



# The Guardians of Br'thn Rebellion

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## Earth Two

It feels good to be back. I disembark from the new improved Sea Mist II to the dock at Crab Cove. A lot of the old crew left the Library once the ship was finished. I can see why. Much more crew space and no rats in the hold. Oh, they will come. Hard to keep em out. They chose a good captain, and he was chosen and is accountable to the crew. No more my boat or leave business. The ship is owned by the community and serves the community. The work as crew counts as community service. Too bad you can't save up service, but if you chose the task that counts too.

"I can't believe you actually like this shit Randy. I am still sea sick after a month at sea." Ah, my boss at Farout. Still thinks she is my boss. Wait till she figures out I am now higher TK. Holding that one for a special time.

"There is a simplicity and closeness to the real world you can't get on a spaceship Susan." She screws up her face to chew me out, but we were both crew of equal rank, scally wags first class, on the Sea Mist II. And she had no clue how to do her work. Different with the roles reversed. I don't care. I love it here.

We make it up the dock to the first bar we can find. Of course alcohol has no effect on us and the stuff they are allowed to sell here is basically near beer. You would have to drink four liters to get drunk as a norm. Not that there some some who don't try. Makes for a lot of piss. We are here to check out the locals and get a feeling for how things have changed.

We get some beer and some grub. After the ship fair, this is actually pretty good. Without metals it will be awhile before they get refrigeration to work on a rocking ship. At least no one gets scurvy. Ah, the good old seventeenth century. Those were the good old days. NOT.

Susan spits out her beer. It was stronger on board to help disinfect the water supply. Barrels are not the best way to store stagnant water. She looks around adds some ethanol to hers and then sits back to enjoy it. Will have to warn her not to get caught. Three days in the brig for trafficking hard liquor. Ownership, as in one's hand, is enough to convict. get another week for not turning over your source. That means nasty labor, the stuff no one want to do but needs to be done. Composting sewage to make fertilizer is one the favorite punishments.

Droopy comes in as he agreed to meet us here.

"Looking good Susan. Who would have guessed you would make a good looking Hu." He smiles clearly teasing her.

"And you are one ugly one. Look better as Di. Am I going to meet the rest of the Magenta castaways here?"

"Nope just the good looking ones. Snap died on New Hope unfortunately."

"Ly'thn's revenge. I heard. Hopefully you have not endeared yourselves enough with the other 'thn to get someone to take us out here."

We have not told the Farout crew yet that most of the 'thn are asleep. Nothing like a month at sea with someone to remind you how much you really did not like them. Okay, it has been over a thousand years, but it all comes back. Each got to spend time alone with one of us. Penance for having been free this whole time is my guess.

Rogers comes out from behind the library carrying a load of wood. Another one I really did not want to see again. He drops the load at random of course. Right in the path.

"I have a question Susan. Did any of the other crew on our ship survive? Any other pods make it?"

"None, you three were incredibly lucky I guess." Matter of opinion. My companion comes up to me. Susan has not seen one yet and looks at it with curiosity and trepidation.

"This is not a 'thn though the right size. Not 'thn metal even. What the hell is it and how do I get rid of it?"

"This is my companion. You leave her alone. In fact, any of these you see whether companions or buddies, you leave them alone. If you want a companion of your own, that can be arranged. They are not 'thn and they are sen and off limits. She can kill, if needed, to protect herself."

"That little bitty thing? Really?"

Drup steps in, "Don't be stupid Susan. One of these can take out a 'thant warrior in a fraction of a second. Likely could even kill a 'thn. You would be an easy mark and we would hate to lose you so soon after your arrival."

"No way! It can't be above what, a TK6?"

"TK7 actually." Same level as you idiot.

"Shit. No way. And you guys made these? Without 'thn help? What else are you hiding." Rogers comes over.

Susan finally notices Rogers and nods a welcome. He is a TK8 so she has to be nice to him. Hell we were only sixes back then. Not that different. Not that I ever want to go back.

"Come inside, we have rooms for you two. Rand, are you staying I hope?" I nod and he sighs a thanks. These two are going to be a pain for sure. They think they are royalty because of their TK status. Was I ever

that way?

Rogers takes Susan in to show her around. Wait till she finds out she has latrine duty tomorrow morning. They put that on any new person, she is not being picked on, but I am sure she will feel that way. Rogers will enjoy telling her too. So much fun.

"How did you ever survive a month at sea with her?"

"I know more about ships than she does. She was totally dependent on me for instruction to fit in and do her duties. Don't forget she was Ku when Silver picked her up. Takes awhile to get used to a new form."

"How many times did the crew threaten to throw her overboard?" He smiles and I laugh.

"A few. She got the hint and quieted down until we got to shore. First thing she did was up her beer to forty proof."

"Of course. I always did the opposite and made mine into pure water."

"Same here."

"How much you tell her?"

"As little as possible. She knows about Snap as you heard, but not much else. I don't think she cares about us. Missed some of the other crew that were lost, but not us."

"Must be strange to have Silver come and get you after all this time and then come back to a totally strange world."

"You told Rogers yet, about our, ah, status?"

"What and ruin all the fun. No way. He has his own buddy through. Did not trust him with a companion yet."

"Good call. Our bosses really were assholes." He nods.

"It will be interesting to hear what the others say about their interns. My vote is to ship them all off to some distant earth and let them make their own way. Give them enough seed stock and animals to start a world and be done."

"I concur. Not fair to judge, but after what we have been through I really do not need this type of personality around. Reminds me too much of the Sector 'thn and their sense of entitlement."

"Perfect word. Entitlement."

"Oh, have they figured out they are not on Earth One, their home base?"

"Nope. Pretty much the same anyway, I mean in that both worlds got rid of most of their Hu through disasters and plagues."

"But we have Cats. Lots and lots of Cats."

"Don't remind me. I think I would have been a dog person if Silver and Turtle would allow it."

"Yeah, right. Good luck with that. Don't know what they see in the Cats. They certainly do not seem to like Silver and Turtle."

"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer."

"Think these two will actually do their required community service?"

"No, but that would give us an excuse to banish them. Win-win."

I smile and nod.

# Earth Two, Madscar

"No, I don't want to go back."

*It is time little one. It is time. You are ready.*

I hate that voice in my head. Nothing but trouble. I would not even be out here on Nosy if it weren't for the insistent persistent annoying voice I cannot get rid of. I tried drink, drugs, starvation, beating myself. Nope, still here.

Only on the island did I find some piece. Once I was away from everyone else the voice was softer. I have lived out here for tens of years, foraging from local trees and what I can find on the beach. I can make a fire, I have a hut and a cave when it gets stormy. Woven baskets to store minimal materials and made some simple clothing. Stolen clothes off the dead that wash ashore once a year from the storms. Guessing they got washed off near shore boats. No matter, been in the ocean long enough to remove the stink of death.

I was, a long time ago, once a carpenter, before I lost everything during a local disagreement that led to my fleeing for my life. Left behind a family who did not care for me. I miss my tools. Rocks and such make poor carpentry tools. I jumped into the sea intent on ending my pitiful life and found myself washed up here the next morning with sand crabs trying to decide if I would make a good meal soon. Not dead yet guys, sorry. They were my first meal. If it had rained that night I would not have been able to make a fire to cook them and likely would have starved or had to eat them raw.

I call the voice George, after a father for whom I was never good enough. Never good enough for this George either. I am sure George saved me many times over with insistent advice. I would rather have been dead and done with it.

Here I am, ten kilos lighter, much more fit from having to fend for myself. I know my inner thoughts way better than any mortal should. I did not like what I found. Not that I am that bad of a guy, but when you have found the devil and it is you, it is not so pretty. I am sure the cannibals would reject me for tasting bad if they ever got the chance.

I have seen ships pass many times between here and Madscar, but never once had the urge to flag one down to escape. Now the voice wants me to return. I really do not want to wait for a ship. I know the voice will get louder and louder until I do something. I have nothing to take with me. I walk up to the water and wade in. Soon I am swimming in the gen-

eral direction. Hopefully I will drown before I get there and be done with this madness.

Unfortunately, I do not drown, and I make it ashore just as the sun is coming up. I find a nice hollow in a tree and fall asleep exhausted.

When I wake it is late afternoon. I get up, scrounge up a few coconuts to crack open and eat the contents and drink the milk. My needs satisfied I walk north along the shore. Why north you ask? It was the direction I was facing. I know that sooner or later I would find a settlement in either direction. The entire shoreline of Madscar is littered with Hu settlements. If I am lucky I will die first because some creature finds and makes of me a meal. I can hear plenty further inland. I ignore them and continue my march north.

I hear a low growl in the brush.

"Come on out and eat me. You would do me a huge favor."

A large cat jumps out and stops just short of me. I stand facing it without fear.

*Do you not fear me stupid monkey?*

"Ha, as I do not fear death but welcome it, why should I fear you silly kitty?"

This clearly confuses the cat. It decides to lick its flank suddenly like this is the most important thing it has to do. Good size female. If she has kits I might just make a good meal for them. At least I would be of some use.

*I have no kits and have been sent to find you. I am not happy about it either and given any excuse I could decide to eat you instead.*

"Fine with me. Here I am. Be done with me or leave me alone."

*Those are not my instructions. We are ordered to go to the settlement of smelly monkeys two days from here.*

"Who dares order a mighty Cat around?" I laugh. What the hell is a Cat doing on Madscar? Even I know that is forbidden. Not that I particularly care. It has been some time. Maybe they own the island now. Wait, she said settlement. Damn, still Hu about then. Sigh . . .

*I am not happy about it either. But if I do not do as told it will nag me until I throw myself off a cliff to silence its never ending pestering.*

"Sounds like my George. Maybe we have the same demon in us."

*So, you understand. Good, saves me the agony of convincing you.*

*Follow then and try to keep up.* She takes off rapidly. I follow at my own pace. I find her soon enough curled up taking a nap no doubt. Nose in the air and tail curled around her head.

I sigh, collect crabs from the coconut trees and start a fire. Soon



enough I have a nice stew of crab meat in coconut milk in the shell of the largest one cleaned out for the purpose. The Cat wakes up once the meal is done and cooling. She yawns, and sniffs the portion I have set out for her. Decides it might be passable and gives it a lick. A moment later it is gone and she is looking for more. I give her the rest of my portion. Not that hungry.

*You might just be allowed to serve me old monkey. Too scrawny to eat.*

"Too bad. Ready to continue or time for another cat nap?" I tease. She jumps on me and pushes me to the sand. Not unexpected so I do not react to her bullying. Many a Hu have pushed me to the ground, why not a Cat too?

*I could still eat you and be damned for the consequences.*

"You already know that has no effect on me. Save your energy. Shall we get this over with?" We set out at a more moderate pace. Guess she has had enough naps now.

