. Think of me as your partner in orientation and we will get along fine. Royalty are no longer watching either of us, thankfully.~

~I have a strong aversion to anything made from copper or copper salts. Please warn me about possible contact.~

~My blood has copper in it. I will make an attempt not to bleed all over you then. A number of species do not like copper and many do not like silver or gold. We have none here in the beginners section. Only advanced students use toxic metals and then only with safety precautions. This means colors are very limited here. Have you done ceramics before?

~

~Assess prior knowledge. We all learn ceramics on Yesan. It is how our world is made. We are taught this from a small size. We base age on size not temporal length.~

~Ah, do you eat your defective young also?~

~Of course, why waste nutrients on defectives? I have heard most here do not. I understand that I cannot assume a small one is available for eating.~

She shows amusement, ~We will get along fine. They are really barbaric here in many ways.~

~Agreed. Are there any locations you cannot access that other sens can easily?~

~Depends on how you define easily. Ceph are very good at getting into tight spaces, but put us out into the hot sun and we do poorly. Yes, there is one location. The path goes across a desert area a kilometer wide and then through a ring pool high in magnesium sulfate salts to a metal shack that gets very hot in the sun. No Ceph has ever managed to reach this room. Why do you ask?~

~No connection to ceramics. Just curiosity. We are a very curious race. Not being able to go somewhere others can sort of makes us crazy.~

~Us too! So where can you not go?~

~The copper room. Or what we call it anyway. I can show you the location on my pad.~

~I wish I had a pad, but no one has been able to come up with a totally waterproof one that works for us yet. They are trying though. I know of this space. It is an empty room once you get around the entrance barrier.~

~Maybe something written on the walls, ceiling or floors?~

~None that I can detect. They have these rooms all over. There is one that is very high on a shaky structure. No Di or Rap will go near it. Yet, you or I would have no problem. Neither would a Ba.~

~Ku do not climb well either. It would appear this is another test then. I will report back to my teacher that the room is empty and see how she reacts. I would suggest you do the same.~ She affirms with amusement.

~It is so good to meet someone who uses logic instead of brute force to solve problems. What kind of clay is your preference? We have a very fine white clay that very precise shapes can be formed from, but will not handle much weight during working. Other clays are not as precise but can be made into larger shapes.~

~We use a waterproof clay that hardens to full strength without heat. But cannot be handled with bare arms until set. We use special tools that take enormous practice to get used to.~

~We have imported some of this clay if you wish to work with it, but you will learn more if you try something new.~ She passed this test. Interesting. She is not afraid to learn new things either. I think I might actually like it here. There are lots of puzzles, knowledge, and good people to interact with. I can hold off reporting on TK knowledge for awhile. There will be plenty to fill my reports with.

Visitors

"Three more have shown up to have their 'thn babies awakened."

"Are we sure this is safe?"

"Not all cultures have the same morals and may see us as useful as subjects or even gone."

"Life sucks. I got that much a long time ago." I laugh.

I make my way to the newly made receiving area. We have instructed all other earth froths to direct them here. We wanted a location away from the rest, but close enough that we did not need to world hop every time the bell dinged.

We take turns here, but no one except maybe Myra likes this duty. Most of the time we greet them, tell them our terms, wake up their baby if they still want this, and send them on their way. Their travel stone only works one way and only once. We made sure of this. Encrypted so even if they dupe it the dupe will not work again. To leave we make them another stone on the spot that again only works for them once and then self destructs. We are a suspicious species I will give us that. Actually most of our earth froth is suspicious. 'Natural Selection' was brutal to us.

Did I mention that where they land is a highly limited area? This upsets more than one arrival, but we want to be sure they understand we can and will defend ourselves. Yes, we are tested. Some come with an amazing array of mech weapons. Word has spread. Slight problem. The limiters only work on them not us. The circle is approximately one hundred kilometers wide. Warriors roam throughout this space. Most have had some experience with warriors and this gets their attention immediately whereupon they notice their lack of TK ability. Nothing like facing a mortal enemy without any protection. Whatever environmental bubble they arrive in we leave intact of course. Would not be a good rep if we killed a lot of them.