Two days of nagging from Cat are almost as bad as from George who has been mercifully quiet. Cats mind speak so I have to wonder if she is George though she denies it. She calls her inner voice Monkey of course.

"Look I am not a monkey, think of another name. I certainly do not remember my Hu one. And I do not know your name."

She pushes me to the ground again. This is getting really old.

*You are not worthy of knowing my name little mouse.*

"Fine you are Cat and I am Mouse. Works for me. Need to be able to refer to you in some way when we meet the others soon."

She looks at me, *You can smell them too?*

"If you mean the town smell, then sure. Towns always stink of sewage, cook fires, general smell of something I can't identify."

*Monkey sweat.*

"Could be that. They rarely takes baths. I do just to cool off, but then I do not wear many clothes either." I shrug.

*If they did not stink so bad I would eat the first one we encounter. Crabs are not enough for me.*

"As if I did not notice you going off at night to hunt and come back licking your face and paws."

*I need more food than a Mouse.*

"True. I can see smoke from chimneys. Here we are. Any idea what we are supposed to do?" George has been quiet.

Cat stops. I walk on a bit, but turn back and see she is still there.

She seems to be arguing with herself. Lashing out with her teeth and

front paws. Strange.

I walk up to her.

"What's up Cat? Rabies?" She gives me a really dirty look.

*If we go into town like we are I will be killed on sight. Monkey wants me to wear a leash and you to hold the other end. I cannot abide the indignity. I would rather die on the spot.*

"You can put me in the leash and hold the other end in your mouth. Would that help? Makes no difference to me."

*You would do that for me?*

"Not because I like you so much as that I do not care for myself."

*Monkey says that could work. You do look the part of an escaped criminal. I could claim you trespassed on my territory and as per treaty I am returning you to your kind.*

"I thought Madscar was Hu territory?"

*Your island was not. When Hu came near I jumped there to hide. None would dare invade.*

"That certainly explains the lack of visitors. Strange that I never found any signs of you though."

*Maybe it was not the same island.* She is looking away like I am boring her as usual. Likely she spent most of her time on Madscar where there was more to eat.

I find some vines, braid a rope quick enough. Done it enough times to make a sleeping hammock off the ground. Lots of things crawl around at night. Some have sharp poisonous bites. I loop it around my neck and give her the other end. She takes it up in her mouth and we enter the town.

I am sure we make an interesting sight. I don't care. Soon enough we have a following behind us. Must be bored. I am.

Cat leads us straight to the local leaders. I am sure Monkey told her where to go. She tugs me to sit on the ground and she sits next to me. We wait until the screen is pulled aside and three fem and a male come out to look at us. I am sure others have told them we were coming.

I look as disinterested as I can looking down at my toes. They are really in bad shape. Surprised I did not take better care of them.

"Why the hell are you two here?" Several warriors with spears are now surrounding us. I am sure they are more worried about Cat than me.

I look to Cat, who pretends not to care. I shrug.

"I trespassed on a Cat island and now I have been brought here, the closest settlement, to be dealt with. Once I am handed over she will return to her island and leave everyone alone."

"Surprised you were not eaten. They have the right to do so if you trespass."

"She said I was too scrawny, chewy and stinky to be worth the risk to her teeth and delicate stomach." They look surprised and laugh. I am sure they agree though.

"She might be right at that. You look like you must be at least sixty if not a day." I shrug. I have no idea how old I am.

"Cat, you can let your mouse go. We will take care of him from here. You may go in peace as long as you don't bother anyone."

She drops my leash and walks away. A guard takes it up all covered in Cat spit with a disgusted look on her face. Can't blame her there. I am led away to their detention area no doubt. No one abuses me. Surprised there. Maybe they figure I have had enough from Cat already. Or just surprised I am still alive or not tried to escape. Can't say I am happy to be here either.

I am led to a cluster of huts and placed in one. They do not even bother to secure the door, but leave it wide open. It is nearly dark, so I make a nest out of the straw there and am soon asleep.

When I wake there is a plate of food and a jug of water at the door. I ravenously eat the food. Not too bad. I thought they fed prisoners garbage as part of the punishment. Or maybe it has been so long I do not even realize this is garbage. I finish the water too and look around for a pot to do my business in. Cat did get me to bury it every time and would swat me if I did not. Never cared on the island. I used the bird logic, everything below me was my toilet. Moved when the smell got too bad. Not going to work here clearly. No pot.

It has been a long time, but I remember there were places for this in towns. When I peak outside there are five children of various ages watching me.

"I need a toilet." Surprised I still remember the words. A little girl comes up to me and takes my hand.

"I show you." She leads me off. Sure enough it is what I was expecting and I am soon relieved of that load. I come outside and they are looking at me again. The little girl points to a bowl of water. Ah, can't infect yourself. I wash my hands and she dumps the water on the flowers. When I go to dry them on my rags she hands me a cloth to do so. I am going to be spoiled.

"Thank you fine princess." I bow to her and she giggles. At least that has not changed. No adults are paying any attention to me. Guess they don't really care about Cat justice. Probably more surprised to see her

than me.

"I need work to do. I need to earn my food."

A larger boy looks at me as if assessing my ability to do anything. He shakes his head. Apparently I failed. No surprise.

I sigh, "I was once a carpenter. Happy to do scrap work, cleanup, that sort of thing."

"What is your name? We can't call you Lucky."

I laugh at that, "Hardly lucky. Cat really would have eaten me. My name is apparently Mouse according to her."

"You could talk with her?"

I tap my head, "Cats speak in your head. Pray you never see one again. Not very nice." Actually she was pretty nice considering she did not want to be there either.

"I will take you to Mosbe and see if she can use you. She needs a handyman to work around her small farm."

"That could work." I follow him. Never gave his name. Likely won't see him again anyway.

We make our way to the small farm and an old woman comes out and sees me, shakes her head and turns to go back in.

"I have lived on my own for decades in the wilderness. I am sure I can do a lot to help out. I am self sufficient and will not bother you with my own keep. I can make a hammock near any set of trees large enough, so need never enter your home."

"I can't afford to pay you." Pay? They have gone back to money? I thought that was outlawed. Things have changed. Barter sure, but not money.

"I have no need of money having no pockets to hold it in or anything I wish to purchase. I need work and access to a source of food, place to poo. That's it."

She sighs, nods and turns to the young man, "James show him around will you. He can make his hammock in the trees over there. He can dig a hole for his waste and he can glean from the leftovers after harvest for his food or go in the forest. Then he can get to work repairing the fence." She never talks to me. I will be invisible. Works for me. I am given the five minute tour and left on my own. Still a jungle here and only a small clearing. I can probably find more food there than on the farm itself. No matter. I don't even know why I was forced to be here anyway.

I go into the forest and scrounge for the materials I will need to fix the fence and set to work. I use vines and roots to bind the branches falling apart and select new branches where they are missing or rotten.

Mosbe comes out to watch me work and grunts approval. Probably just happy I have not asked for any supplies. I continue till I am done. It is nearly morning of the next day. I tend to be that way. Once I set my mind on something I complete it. I retire to my hammock after gathering some mangos and nuts from the forest trees for my meal. Water comes from a small stream I have found. Almost as good as the island.

Over the next few eight days I am given more tasks to do, repairing the home, helping to plant and weed crops, gather wood for her fire. Not hard work. I think I tired her out from watching me and she feels guilty about it.

The kids great me most days. They are no longer afraid of me and often bring me treats I would never get otherwise. Adults come by and examine what I have done, but do not greet me.

Finally one young fem stops me and points to a portion of the fence I have repaired.

"Good job, teach me?"

"I am bound to Mosbe. I cannot leave here. She has asked for a gate to be placed over there. You are free to watch as I make the gate." She nods. I go about my task. She watches intently and tests some of the work I have done. Understanding comes, she smiles, nods to me and rushes off, no doubt to do her own assigned task. I suspect her owners wanted her to bring me, but having the ability herself is much more valuable.

One day there is a lot of excitement with everyone talking and pointing to the harbor. I had some time, so I follow the crowd and see a large ship has docked and is unloading. Okay, so, this happens all the time right?

James comes up to me, "Exciting isn't it. We have not seen the Black Wind for a few years. I wonder how far she has traveled and what sites she has seen." Wonder lust. No thank you. I shrug and turn to go back to the farm.

*You need to speak to the Captain.* Shit, why did you have to come back? It was so nice with you gone. Why do I need to speak to this captain? Why this one and no other? Why any captain.

*SILENCE!* The headaches starts. Almost missed those, NOT.

Reluctantly I start walking towards the ship with James looking at me confused.

"You can't go there Mouse. We are not allowed near the dock."

"I have been told I must go, therefore I go." I leave him behind wondering why I am doing this. The headache subsides.

When I get near the dock I am pushed around, but continue my

progress.

"Are you deaf old man? Go home. You are not wanted here." I ignore him and when I see the ramp barred I jump into the harbor and swim to the side of the ship and scramble up the side like it was any other tree I have climbed thousands of times.

When I am on deck I orient myself towards what is likely the captain's cabin. A group of sailors come out to stop me. Which will likely be hoisting me overboard since I can clearly swim I will come to no harm. I duck past them to their surprise swing off a rope and get past them easily.

I am standing before what I am guessing is the Captain.

"I am intrigued. Why are you here old man?" He signals to the others to leave me alone but watch. I would do the same if anyone got past my guards.

"I was told to come here to speak with you. Therefore I am here. I am hoping you know why?"

"You can clearly swim and climb. How are you at heights and tying ropes?" An assistant comes up with two ropes about a Hu length long each.

"Tie these together such they will not come apart under load."

Staring at him I do so without looking at what I am doing and hold them tight. Two of the crew each take one end and pull. It does not come apart. I take it up again, perform a simple motion and I have two pieces again and hand them to him. He points up the tallest mast without looking. I shrug and quickly climb to the top. Nice view from here. I can see the entire harbor and now know where the farm is in relation to everything else. I come back down with the seagull I captured unawares while up there.

"You can't eat those you idiot?" Says one of his crew.

The Captain looks at me. I sigh, "Let me see you catch one at the top of the mast. And yes, you can eat one if you are hungry enough. I have been."

"You have a position as crew if you want it. Gather your things and be back here before the high tide."

"I have everything and can start my duties now." I am wearing almost nothing of course. No pouch or pack.

"You will need a knife at least." I shake my head no and pull a very sharp knife I have made out of fire hardened wood with stone flakes embedded in the side from my belt.

He raises his eyebrows, "If I had two more of you I would not need any other crew and could save much on expenses. Teach these three how

to make that knot you did. For the life of me I have not succeeded." I nod and pick up the two ropes again. The three do not look happy.

He announces to everyone, "They will have no rations until they learn how to do it as well as you do." A cheer goes up. A loose rope can kill. This could take years. I have healed bones from the times I have failed and fallen from a tree. I nod and set about my task without question. I am not asked to beat them or anything else that goes against what I feel is right. I am not sure what will happen when that invariably happens as it always does.

It takes a few eights. I am patient and keep at it without chastising them for their mistakes. Going slow helps. Soon I am accepted and they pay more attention. A lot of the rest of the crew watch as well. I do not like being the center of attention. The First Mate sees my discomfort and she calls the rest back to their own duties. At the end, one is still having some trouble, but I show him how to test the rope to be sure they have done it right. This makes him happier and he nods his thanks.

I signal we are done and the First Mate gets the Captain. He comes out, orders three ropes raised with one each tied by each of my students. He then orders them up their ropes where they need to reach the knot, untie it and then drop the section upon which they will be lowered to the deck. Each passes though the last one is more cautious of course, but he does succeed to lots of back patting and cheers.

"Tide!" Someone yells and all hell breaks loose as everyone goes to their duties. I have no idea what is expected not having been trained on my duties yet.

The First Mate comes up to me. I show attention.

"You lived in the jungle right?"

I nod.

"It will take some time for you to learn the ship. I need to keep you busy till then. How are you with wild animals?"

"I know their habits well enough to survive."

"We don't normally take on large animals, being forbidden by treaty, but we have a special case this time. We have been ordered to transport one to the mainland where their fate will be decided." I nod.

"Follow me. No one else has been able to get near her and she needs to arrive alive and well." I nod and follow her down into the hold. Dark and it takes a moment for my eyes to adapt. Not as good in the dark as they used to be.

"I know that smell." I comment. She looks at me.

"Not many do and have survived. You have truly been called to us. I

will admit this freaks me out. I am not a religious type, though many of the crew are. They are always hoping some saint will protect them from harm."

"I am not religious and all of the gods have abandoned me."

I am brought before a large cage where there is a creature asleep inside. I roll my eyes. Of course.

I go to open the cage latch and the First Mate is horrified.

"Are you insane? This was a huge mistake." I ignore her and she does not run to her credit.

"You can come out now Cat. It is Mouse."

*I know, I can smell you too.* She gets up does a huge stretch and even bigger yawn with really bad smelling breath.

"What have they been feeding you Cat?" I wave the air in front of my nose.

"We were told to feed her these pellets. They called them sap chow."

She holds one out to me and I taste it to her surprise.

"Not that bad. Better than stink bugs anyway." She gives me a surprised look. "You just need to learn how to prepare them. The stink is in their rear end. Cut that off as fast as you can and throw it as far away as you can. The rest can be roasted and eaten." She nods clearly not convinced.

I give Cat a hug upon which she gives me a dirty look.

"We know each other. Traveled together for a bit. She was the one who gave me my current name. I just call her Cat, being too low in her estimation to know her true name." We are still next to each other looking up at the First Mate.

"You mean a Cat with a capital 'C' not just a jungle cat." I nod.

She looks at Cat, "What the hell are you doing here kitty?" Cat snarls and she jumps back.

"She hates being called kitty."

"I got that. You can't let her run loose."

"Not like she is going to swim to shore to get away. She will not eat anyone. Of course she is unlikely to be of any help either." I get batted for that.

"So you can talk to each other?" I nod.

She rubs against me and purrs. This totally surprises the First Mate and she laughs.

*Most disgusting sound.*

"You started it. You had to purr didn't you."

*Found it makes it easier to get close enough to monkeys to eat them.*



"What did she say?"

"I would recommend you don't laugh at her." She nods slowly understanding why this would be bad.

"Stay here. I need to get the Captain's permission." I nod.

"Tell me what happened. I have not seen you in a hand full of eights and now you are locked in a cage?"

"I don't want to talk about it." Meaning something embarrassing, at least to a Cat. Getting locked up is probably only the end of it too.

"Can you swim?" She gives me a dirty look, but I know cats of all kinds can swim when they have to.

We are down here for a bit, sometimes someone looks in, probably in disbelief that their newest and likely most strange new crew mate is also a Cat tamer. Not, but that is what they likely think. Given a choice I would be back on my island, alone and happy.

*So would I.*

"You don't have to read every thought I have."

*You think so loud any creature could hear you.*

"Except another stupid monkey." No comment.

An alarm of some kind is sounding. Not been told what to do, so we stay put. Someone comes down and yells, "All hands of deck! Pirates."

"Feel like hurting monkeys Cat? I bet if you put on a good showing they will leave you out of the cage."

She runs up the stairs with me after her. We come on deck to a startled crew and pirate alike, at least until she attacks the first pirate and easily removes a sword arm. Yikes.

I grab the sword and we become a duo no one wants to get near, covering each other's back. Helps she can show me what she sees and she can see what I see. No sneak attacks.

"Captain's in trouble." We make our way over and I tap on the shoulder of the one attacking him. The Captain smiles and the pirate takes a quick look around and see both of us snarling at him. He drops his sword without hesitation.

"Put em down me maties. The battle is lost." The pirates run for the rail and jump overboard to swim towards their own ship.

The Captain comes up to us as the others are throwing the dead and body parts overboard. Wounded are tended to.

"You know something about healing?"

"On land I would know what plants to search for, but not here. I did not bring much with me. Did not know this was where I would end up." He nods.

"You two did well today. You have first watch. Someone will bring both of you food."

I nod towards Cat, "She hates sap chow."

He laughs, "Noted. No sap chow again. You have earned it. Both of you."

*He wants to talk about us behind our backs.*

"I know. Let them. The worst they would do now is let us off at the first port. Either way works for me. I have called way too much attention to us as it is."

*It would be better if we were alone again. You are correct, they are meeting about us, specifically me.*

"And that surprises you? I am strange, but you are unheard of. A Cat that fights pirates? You will be talked about for a long time my dear. A very long time."

It is just the two of us and the one who steers the ship. Quiet now. The pirate ship is soon out of sight. No doubt telling others. This means one of two things. They leave us alone, or they all come at us to remove an obstacle that prevents them from doing their trade.

"Any chance of recruiting more Cats to help on other ships?" If looks could kill.

"What, you did not have fun? You were allowed to hunt and kill monkeys legally, no consequences. How often does that happen?"

*You killed too.*

"The thing about pirates, they don't take prisoners, especially old males. We are killed and fed to the fish. Every child knows that. I was dead if they won. Nothing to lose. None for you either. At best you would have ended up severely wounded and likely in a new cage to be paraded before other pirates. At least as a fem they would not cut your balls off and eat them to gain strength."

*That does not give anyone strength, just makes you stupid.*

"Don't I know. Never want to be young again."

*Monkeys do not need balls to be stupid.*

"Yeah, I got that. What brings you here? Monkey again? I have not heard anything."

Before she can answer, food is brought up to us. Good food.

"Hope you like fish? This being an ocean going ship, it is what we usually get. Surprised the pirates were hunting this close to harbor. They must be getting desperate."

"Which way is it going down there?"

"I work in the galley. Not included. Just a scrubby that helps cook and

she did not attend on account of preparing the food."

"Got it. Thanks for the chow. In the future, you do not need to cook the fish for Cat. Or gut it for that matter. Still flipping would be good."

She almost laughed, but caught herself in time and looked at Cat worried. Relieved when Cat was ignoring her looking at the food instead.

I set her plate down, the larger one of course. The scrubby leaves and I set to my own plate, keeping an eye out at the horizon. Probably attack at night if they do. We had time to get everyone above deck this time. Not so lucky if half are asleep.

I hear Cat's bowl being pushed around to get the last licks in when the Captain comes up to us with the First Mate.

"Cat and Mouse, you know each other." Not a question. I nod anyway.

"Cats are not allowed in this territory. We could be fined for harboring her." Meaning outside of the cage.

"I believe technically Cats are not allowed on shore. Nothing said for onboard a ship, much less as acting crew." The Captain is shocked at first, whispers to the First Mate who agrees with me.

He turns to Cat, "Do you agree to follow my orders in all things pertaining to this ship and its crew? Given the alternative is being put back in the cage and then turned in once we reach port."

Cat hisses, but nods in the monkey fashion.

"You realize Cats are not good at orders unless it benefits them?"

"I know, but at least I went through the motions. Legal stuff and all that. Jaso make a note in the log and welcome aboard your Highness." He bows to her. Oh, god, nothing worse than a Cat with a fat head.

"Raw fish is easy enough. Anything else you happen to catch, eat or toss overboard, excepting crew of course. Or any passengers we might take on."

"They will be back Captain. We hurt their pride good and they were desperate as it was."

"Yeah, I got that too. Any chance you two would be willing to sleep on deck?"

"Actually sir, we would really prefer it. Both of us are used to being outside and not in a box, so to speak."

"Got it. Good. Have the maker set about making a space for you topside." He turns to Cat, "Can you climb a mast?"

*Stupid Monkey.* I do not need to hear her thoughts to know that one. In a few bounds she is up to the first cross beam. I really need to learn the terminology. She looks down on us, curls up around the beam and some ropes up there, yawns and is out.

"I will take that as a yes." He turns to me, "You prefer to be aloft too."

I nod and he points to the second mast, "That basket about half way up. Called the crows nest. Don't ask me why, just tradition." I nod. Keeps the deck clear and a better lookout. Guess I know my task now. I smile at the thought of Cat springing down on an unwelcome guest. Now that I have a sword I would be a threat too.

I thought I would be seasick, but it never happened. Guess all that time swinging in a hammock saved me that disgrace. I will admit I do like fish better than crabs and clams. Others on board are not so appreciative and prefer variation. Not going to get shore life out this far.

I really thought the pirates would be back. Judging from the actions of the others, they did too. Apparently the attacks have been building the last couple of years. I thought that everyone was pretty much taken care of. Any community that was caught up short was helped out by others. No one starved. Granted you did not always get your preferred food either.

I was useful in many ways aboard a ship with carpentry skills and was always working repairing or adding. There were tools and extra lumber on board at all times in case of an accident. I knew a few knots, but the rest of the crew knew a lot more. I learned much I hope will make me useful at some point.

Talking with Cat at meal time I note, "Seems really strange the luck we are having. We were both here at just the right time to save everyone. I was at the garden to be of the most help. Why are we here together?"

*Monkeys talk too much. We are alive and fed.*

"Don't forget nap time." I tease her. She is not amused and concentrates on this huge fish they just gave her. I am sure they did it just to see what would happen. She ate an amazing amount of it and then took the rest up to her nest in the ropes. Other crew helped make it better and more comfortable for her. Sort of a Cat hammock.

"Land ho!" I put my bowl in the cleaning pot and scramble up the mast to my post. Sure enough we see land off the port side. I am learning. Other ships are visible too. I yell a confirmation and we steer towards the harbor. We hug the coast for the most part and are only out of sight of land for a few days at a time. Suits me. Would not want to swim even this far.