I sit in a shack at the edge of the field. Shaped like a pueblo from the rez. Very minimal, but we keep it stocked with food and water and a huge backup supply of sap chow. Rumor has it the Yesans think that shit is candy. Ug. I have never been one for reading, so go through my normal Kung Fu routine under the shade of a lean to.

A bell dings and a Cat Box has arrived on the table near me. I sigh, press the top and it opens. We have one coming in. Sigh. Why do people like baby 'thn so much? Of course I have never made one of my own. The companions are annoying enough. Speaking of which, Hoonaw shows up

right on cue. I have no idea who she senses when a box is coming, but she always shows right afterwards. I sit and we wait together for the one to arrive.

It is nearly an eighth before our arrival appears. Must have been some hangup at the other end. I reread the message. Written in Ku script. Flor likely. Nothing like a very strange creature suddenly showing up on your coop step demanding attention. Strange though. This must be Flor's first arrival. Maybe that is the cause for the holdup. Most arrive at earth one or two. Yeah, it is racist to give the Hu worlds first names, but then they did start this whole sequence. Not important enough to fight over. Hu Eden would work for me just as well. About time we changed it. The paperwork will be hell though. I hate paperwork.

I scan and see it is one of those really spiky creatures that looks like it could rip you to peaces without thinking. I usually give them a few minutes to adjust to their confinement. Calms most down when they realize the warriors are just grazing and not intent on killing them. No bubble, so our air is not toxic. I prefer the ones in bubbles. Another layer of protection.

I use fast mode to calmly walk there. Of course to them it looks like I have arrived at supersonic speed and then suddenly stop right before them. It's show time.

Letting you know that I am on duty and spotting you Marie.

About time Mike. Were you sleeping again?

I think I have come up with a new brew you might like, Jalapeno flavor.

You first. Going in.

I scan it for weapons other than the ones it is born with. Nothing. Either did not expect to need them or thinks what they naturally have is enough. Does not appear to be agitated. No movement. I do not sense a 'thn either. Really tired of baby 'thn, but this also makes its intentions less clear.

Please state your intentions. Not sure polite is the right approach with this culture, but we need to start somewhere.

It throws the travel stone on the pile with the rest of the dead ones. Figured that out at least. The brute stupid species are the worst. What kind of TKs were some of the 'thn raising anyway?

Please forgive my outward appearance. A gender competition aspect we have not removed. As a TK it is redundant and unnecessary. Like Hu we lose interest once we advance up the levels.

You understand why you are limited however.

Trust must be earned. Same with us. I come alone and unarmed. I wish to learn.

Can you be more specific? I have made a chair and am sitting near by now.

Like you, our froth has many sentient species of disparate types. We have been unsuccessful at becoming coordinated.

It continues, I wish to join your University as I believe you call it.

This may or may not give you the information you seek. All froths are different. Ours was guided by a non antagonistic 'thn who saw us as helpful and not as rivals. I do not tell it about Sauron. Best not to air all of our dirty laundry just yet.

This is understood. We do not have any 'thn we wish to revive for this very reason. We will not survive as a froth if we do not learn different ways.

You cannot remain in your current form. This would bring undue attention without gain. We are likely not the answer you seek, but if you behave and except immediate removal if we feel this will not work, then an accommodation may be reached.

I accept these conditions. I would like to appear as harmless as possible. I believe a Hu would work for this purpose.

Hu are not harmless. Hu have committed uncounted acts of genocide on their own kind and others. Appearances are very deceiving in the case of Hu.

Yet you wear this form.

We do not wish to scare visitors on sight. You will also have limited TK abilities. Most sentients present here have no TK abilities, which also makes them mortal and easy to harm.

Is it possible to be an observer without participating?

Not with TK abilities. You are an unknown. We have not had good luck with unknown species.

This sounds like my froth. Maybe we are not that different then.

Likely we are not. We learned by almost dying ourselves. I am not sure there is an easy way.

Yet you are willing to allow me to participate under these conditions? Why?

We can defend ourselves. Any 'thn currently awake can be put to sleep again instantly without harm to our own. Any species that attacks us will die. This is fact, not boast. We will not leave our froth for any reason, even to defend you later if we become friends. We made this promise to the multiverse and will abide by it. We accept that we are likely a mis-

take, but we have no wish to die either. If we are an infection, it will not be us who spread it. 'thn are not stupid. We respect that even if we did not agree with their method of control there is likely a reason to contain us.