I see the Captain and First Mate talking below me. She is holding something that looks like it is made of cloth. She nods and hands it off to another crew mate. They take it over to the first mast. The one I am on and it gets hoisted up past me to the top of the mast where it unfurls. Hard to see from this angle. Clearly a flag. When I finally make out what

is on it I laugh. The rest of the crew were apparently in on the joke and were waiting for me to notice. The flag has a large Cat on it in a fighting stance. Way to avoid notice everyone. Not sure this is a good idea. I was hoping to keep Cat out of sight while docked.

Shit, small ships are coming towards us. Being small and fast, they quickly catch up to us and sort of escort us into harbor.

When we reach shore there are a lot of people on the dock waving at us. Well, normally there are a lot of people around any harbor. Noticed that when I boarded. Remember what it was like before I escaped to the island. How did they know ahead of time? We have been out of sight of other ships since the attack. Unless the pirates themselves came through here?

Cat comes down to the deck and I do the same. No need for me to be topside now. Needed here to help haul cargo and supplies.

Captain comes up to me, "Seeing as how you can talk to her. We would like her to wear a symbol that she is part of our crew and not a beast to be taunted and teased." That would definitely not be safe for anyone doing so.

"My understanding is that she can talk with anyone she chooses to, but you must know how cats or Cats feel about collars. They would rather hang themselves than wear one."

He holds it out, "More of a necklace with a Cat medallion. Very light weight and not a symbol of ownership. A symbol of membership."

I laugh, "Yeah, no one owns a Cat. She is sure she is my owner in fact. I am required to obey her at all times. Fortunately her requests are few. But you are right. We need something. Even I know Cats are not allowed in Hu space normally. I am sure this will cause trouble. I am very happy to see you are willing to try, but save the ship over saving us. We will make our own way if we have to."

"I have no doubt of your ability to survive. Seen enough to convince me of that. You were on that tiny island for what twenty years?" I shrug and nod. "Things have changed. Not all for the good. Used to be in my childhood people were more cooperative and less competitive. You and Cat bring us much needed pache. The crew are behind you, never fear. I am more worried they will vote you Captain next round."

I look suitably horrified and answer, "No sir, I am no Captain. Regular crew is just fine. I barely know bow from stern. Can't have me giving anyone orders. Besides I am so old I am likely to keel over any moment."

The Captain laughs, "You are in the best shape of any Hu I have seen your age. No, you still got a few years left unless someone sticks a knife

in your back. Be careful on shore leave. You two stick together." He hands me some self defense weapons to hide on my person. I nod and put them away. Rather lose this small knife than my stone one anyway.

"At least I will never get drunk. Don't touch the stuff."

"Then stick to tea, water is not safe. Needs to be boiled in most places near a port now." I miss the island where the water was always pure. Well most of the time. Could not count on some animal not pooping in it upstream of where I was getting a drink.

I place the necklace around Cat's neck. She fusses with it a moment, but she has been listening to our conversation and does not resist or tear it off. Light weight enough she could easily. That was what probably convinced her more than anything. Besides she does look good with it. Not just some wild beast any more.

She looks at me and curls her lips to a snarl to remind me she is still a wild animal. Excuse me, sen. Purr.

*Monkey says we need to go ashore and be seen.*

"Strange. Up until now we have done so well to keep a low profile. NOT."

We make our way down the ramp after the Captain and a few other crew. A few crew mates stay with us warning people not to try and 'pet' Cat.

One particularly ugly crew mate snarls, "You would not try and pet one of us. She is crew. Do not pet any of the crew." Good logic. I nod to her in thanks. I can see a few in the back of the crowd assessing the situation. I am sure some are pirate crew.

I see our Captain and he waves us over. The First Mate is with him and two others, both female.

"Mouse and Cat, I would like you to meet Captain Bright and her First Mate." I guess First Mates do not use names normally. Strange that. I nod to them. Cat sits. What does she know? I know she has already read them.

"You should have introduced us as Cat and Mouse. I am in a sense her First Mate and of lesser importance."

The Captain nods understanding.

"Cat, Captain Bright would like to know if any other Cats are willing to serve. Free sleeping space and all the fish you can eat in exchange for protection during attacks. No other duties."

*How do we know any Captain is not in fact a pirate in disguise?*

"How do we know you are not a pirate? Would be a good move on their part to even the odds."

"I have known Captain Bright since we were both in nappies."

I shrug, "People have turned before. A lot is at stake. You do realize that Cat is technically illegal and should not be here."

"And any pirate could point that out and even the odds by removing the only Cat with less hassle," Captain Bright points out.

Our Captain nudges the other to ask a question she has been hesitant to ask.

"I will ask, since you have been afraid to. Cat, what level TK are you?"

*That is personal.*

"Personal. Like asking anyone if they are a virgin. A Cat would not care, but we would. TK status is personal to the Cat hierarchy and not shared. I do not even know what a TK is, much less what level she is, so don't ask me either."

"Captains are afforded some knowledge that most Hu are not aware of."

*Both are TK2, but say nothing.*

We will need to talk more when we are alone, I think.

*We are always alone in our thoughts. You want to know what TK means. Monkey okay's this knowledge to be shared with you alone. They are not to know you know.*

What TK level am I?

*TK1. Better than most Hu. A natural, so a bit different than one made to be TK. This is why you were chosen by Monkey for this mission.*

Well, are their other Cats willing to serve?

*Yes, but this will be done carefully and after thorough research into character of each ship.*

"She said that there is a possibility, but each ship will need to be assessed independently."

*And the two of us are to be in charge of all pairs of Cat/Hu who serve in this capacity.*

I nearly fall over. I am definitely not ready for any responsibility, much less something this intense.

"I will tell you in a moment what other conditions are part of this. But, I have a question. I get that we had a pirate attack. That can't be totally strange. You were prepared. Why this sudden interest in obtaining help from a banned sen species. I was on an island for twenty years, I am not stupid. Something is up."

"We should talk some place ah, less public," Says Bright.

*Her ship, so I can check out the crew at the same time.*

"Cat says Captain Bright's ship would be best. Is your crew aboard?"

"They can be called back. They will be at the first tavern as we leave the dock." Not a good starting point. Maybe they are all drinking tea.

*Not a chance.*

We turn around and head back up the dock to the Moon Beam. A nice looking ship. A little larger than ours. The watch crew see us coming and look lively. We come aboard and go straight to the Captain's cabin. Not much larger than our Captain's cabin.

Cat claims the couch for herself and curls up.

"This is not nap time Cat," our Captain says.

"Don't worry. All an act. She will hear everything said." And unsaid.

Captain Bright asks, "What do you need to know?"

"We can relax. Cat is doing the assessment. She will finish when the crew comes back. You already know she knows what I am thinking. This is how we communicate." They both nod.

*All Cats will be fem and in most cases be matched with a Hu fem. Call crew Lizat to the cabin.*

"She wants to meet crew mate Lizat?"

They both look surprised.

"How do you know her name? Never mind. I got it. Creepy though. No secrets from a Cat. Have to remember that is also part of the cost."

"As has already been said. Each ship needs to be assessed. My guess is, this will be a rare matching, at least at first."

"A trial period would be good for all concerned."

I comment, "This was arranged was it not? It was not a coincidence that Cat was on board."

"We were told to stay in port until the right person came to us. We had no idea who that would be. You will have to admit your method of getting on board was unconventional. The real test was of course your meeting Cat. Others did not pass." I can imagine.

"How did Cat come aboard?"

"She was delivered to us with the instructions I have just mentioned. Freaked out the entire crew to say the least."

"Cat was not happy about it either I suspect."

He is careful not to laugh in front of her.

"I doubt anyone here would like being treated that way." He gets it.

"How does this fit in with the treaty with Cat and Hu jurisdictions?"

"You are not a normal hermit are you. You say you were a carpenter, but you clearly were higher up the education level than most laborers."

I shrug, "I had a long time to think too." He nods.

Crew Lizat arrives clearly worried why she has been singled out.



When she see Cat not restrained in anyway she freaks and nearly leaves.

"You were called here by Cat. She is not here to eat you, but to interview you." She nods and calms down quiet a bit actually. More than I would expect. I was ready for death, but I don't think this is the case with her. Younger than me of course, but that is not saying much.

"So, how does this.... oh, wow. Did not know. This is fascinating. Ask away. Got it, don't need to speak." The stare at each other for a good eighth of an eighth. Cat finally breaks her stare and licks her flank.

I smile, "I guess you passed. Not surprised. If she knew enough to call you in, you probably already passed."

Captain Bright adds, "Never underestimate the need for a face to face interview. She did not break under pressure was probably the final test."

I smile, "Oh, definitely not the final test. Everything will be a test from here on out. Not a bad thing. Think of it as learning opportunities."

Captains both roll their eyes. Lizat nods understanding slowly.

She asks, "When does this happen? When do I meet my new master?" Oh, she is a gem. Got that right off too.

*In a few days. Hard to time these things. Besides, if she failed I would still have time to find another.* I nod.

"Cat says in a few days. You will stay in port that long?" I look to Captain Bright.

"A few days won't matter. I assume I can release the rest of the crew back to their shore leave?" I look to Cat. No answer.

"I assume this is fine too or she would have told me. Maybe Cat, Lizat and I could go on deck where we can discuss what this will mean to her?"

"I will need to know also my role."

"I can fill you in once they leave the cabin." Got our dismissal. I nod and walk out with Lizat. Cat is the last to leave of course. She likes to taker her time so as not to appear to be taking orders from monkeys.

On deck we can see the going on at the dock. A lot of activity, but with Cat out of sight, it looks pretty much normal.

"Spill. What am I in for?"

"Each Cat is different of course. Just like we are. But roughly, be kind, be honorable, Cat comes first. Oh, no sap chow. Raw whole fish is Cat's favorite."

"No name?" She looks surprised.

I shrug, "Up to each Cat. I am not worthy to know yet. Maybe in a few decades." She begins to laugh and I catch her and shake my head violently no. She cuts it off.

"They hate the sound of a monkey laughing. Oh, stupid monkey is the

most common label Hu get from them."

"Well, they got that right. I can't believe how some behave." Right. I like her.

*Will you mate now?* Cat gives me a really funny look.

"What did she say?" Lizat asks.

I look straight at Cat and say carefully and slowly, "No. I am done with that sort of thing."

*Too bad, the way Hu mate is very entertaining.*

"And the way Cats do is not? All that yowling and carrying on. You wake up the entire forest."

Lizat's eyes go wide as she gets what we are talking about.

"The Cat I am assigned will be a male? I will be expected to . . ."

"Absolutely not. You will be assigned to a fem. All companions will be assigned to fem. And no I will never mate with Cat. That would be too demeaning to her." She nods relief and understanding.

*I have never mated with a Hu. Can't imagine it would be any fun. Your penis is too small and not barbed. Pain is part of the pleasure.*

"I am not going to translate that Cat." I am turning red.

"Did she just describe . . ." I nod and she flushes too.

*Prudes. Sex is part of life. No big deal.*

"It is to us." Lizat nods her agreement even though she did not hear what Cat said.

"Okay, she chooses where she wants to sleep, when she wants to eat, what tasks she wants you to do. Don't worry, you will have plenty of time to preform your normal chores. They like to sleep A LOT." Cat is already curled up on deck.

"Do they drool?" I nod.

I whisper, "And snore sometimes."

*I heard that. I do not snore. Only monkeys do that.* Right.

"She purrs very loud, especially when sleeping." Lizat gets it and smiles.

"Never laugh and you should do fine. They do not have hands, so we effectively become their hands, not that they need much in that way. Occasional massage or scratching. That is actually fun for both."

"We are doing this for stopping pirates right?"

"That is my understanding. Of course the pirates will either get their own or enlist some other means to even things out. These things never end well. I'm sorry, but I see our life expectancy as rather short."

She shrugs, "Welcome to life on a ship. There are thousands of ways to die out there."

"I have found shore leave to be more hazardous."

"You could be right there. Especially for fem. Rapes have become common again. We never go anywhere without another crew mate now."

"That is sad. I was alone on an island for some twenty years. Missed all of that. What happened? Rape was only a story in my time. Never happened."

"Better than being killed. Males get knifed. They usually don't make it. Of course the perp is hunted down and killed, but it still happens."

"Crime is fast, justice is slow." She nods.

"Watch your money pouch. They will take that off either gender."

"Don't have one, don't want one. Besides with a Cat at your side, no one is going to bother you."

"Until they figure out arrows can kill one." Shit.

*Never happen. We have ways of defending ourselves you have not seen yet.*

"Cat say that won't happen. You should have seen her tear the pirate apart. My sword was taken from his arm lying on the deck."

"Shit. This could get interesting." I nod.

She points to my sword, "You know how to use one?"

"Point and push. Worked during the boarding attempt."

"Ah, so you have already had your first kill. Beginners luck."

Without looking I remove the knife the Captain gave me and throw it over my shoulder without looking. It sticks in the mast just above the head of a crew member working on a knot.

"Okay then. Not a beginner."

"I had to survive in a jungle alone. A lot of things wanted to eat me. They were not as polite as a Hu." She nods slowly.

"I can teach you how to use the sword if you teach me how to throw like that."

"Got twenty years?" She raises an eyebrow. Did not think so.

A lot of the crew have been leaving for shore leave, but all come close enough to get a good look at Cat. I retrieve my knife from above the clueless mate. He looks confused that a knife would be there. I am quiet too. Noise brings visitors you don't want.

Looking out over the dock I see a large team of people bringing a large covered crate. They stop and ask directions and are pointed towards us.

"Ready or not, here she comes. Sooner than expected even." I nod to the dock. Lizat stops looking at a sleeping Cat and turns towards the dock.

"What's it like having another mind in yours all the time?"

"Better than talking to myself all the time. At least I know her voice is real."

"And there are consequences to prove it."

"Hope you like fighting pirates."

She gives an evil grin. Yep, she is going to enjoy this.

*She is considered the best sword user in the area. Together they will change the tide.*

"I really have no idea what your relationship with her will be like. Each of us is different."

"You would think it would have been easy enough for the pirates to jack this crate and take her themselves. I am sure they are watching."

"The only time you could have even a slight chance would be when she is in the crate. Yeah, that would be a good time to take her. Let's go greet them shall we?"

Cat jumps up and bounds down the gang plank towards the crate. We follow at a run. Lizat has her sword out, so I do so as well.

Most people are just stunned not knowing what to expect, but small groups recede back into the crowd and then leave out the back edge to dissolve into the stores and shops.

"We were being watched. They would have tried something given a chance."

"Too many people about. Nearly everyone on the dock is armed. Not really safe either, but everyone has been on edge lately. Too many people have disappeared under mysterious circumstances."

"Sounds like they need Cat/Hu pairs on land too."

*Where do you think the males are going? Wusses are more adverse to being on a log in the ocean.*

"Cat says, . . ."

"She told me too."

*I did not. That would be her new master. I keep quiet.*

Lizat is already directing the crate to be brought aboard. The cover remains on. I look back to see her Captain on the railing watching. Has to be scary for her too, but if the pirate situation is not solved no one will be safe. Trade will come to a standstill. People will die.

*You understand a lot for a hermit monkey.*

"As I have been saying. Had lots of time to think. I made a lot of mistakes. It was not a pleasant experience being immersed in your own thoughts."

*We need to meet a few monkeys while we are here.*

"I think you can stop pretending. I know you are George. Why keep it a secret now?"

*NEVER mention my name aloud again. EVER. Sacred.*

"Yes Cat." I give her a salute.

She leads me the back way through a number of alleyways and such. During my years as a drunk and thief I know this type of area. We are not going to meet nice people. I keep my hands on my knives. Too close quarters for the sword.

# Cat Land

*Welcome Squeak. You have grown up some since the last I saw you.*

<sup>R</sup>Hello Owa. Abundant prey has that effect.<sup>R</sup>

I am not entirely at ease with her. She used to tease me a lot. Never knew if she was training me or going to eat me. Now here I am at the same TK level. And no, there is no way she can read me. Not going to fall for that weakness again around her.

*You know why you are here?* I nod.

<sup>R</sup>Show me where you want to set this up and I will bring in the other-  
s.<sup>R</sup>

*They will be spread out. I do not entirely trust this situation. I will not allow a concentration of any sen other than a Cat in our territory.*

<sup>R</sup>You were the one to suggest it. It did not come from Silver or Turtle.<sup>R</sup>

*Are you sure you do not need 'permission'?* She is taunting me.

<sup>R</sup>I am not staying. They will all be volunteers. Raps who are studying Cats in grad school. We want them back alive.<sup>R</sup>

*That's no fun.* She yawns to emphasize the size of her mouth. Not her mouth I am worried about.

<sup>R</sup>I am serious. Eat even one and they all leave. Game over.<sup>R</sup>

A portal opens and a pack of young Raps come through. The portal closes. Leeas is with them and comes up to me. The others are circling around each other, sniffing the air and staring at Owa.

<sup>R</sup>Young Raps are sure stupid. Were we that bad?<sup>R</sup> Leeas is a deep offspring of my own birth pack. The genes are so dilute we do not see each other as related of course.

A Cat comes forward for each and one of the Raps goes with each. They pop out together to some place of the Cat's choosing.

*You can leave now.*

<sup>R</sup>Not quite. I want to see what happens. We will rescue anyone who gets into trouble either of their or their partners doing.<sup>R</sup>

*I don't care.* Owa pops out. No doubt back to a nap near Sylvy.

<sup>R</sup>Was she always like this?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>No. She was always a trickster, but we used to get along fine. She has become very sour. You read the journals. She and Silver go back many incarnations. She has never gotten the best of him and she deeply resented needing our help.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>And the reason Raps were called in instead of Hu. Got it. Sad.<sup>R</sup> I nod.

<sup>R</sup>No one has ever gotten the better of Silver and Turtle, but no one else

resents it. Well, maybe Cat and Puu, now Myra.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>But they were not actively trying to beat Silver either. Just curious and lucky.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Traits we have too I am afraid.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You think that is why she wants our help?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Who knows. Cats are known for their curiosity, but only if it might be a meal. They have gotten lazy, inbreed, and now hungry. Either they change or their culture dies.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Are we here to kick them in the butts, as the Hu say.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Yeah, best not to use Hu cliches here.<sup>R</sup> Leeas smiles.

<sup>R</sup>We learned to do things in a new way. You understand this more than any other Rap. We have scholars such as yourself, scientists, farmers, schools, mild industry, even restaurants.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Some how I can't ever see Cats doing all that. Farming would be my first need. They need to raise more prey, that means more food for the prey to eat. That means farming. The only way.<sup>R</sup> Leeas nods.

Squawk pops in and nudges me to get my attention.

*The box has arrived mistress.*

<sup>R</sup>Thanks.<sup>R</sup> Just what we need, Cats with buddies. Thank goodness they are not getting companions. On the other hand I can't see this working without them. A Cat can dig a hole. Might even be able to spill a few seeds into the hole. How are they going to harvest enough seeds for the next generation?

<sup>R</sup>We are ready to disperse the buddies Owa.<sup>R</sup>

She hisses at me, *I am not your servant. Do not order me about.*

<sup>R</sup>Fine. You were warned.<sup>R</sup> *Everyone, we are going home. Round them up. Open the portal Leeas.*

Owa looks at me like I have just kicked her. Not putting up with this Cat shit game of I'm bigger than you. Di have all learned not to play the game. Time she did too. I immediately shield the two of us. I know how pissed off predators act. The portal opens and we head towards it, backing into it actually. Not that we need to. Scanning works in all directions, but I want her to know we are keeping an eye on her.

Just as I enter the portal with the box, it disappears. I smile.

# Di Eden

The portal closes and we are home. The box was empty of course. Just quartz spheres of the right size in a heavily shielded box she could not scan through easily or quickly. Bought us the time we needed.

Our Raps pop in one at a time using way-back stones.

<sup>R</sup>What went wrong? We were ready to receive their buddies.<sup>R</sup> One asks.

<sup>R</sup>Actually nothing. This was expected. Part of learning how Cats are. I want a report from everyone by tomorrow morning about what you learned from your temporary student. Suggestions on how we could proceed.<sup>R</sup>

Silver comes up and asks, "How did it go?" smiling as everyone is dispersing to their rooms or the library.

<sup>R</sup>As expected. You were right. I was hoping a little humility had sunk in as you say. Not a bit. They need us, not the other way around.<sup>R</sup>

"You knew Cats hate to be ordered about." I nod.

<sup>R</sup>It was not an order, just a statement of fact. She was looking for an excuse to take total control. I will not put my students into that kind of danger. They are only ten years old. Stupid as rat shit. Most, if not all of them, would have been eaten within a week 'by accident'. I need to see a lot more trust before I will let them stay even a few eighths there.<sup>R</sup>

"Your call as promised. It was always a risk putting two predator species together."

<sup>R</sup>Like Hu are any better?<sup>R</sup> He laughs at my comment. Good.

"I am afraid we have gotten spoiled as TKs. We expect things to work out, sens to work together to figure things out. Not to take everything personally."

I spit out, <sup>R</sup>Cats only care about food, sex and naps.<sup>R</sup>

"I warned her that TK Cats that can reproduce would be a problem. The non TK ones in Africa are doing fine."

<sup>R</sup>Because they can still die attacking prey or getting into a fight with another. Or old age of course.<sup>R</sup>

"Not possible to have an immortal utopia that is ever expanding."

<sup>R</sup>Unless you have an infinite amount of space to expand into. She does not. Maybe she should have her own world?<sup>R</sup>

"Any species that would make good prey would also make a good sen. We could not do that to them. Besides, they have the ability to move any time they want. Only pride keeping them here."