If I take your methods back to my froth will that not spread the infection?

It is unlikely you could duplicate our way exactly. You will have to adapt to your conditions. And no, we will not show you all of our secrets. Nor would you if the conditions were reversed.

Good, we have an understanding then. I am ready.

Do you know how to transfer to another form?

Yes.

I make a Hu female of small stature to be less intimidating. It is already fitted with hidden limiters. Making the transfer is second nature even with a totally alien form. The Ceph have had this experience as has Edwin now. He hated being Hu, even through he asked so he could understand Myra better. He now has a new respect for her limitations.

I will give you the capability to understand the Standard language we use. This includes a hand form for beings without hearing. Also useful for talking in a crowded room. I can still talk to you this way, but you will not be able to use mind speech as a precaution.

"You do understand that if I do not report back then bad things will happen."

"That is expected. We are recording everything that happens from this point. Hu tech was quite advanced before the fall and Yesan tech has improved it considerably. One of the advantages of working together. You are to be assigned a 'Buddy' which will act as a guide and helper when I am not with you."

"Do I need a background story?"

"You are free to make up anything you like or even tell the truth, being easier to maintain."

"That won't upset everyone?"

"You are not the first visitor. You are familiar with the Keei?"

"The slug like creatures from a moist world? Yes."

"I will introduce you to her then. You can catch up. She has allowed this to happen to better help your stay here. She has already been here one solar orbit. You decide whom you want to tell or not tell."

"This seems off. We would not allow such access."

"There are locations you will not be able to access. My teacher taught me that everything is a test. You are being tested, just as you are testing us. May we both pass with good scores."

"On our world failure means death."

"Not so extreme here. If you decide this is not working for you, let me know and I will return you here and to your original form. You will be free to leave."

"You would not worry about what information I take with you?"

"No worries. You did not come in aggressive, nor have you told me obvious lies. You are in need. We help others. We only fight if threatened and then only far enough to defend. This is important. This is part of what you are here to learn and understand. It is part of our way."

"A lot to learn."

"Indeed."

"thn are not gods. TKs are not gods. We were both formed to help others. Best if we got back to those roles."

"There are many ways to help. Some involve control measures that do not appear as help to everyone."

"We do impose limits on tech to avoid harming the other species who are not quite at our level of understanding yet. Many are close and we have no right to limit their chance to join us. But otherwise, they rule themselves. Locals are chosen to do administration tasks as needed. Some have been chosen as peace keepers. There are no armies. Gangs of all kinds are discouraged. Locals do the enforcement. We are only called in if there is a large level problem. Even then we try and get the sides involved to work things out between them. We only stop the destruction until calmer minds can meet."

I continue, "We do not hand people dangerous materials unless they have proven they can handle them safely and in limited quantities. TKs are not saints, but we have all gone through a very thorough vetting process. Those who cannot handle the responsibility are . . ."

"Killed."

"No. They are returned to normal life without the extra abilities. A surprising number needed to be returned until we learned to only ask ones we were pretty sure ahead of time could handle it. Now it is rare. Two of my close friends lived out their lives on another earth very happily after they were returned to a normal existence."

"I feel very vulnerable." I hand 'her' a wooden box.

"This is your buddy. It is a quantum construct that is considered to be sentient. They cannot reproduce and they cannot kill unless directed by a high TK, which you are not. They were first used to destroy some mad warriors that were set on us. We have since learned that the warriors are not naturally aggressive and now provide an easy food source for the

'thants."

"But can be made aggressive again if needed." I nod.

"You have had some experience with them?"

"We were given a demonstration by our 'thn overlord. A single one destroyed an entire city before it could be destroyed. They can appear anywhere at any time through a temporary portal."

"We know."

"That would be useful knowledge."

"Yes, it would." I remain silent through. Maybe if after you have passed our tests that is.

"Let's go meet some others." Puu and several of her companions pop in and take over watching the landing zone. The four of us, Spikes, her buddy, my companion and I pop over to the University.