<sup>R</sup>How is the other experiment going?<sup>R</sup>

"Too early to tell. You were right. 'Mouse' is a truly excellent candidate. We should raise him for sure."

<sup>R</sup>I watched him for over a year. I don't make quick decisions.<sup>R</sup>

"Well, thanks for your help on that one. It will be interesting as more candidates are chosen and paired."

<sup>R</sup>Yeah, except the Cats are doing the choosing. Was it wise to get the ones who were kicked out of the Cat Land?<sup>R</sup>

"Depends on why they were kicked out. No, Myra's mother is not going to be part of this game on either side."

<sup>R</sup>Are you sure? We start poaching their island Cats, nothing to stop them from going after ours.<sup>R</sup>

"We had permission. They were running out of prison space."

<sup>R</sup>No doubt.<sup>R</sup>

## Earth Two - far north

"Puu, I don't like this assignment."

"I know Cat, but we have to put in our time, same as everyone. Can't expect Drup and Rand to do an entire world this complex."

She opens her mouth and then shuts it. Good.

"I am a desert girl and it is freaking cold here." We are both wearing heavy parkas, boots, etc. drudging through knee high snow.

"How far till we reach the village?"

"Another eighth I expect. We could not come in too close in case a local saw us appear out of nowhere."

"We scanned, there was no one."

"And how would it look with us coming in like we had just been to the outhouse?"

"Just a little TK to keep warm, please?" I shake my head no. Who made me leader of anything? Turtle did. She did not trust Cat not to cheat.

We finally see the small village. They don't have wood, so they build from skins, stone and ice. Mostly ice.

"At least they speak Standard and we did not need to learn Inuit."

"No Inuits ever lived here. These were natives of Finland originally. Ancestors spoke a version of Sápmi, though most spoke Russian just before the plague. That was lost after the plague, same as everyone else. Not enough people to maintain it."

"How hard were they hit by the plague?"

"Those who could live off the land escaped north and survived."

"Never forget the ancestor's ways I guess." I nod.

"It also means they never got the pop reduction genes."

"Shit, why not? Didn't Silver and Turtle do that to everyone?"

"They have a high infant mortality. If they had gotten the gene there would be none left. Apparently Turtle offered them the choice."

"A lot of people have an aversion to being played with. I get that. High infant death though. That is harsh."

"It is a tough world."

We get close enough to actually see the village. It looks like it is made from wood?!

"Ah, Puu, that is clearly wood. Where is the ice?"

*Sami, we are here, just outside the village.*

*Welcome. I will be right out. Give me a moment.*

I do a long scan.

"Cat the nearest forest is about a hundred kilometers south of us. That is a long way to haul lumber."

"Shit, they have lots of dogs. I hate dogs. They all bite."

"Didn't you read the summary Cat? They were clearly mentioned."

"I am shielding and I don't care what Turtle says about it."

"They are also very affectionate, especially towards female outsiders. They will notice a shield." I am trying really hard to suppress a smile. Cat's face goes red. Or redder. Already red from the cold.

"They won't expect us to ah, mate will they?"

Oh this is fun, "They need the genetic diversity." But usually want males as female leave with their genes and do not contribute unless they stay. Visitors rarely stay.

"Anyone tries and they will find themselves shoved into the nearest active volcano."

"Be sure to warn them of that Cat."

We are near the edge of the village now. We wait.

Finally Sami comes out, pulling on his coat and apparently pulling up his pants. He sees us.

*Not what you think. I just came out of a sweat lodge. You should try it while you are here.*

*Are males separated from females? Cat asks of course.*

*Why? Small place, we have all seen each other naked. Can't believe you are still a prude after all you two have been through. Surely you did not always wear clothing around New Hope?*

*New Hope was just high TKs. None of them cared about sharing the gene pool.*

He breaks out laughing. Got you Cat. She gives me a dirty look. I shrug and smile.

*Not my fault you never read the briefs before hand.*

"What's for dinner?"

"Raw whale fat, reindeer hooves and fish tail soup." Now Sami is playing with her. She gives him an ugly smile, ha-ha.

Actually he was not that far off. No whale, but lots of reindeer and fish. No vegies grow up here. Only a few tundra herbs and salt for seasoning. Guess you get used to it.

Sami notices us watching the dogs.

"Once you feed them, they are friends for life. We depend on each other. Neither of us could survive here without the other. They are watching you because you are strangers. Stranger are bad until proven other-

wise. The only reason they have not attacked is because I am with you and you are not showing any hostile behavior. Please do not hurt them." He emphasizes this last point looking directly at Cat, who of course ignores him, or pretends too. We were warned we were here to do good, not tear apart their culture.

"I guess I am surprised any Hu are up this far north. There is plenty of land further south."

Sami shrugs, "We like it here. This was always part of our history. The plagues and ash did almost nothing to us."

"So, you really do not have the lower reproduction genes?"

"Don't need them. High infant mortality. We do not even name them for the first five years and they get an adult name when they turn thirteen. Both genders in case you were wondering. Most young ladies do not have their first period until seventeen or so."

"And life expectancy minus the infant mortality?"

"Sixty or so. It is a hard life. But we party hard too."

"You can't ferment deer antlers or something can you?"

"The milk. Fermented milk reaches twelve percent. Tastes horrible, but you do what you have to." He smiles. He is a five, so unlikely to affect him anyway.

"What's it like being a shaman?"

He stops, turns around and looks at me, "You two are weird. I am needed as a healer. Lots of accidents. A five can do a lot of good here. You should try helping people for awhile instead of ignoring them."

"Hey, we help. Not the same way, but we do a lot. We are running a university now for all sen."

"TK sen you mean."

"Nope, all are welcome. Of course we keep the TK classes separate, but the TKs are required to take norm classes with the norms and are graded the same."

"That must provide some incentive. Unless of course someone reads the instructor's mind to get the answers."

I sigh, "We are well shielded. Can you tell what level we are?"

"I read the briefing, otherwise I would not have a clue. You both scan as norms. But, I was expecting that."

"Well you did better than Cat. She never reads the briefings. Trouble up north? There is something north of here?"

"I did not want to say much in the com. Something weird is happening at the old scrubbers."

"Weren't those abandoned hundreds of years ago? They can't still be

working. Not on any maintenance schedule I have seen."

"No, no longer needed. CO2 is down to a nice 200ppm now and steady. Of course it is going to take sometime for everything to stabilize. The sea is still receding, but not below the pre industrial level yet."

"You expecting another ice age?"

"Actually we were due for one about now. Natural cycle. About time we became the dominate culture again! Just kidding. You don't adapt well unless you like very hard work and like spending a lot of time alone."

"Works for me." Cat jumps in.

"Cat has become a lab rat. She would spend hundreds of years alone there if we did not drag her out for a bath once in a while."

"You are safe here Cat. No baths. Being immersed in water is the best way to die here. No second chances."

"You have not, ah, resurrected anyone have you?"

"Technically I supposed that is possible if I get to them fast enough, but no, when I see the dead, they have been dead and frozen for hours if not days. Ice crystals turn brains to mush fast."

"No second chances." Cat says.

"When do we go to the nearest scrubber?"

"I am only a five. No DS for me. We leave by dog sled in the morning. And no, it really will be better if we leave the usual way. People here are deeply suspicious of 'strange' ways and are likely to immediately label us all as evil spirits if you go popping around like ghosts."

"Okay Puu, guess we are not going to be back in time for your sap chow snacks."

"Oh god, you two do not actually eat that stuff? I had it in training of course, but never again. Fermented deer milk tastes better." He makes an ugly face and shudders. To each his own. I don't find it that bad. Nothing I would ask for, but it works for what it was intended for.

In the morning Cat gives the dogs their breakfast and I give them a few special treats. We both get licked to death. I think Cat is going to die after she kills me. It was so hard not to smile. Sami had to turn his head to not get caught.

It takes three entire eight eighths days of cold, bumps, sleeping in snow near the sled. Worst experience of my life that I remember. Well, growing up with Cat on the rez with her nightmares was no picnic. Give it a toss.

Because of the mist, clouds, fog, whatever, we do not visually see the first scrubber until we are nearly upon it. Even then we only see the base, which looks more like a cliff edge. The tower goes up nearly a kilometer

into the sky. 'thn metal of course. Nothing else could hold up structurally this long. I don't get why they could not have gone down instead of up, but not my department. They are here.

Coming up to the wall I see scratch marks all over it. Seemingly random. Strange.

"'thants have been here. I do not sense a colony. Must just be scavenging the 'thn metal and taking it back to their colonies."

Cat comments, "You would not sense a colony if we were right on top of it. They shield really well. Okay, everyone report in!" Suddenly we are surrounded by six companions and of course he tries to touch one. He is immediately shocked and jumps back a meter.

"They don't like to be touched." I say.

"No shit."

Cat asks, "You don't have a companion or buddy? You qualify."

"Offered, but hard to explain to the locals. They are already spooked by my healing ability, but I do the required chanting, bad tasting herb mixes and stinky smoke to cover my actions."

"I was wondering about all the stuff on your necklace."

"Just like a stethoscope down south. Badge of office." He shrugs. I don't ask any more. We are not moving in.

"Why are the companions here? Surely you two don't need help in this."

I answer as Cat is already giving our companions instructions.

"We do actually. Even we can't see through a 'thant shield by ourselves. Fortunately with eight of us, two TK Hu and six companions we have the necessary number. No offense, but we are practiced at this and don't want to waste time training you. You should join us in the link. You never forget your first time." Cat smiles. I roll my eyes and sigh.

"Ah did you two notice the structures about a quarter of the way around counterclockwise from here?"

I laugh, "Good Sami. Shows even we can lose focus. Let's check them out."

"You mean walk don't you?" Cat gives me a dirty look.

"Pop us then. I have scanned. Nothing alive since we left the village, except for someone fishing on the bay. Too far away to see us."

We pop to just outside a cluster of what look like our igloos.

Sami says, "Too far away from any forest. They had no choice. Empty of people. I sense artifacts though. After you." He bows and allows us to go first.

"There is more than one, fan out and search each one please." I hate

being inefficient. All of us, companions included have already scanned down to the molecular level.

We gather back together.

"If we can pop, can we go inside out of the wind and cold please."

"Poor kitty. Paws cold?" I tease her and we are all inside.

"Less talk, more work. Spill Sami, what was all that about?"

"You complained about the wind but the huts were on the leeward side, out of the wind. Believe me, you don't want to be on the windward side during a gale. Guess they were just making use of the shelter on their travels. Saw nothing that our culture could not produce." I nod.

"Likely they had no idea this was even a structure made and not natural. Our village knows of it and just calls it too high cliff. No obvious way to scale it to see what is on top."

I make a light globe since no one else has bothered.

"Not much to look at. The tech is really primitive. I could make one a tenth this size now."

"Be nice Cat. It had to work for over a thousand years. Sometimes simple and sturdy outweighs elegant." She shrugs. Does not care.

"Why are we here Sami?" He points down.

"Visitors had complained about evil spirits. I know there are no such things. Figured it would be better not to go in alone."

"Good call. There is something below us, but I get a headache if I try to scan it. Not 'thant tech. Something new to me. Time to link up."

I can't say it is any warmer inside, but no wind at least. We use TK to warm up and then link.

"Shit, this is amazing."

*Newbie. Gets them every time.* I tease.

"This place is huge and the tech below us does not match the tower at all. Does not match our tech either. Something I have not seen before. Complex, but also primitive."

"Like monkeys and apes, branched off the same ancestor, but followed a different path. Do we go in?" Sami asks.

*No way. Likely if they were this secretive they want to remain that way. Likely sensors all over the place. Surprised our using TK nearby has not set anything off.*

*I have an idea Puu. I feel evil intent.*

*Nothing lethal Cat. We don't know who did this. Might even be one of our own.*

*Not us. I know all of our sen tech. This reminds me of Silver's tech, but different. More advanced.*

*Assuming they have been improving things since the tower was built that would make sense.*

*Cat traps. We replace anything not nailed down with them.*

*And the first one touched gives it away and they warn the others.*

Sami suggest, "Can you add a time delay? That should solve the problem"

*Great idea. If you ever want to leave the village and join us.*

"What and miss out on fermented deer milk?"

It takes Cat a moment to make a coffee mug which she hands to Sami.

Not understanding he takes it and looks inside. We wait. I add some coffee to it and he tries it.

"I have not had coffee since my student days." He continues and nearly finishes the coffee when it kicks in.

"Shit, shit, shit. Stop that! Undo this right now! Please!" The cup falls to the ground and shatters.

I neutralize the effect of the cup. He relaxes.

"Did you have to test it on me?"

*Had to know it would work. Time delay should be a few times longer to good effect though.*

*Rather than replace, just build it into what is already there. We also need a reporter to tell us they have arrived.*

*At least this should hold them until we arrive to check them out.*

"We need to leave. I can't believe they don't know we are here and what we are. I would not want a group of strange TKs in my territory."

We come out of the link. We have seen what we need to see.

"I was trying to figure out what it is. It looks like a giant seastar. Roughly a half kilometer wide. That is huge. Directly under the scrubber and about a quarter kilometer down. Well placed. My guess is the orbital scanners never picked it up. I have to wonder if the other scrubbers are hiding one too."

"Cat, it's a star ship. It is the only explanation for the tech down there. Everything is in the right place for the designs that Silver showed us. The Farouts are responsible I am sure."

"Or some other race trying to spy on us," Sami offers.

"With coffee cups? No, that is unique to Hu I am afraid. Surprised it survived thousands of years of change though."

***WARNING, WARNING, ATTACK FORMATION!***

We don't wait. We bubble Sami, the dogs and sleds a hundred kilometers away and then shield us and the village.

Cat concentrates on the swarm which has already been unleashed.



They were in passive mode and very hard to find by anyone TK looking for them. A norm would not have a clue what they were either. Some have been collected, but as they cannot be smashed or otherwise harmed, they remained passive.

*What the hell did you two do?* Drup asks.

*Find the Farouts and limit them. We found a Farout star ship underneath a scrubber.*

*WEAPONS FIRED!*

*Gotta go, we are under attack.*

It lasts a millisecond. The swarm destroys them.

*INCOMING DEBRIS.*

Buddy sized chunks of debris come flaming down through the atmosphere in a heavy rain of molten 'thn metal. The ship above us must have been similar to what was below us. The one near us was not their first one.

*I did not get to the Farouts in time. They are gone. Sorry.*

*"This is another fine mess you have gotten us into I am afraid."*

# Alexandria

"Sounds like you two had some fun." Silver smiles and Turtle looks like she wants to kill us.

"As far as we know, no one was hurt at least, well expect for whomever was on the ship. I don't feel bad about that. They attacked first. What were they thinking?"

"They were thinking that with only Droopy and Randy present it would be easy to take over Earth Two."

"Yeah, from their perspective they were just losers and tag-a-longs. Given the culture on Earth Two it only reinforced that idea. Fortunately they only had the one ship completed. Three more were under construction. Please tell me they were all tagged."

Turtle smiles, "Latest Cat tech. VERY hard to detect and multiple redundancies. We know where they are."

"You expect us to hunt them down?"

Silver shakes his head, "We don't do that. They know we can't be messed with now."

"And we are on full alert. I need to make a lot more swarm buddies. All of our worlds need to be prepared." Cat leaves.

"And I thought the 'thn threat was bad. Why does everyone hate us?"

"So, where are they?" I look to Turtle.

"A distant earth for now. A green without much animal life but better than what they had at Farout. I don't get the impression they are limited to gravity wells. Could just have easily done all of this in the asteroid belt."

Silver sighs, "They needed to prove to themselves they were superior to us. I am afraid they saw us as wasting our potential."

"Country bumpkins. They won't stay there long. They need a lot of space. Exactly what got them into trouble in the first place."

"I get it with the Hu, but why are the non-Hu going along with this?"

"It has been near four thousand years for them. It is the only life they know."

"How many were lost on the ship?"

"My guess is only a few. They were up there to protect the ships they were building. It was smaller than the ones you found. Likely the first finished."

"We found no TKs present at any of them. The other two were nearly done too. They are not going to like that."

"Which means they popped out before you arrived. My guess is they

had sensors set up kilometers away. They can build more ships, but there are not that many of them left. Only a few hundred at last count."

"We were carefully shielded. How did they know?"

"May have just been ultra cautious. Anyone who came close to a tower would have been suspect."

"There were shelters outside. Someone was visiting them."

"Better safe than sorry. My guess is they were sure when you popped into the tower. No norm can do that. A passive would be enough. Just sense sound and air movement. Even non-TK tech could do that."

"That will teach us. We have gotten too sure of ourselves. That was close. If they had kill tech inside the tower they would have gotten us before we had time to react. Sloppy on our part."

"Probably hoping you would pop in, see nothing of interest and leave again. If they had killed you, your absence would have set up a shit storm. But, they ultimately showed their hand too. The attack to protect their ships was a no return choice."

"Must have thought they would succeed. They were sloppy too."

"Not really. The information they had was what we allowed them to see. No metal tech to speak of, sailing ships, limited population, scattering of low TKs and two high TKs for the entire planet."

"Except the Cats."

Silver laughs, "Yeah, like they would come to our defense. Likely just roll over, yawn and go back to sleep. Owa was from their time remember. She was worthless onboard ship too."

"You would think she would like the chase."

"Only if she can catch it. Did you scan the ship Puu?"

"Only a glimpse, I'll send you what I saw." I do so.

"An improvement of sorts. More of a rush job. It is clearly their tech though. I did not bring most of this stuff with us."

"Did not need a repeat and yet here we are."

Myra pops in panting. Panting? Did she run here?

"Cat is in trouble. She locked herself in the no-no room and won't come out."

"Relax Myra. The room is there for a reason. She just had a near death experience. Something she has not had for a very long time. She is safer in there. Give her a few days."

"Silver, spill. I sent you my scan. What is it?"

"A fraction of a second later with the swarm and none of you would exist. It was heavily armed. They intended to take us out. I have also gone back and scanned the ships under construction. Planet killers."

"Take them back to Farout now please!" Myra and I say in unison.

"Spilled milk. They know how to get here now. I really thought they had learned their lesson. You don't see the five, ah four, of us building planet killers." Nearly forgot Snap. I miss her too. Even if we rarely talked. She was always happy for some company.

Myra and I make our way back to the lab. That is our space and where I feel most comfortable.

Myra says, "Imagine what they would do with the tech we have. Might have to hide it better or put in fail safes. Anyone who does not know the secret it does not work for, or better yet, self destructs."

"First Ly'thn and now our own kind. What next? Is there any ultimate defense?"

*Br'thn has agreed to keep a close eye on them if that helps.* Silver TPs.

"Good idea. Is it enough? Granted in her new shell she is really awesome."

"Awesome? Have you been reading old journals again." She smiles and nods.

"Sorry I was not there to help."

"Never again should we all be in one place again, especially on a field trip. We are much better protected here."

"Location is hard to find and tech is awesome here." I roll my eyes and smile.

"Whatever." I respond. She laughs. Got her.

"Wait, you did not need to read the journals. You lived that time period." I nod. A very long time ago.

"I am going to the Dojo. I need to work out some aggression too."

"And you don't want to be locked in a box with Cat?" Myra grins.

"We spend enough time together. I hear Spikes is doing quite well and has advanced to black belt. I always like a challenge."

"So does she. Have a good time." I nod and depart. Spikes has done quite well, spoiled really. It will be hard for her to leave when her training is done. I would really like to know what her culture thinks of the knowledge she brings back. We are a totally different froth, banned by the 'thn before they were silenced. Why do so many cultures think we have some kind of answer? We make lots of mistakes too. Look at the trouble we are now in with the Farout group.

I get there and put on my robe, minus the black belt. I don't like drawing attention to myself. Most know me as just another sparing partner, albeit a good one. I watch Spikes work out. She is good. Surprised she has adapted to the Hu form so well. She has a few moves I do not recognize.

That is why I am here to observe first. Now, why did she do that? Ah, throws the opponent off guard, she then comes in with. Yep. Good move.

A brown comes up to me, a Ku. We do not get many Ku interested in Kung Fu. They use their feet a lot, sometimes their heads. I rise and bow to him, accepting his challenge. I have spared with Twy before so I automatically switch to teacher mode.

We go for a few minutes till I see my opening and put him on the mat. We rise and bow.

"Good job Twy. You are getting faster and stronger. Keep it up and a month from now you will have black."

+An honor to spare with you Puu. Thank you for your kind words.+

Spikes is watching, but says nothing. She is watching me workout too. It will be soon, but neither of us feels we know the others style well enough for it to be a sure thing. No such thing really. Even a white can get lucky.

I spare with a few others, as does Spikes. We bump into each other in the changing room.

"You are doing well Spikes. I hope your learning is giving you what you want to know."

"I believe so. Your culture is very different, but we are both omnivores and social, so there are actually more similarities than I thought. I am learning that courtesy is vital to maintaining peace. In your histories I read Hu were very much like us in the past. This means it can be learned without genetic manipulation being forced on us."

"That is great. No one likes being messed with inside. What do you think of the Hu form?"

"At first I thought it was very limiting. I can kill much faster in my native form. By the way we do not have genders. Do you know why Sensei Marie chose this form for me?"

"I suspect so you would not have an advantage over others in size. You learn more starting from the bottom than from looking down."

"True in our culture too. We reproduce by budding. We start independent life about a third of our adult size. Here being a juvenile does not appear to be a handicap."

"We reproduce only occasionally, so everyone has to count. We protect the young in hopes that most make it to adults."

"How do you remove defectives then?"

"We don't. Look around. You will see those who are blind, or unable to walk or some other difference. We do not see these attributes as defects, but alternative ways to learn." I bow to her and leave. That should

give her a whole lot to think about and hopefully learn from.

Marie comes up to me, "What do you think?"

"I am confused. She obviously comes from a very nasty culture, but seems to be getting along fine."

Marie laughs, "She has been in any number of fights and I have had to talk with her incessantly. But, she is making progress. She will be at a disadvantage when she returns. Thank goodness she has not killed anyone, but I am glad I am a healer at the same time."

"I know she wants to have a bout, but I want to observe her style more."

"That is easy. She has a handful of trick moves, no doubt you have noticed that. Other than that she is very aggressive. Does not think things out long view. If her species has a fault, it is the lack of a long view."

"About where we were before we left Earth Two the first time."

Marie laughs, "Yeah, about like that. More like Genghis Khan though. Kill first then worry later."

"You have your hands full. My first Center refugee was a slug like creature. VERY slow. Never could adapt to Hu or any other Earth form. I finally translated some text into s/his language and sent them off. Hermaphrodites, but unable to self fertilize. God I am glad we are past all that."

"At least the numbers have gone down with 'thn baby awakenings. Not a single one in the last eight day."

"Not everyone is seduced by the ten fold increase in TK ability. An eight is already pretty high. Unless you were on Jupiter or such, you can control your entire world. A baby 'thn for twenty five million years can be a burden."

"You miss not having kids?"

I laugh, "I have Cat. That is enough."

"She is a handful. Heard she locked her self in the no no room. It was that close?"

"Yeah. Split second close. We were stupid. That won't happen again."

"They are probably thinking the same thing. We all need to be on the lookout. Even here. If you can't get in the front door, try the back. I don't entirely trust all of the refugees."

"We do limit them from arrival. What is your fear?"

"Eyes and ears can still learn a lot. If you wanted to learn about an enemy, what would you do?"

I give an evil grin, "Become a servant. They hear all the dirty stuff and no one pays any attention to them. Don't need to be a high TK, just in the

room." Marie nods. She gets it. At the same time we both look at the refugees training a second time. Which one is really from Farout or reporting back to them? There had to be a reason they thought they could get away with it. Of course they were hoping to take over without blood shed. Messed that one up.

# Ku Eden

The smell is horrible, but I was assigned, so unless I want to be punished I better get to it. I wade into the sewage and poke at the drain trying to find what is plugging it. It sinks in but does not go anywhere. Nearly an eighth later, using a narrow rake to pull material out of the drain, it finally starts to flow. Of course it will plug again if all this stuff goes back in. I hold it back until the pit has drained. Of course more will be coming, especially after the next meal when the kitchens do cleanup and everyone unloads to make room.

I climb out of the pit and find a wheel barrow, bring it back and start loading as much of the larger stuff into it as I can. No idea where I can take it. May just sit here until that can be decided.

The whistle blows and my shift is over. I need a bird bath really bad, but no public bath will allow me in smelling like this. I make my way down to the dock. Others avoid me as I pass. Yeah, I would too. Reaching the edge I jump into the bay. Not the cleanest place this close to the pier, but better than I am. I do my best to get the big stuff off and climb up the stairs to shake myself off. Now I can maybe get a gardener to spay off the bay sludge.

It is after dark and I am cold and wet before I enter the community perch. I find my place and fall asleep. I oversleep and miss the morning seed. Great. Missed the evening meal too.

I get to work just in time to be chewed out for being late and chewed out again for leaving the stinky wheel barrow where it was. No thanks for clearing the drain. No sympathy for what I endured. I am sick of the high perch being so mean. Totally sick of it. I know I am not alone. At meal times I hear low whispers of others being mistreated too. In my case, if I had a helper and better tools, or better yet some way to have prevented the large stuff from getting to the narrow drain in the first place, none of this needed to happen. I am not a flight school instructor, but even I know this much. I think they don't care, or maybe even they enjoy watching others suffer. What else could be the reason?

White cloaks were supposed to prevent this kind of behavior, but I have not seen a white cloak in ages. Rumor has it they live a very good life. No cleaning sewers, nobody on a perch above you. Good food, clean water, warm rooms. I hear you need an education, a real one, to become a white cloak. I am too old to even try. Hatched to poor peasants, I never had a chance. Two nest mates died before I was fledged. I was lucky, if



you call this lucky.

Being distracted I find myself lost on my way home. I have wandered into the bad part of town, if where I live was not bad enough. Bad birdies live here. Birds are lined up at the entrance to a rundown warehouse, so I join the line. Maybe someone here knows how I can get back. Not that there is anything I want to get back to.

The line move quickly and I enter to see lots of birds at tables eating quietly. Food smells good. I get to the front of the line.

+I have no money.+

+Don't need any here.+ I am handed a bowl of stewed seeds with grubs. It looks wonderful. I find an empty spot and join the perch with the others already eating. No where near as bad as what I am given at work. I mean grubs even. We never get grubs. There are birds serving and taking away empty bowls. They all wear a blue bandanna around their necks. I remember vaguely something about a group called Blue Birds. The spot next to me becomes empty and a new bird comes in with a bowl. I nod to him.

+Good food. Are you one of the Blue Birds?+ He nods and then concentrates on eating. They eat the exact same thing we do. Strange.

He finishes quickly, +New here. Looking for work?+

Before I can answer he gets off the perch and motions me to follow.

I follow him into the back where I see a familiar pool of stagnate water. I am hesitant. I just got cleaned up from the last one.

Without any warning, he jumps in and starts pulling at the debris with his bare arms. Oh well. I jump in to help and we soon have it flowing again. We set the branches that had fallen in to plug the drain up on the side of the pool.

+Thanks. Let's get cleaned up.+ I follow him to a shower area. A shower area! I can't believe it. We take a shower together. It is clean water too. We both fluff our feathers at the same time and emerge.

There are other Blue Birds waiting outside.

+Peter, has a decision been made on the new site? We have a crew ready to proceed.+

+Yes, the board said it was a go. We have a new follower. Set him up on a good perch and show him what needs to be done.+

She turns to me, +Welcome Keki. Pleased to have you among us. We have been hoping someone with your abilities would join us. You did a great job helping Peter with the drain.+

+Ah, how do you know me? I have to tell my current bosses I am not coming back.+

She shows amusement, +All taken care of. You never have to go back there. Now, a few rules. We are a celibate order, so no midnight squawking. No fighting. If you get into a difficult situation, bow, say excuse me and then come get help. If you are attacked, do not even defend yourself. We are never alone, others will come to your aid. Very rare that. Sometimes we get a loony bird high on red mold, but rare. If you will follow me I will get you set up.+

I am shown where my perch is. Nice. All of them are the same. Peter must roost in a different section. The perches follow an unusual pattern of sloping upwards, but no perch is over another. There are bars to climb to get to the upper ones.

The room is dark, but still light enough to see in. Some birds are sleeping, so I am as quiet as possible. I do not know how to read, but memorize the symbol carved into the wood for the row my perch is in. We leave the sleeping area.

+It is better if you use the waste area, but accidents happen, especially at first when you are still learning. That is why your perch is near the bottom. It will be easier for someone to clean if you don't remember or can't help it. You have tasted our food, so you know it is good and you should not have many digestive issues. We also get nuts and fruit when in season.+

I am shown the waste area, conveniently close to the sleeping area. There are no schedules or rules. If I am tired I can sleep. If I am hungry I can go to the open dining area and be fed or help others to be fed. Generally work is whatever needs to be done and who is available. Of course birds have different abilities and can be called on to help in a specific task when needed. Even the most senior birds help with the less desirable work. This has the interesting effect of making all work desirable and nothing less so. Very strange.

There are classes! I go to the reading/writing class. I have always wanted to learn. This is considered a task as important as any other. I soon learn to recognize specific birds, but names don't seem to be important. Everyone just helps. All ages are present. Some are damaged, but no one cares. I am certain I recognize a few as being top perch, but they are treated no differently, nor do they expect different treatment.

A few eight days in and I am given a blue bandanna myself and disappear into the rest of the flock. I have never been this happy in my entire life.

Names are not important so much as skill sets. I learn who to call on when special help is needed. Others call on me when there are plumbing

or drain issues. I own nothing by my blue bandanna and when that gets worn, I can get a new one without question. I own nothing else, nor desire anything. I am ready for flight school, I am in a dream.

# Earth Two - Frog Harbor

I am so hungry I could eat wood. Not that there much of that either. I hope they are successful this time. They have been gone for two eight days and should have been back two days ago. We can't afford to lose another ship. It is always better to lose crew we can't feed than a ship that is needed to feed everyone.

I scratch at the patch of ground I am responsible for along with my work mate, a crew member of the ship expected back. I throw seed into the furrow I have made. There is a temptation to eat them of course. I don't and finish the row and start the next. I finish just in time for the afternoon rain. I hope this set does not wash away.

I check on the plants that have sprouted and getting bigger. Kale is easy to grow and we always keep some going. Squash is looking good too. Will be a couple more eight days before we can harvest any though. My mouth waters in anticipation. Beans are further behind, but will grow fast once they get a good start.

If we do not have another tropical storm. Last one wiped us out and we had to apply for emergency rations along with seven other communities. There was not enough to go around and our being further out meant we were the last to come in. We got a minimal ration that is nearly gone.

This means we have had to turn to a different means of gaining what we need. A dangerous means. One no one wants, but we are desperate.

I am middle aged. My two sons are on board, my husband dead at sea on an earlier raid. A lot of stress I do not need. My own mother died of a heart attack a bit older than I am now. She did get to see her grandsons at least. My two, one quiet and calculating and the other a water spout looking for trouble and fun. Lots of fun. First son joined because of sense of duty to the community. The second for adventure. One careful and one reckless. Sigh.

No one here is rich in the sense of hoarding the best home, best food, best possessions. No one would allow it. Anyone who tried would find themselves alone at sea without a ship in sight. The best we can hope for on a raid is food. Second best is metals. Metals can be traded, no questions asked, in the right locations. Won't get what it is worth, but we can get the food we need.

A dog is worth their weight in metals as an early warning system. Until they are of better use in a pot. There are no dogs here any more. No cats, rats, any wildlife larger than a bug. Some of those are starting to

look appetizing.

"She's here! They are back!" We all rush down to the small dock. We used to have three small ships, but lost the one my husband was on. Now one has returned. Which one?

Our dock is around a small peninsula and well hidden unless you know where it is or have been here before. It is low tide, so we will have to wait four eighths for the tide to change before they can come in all the way. I can see it is the Toad, not the Tadpole my two were on. Depressed I head back home. If those two are gone I have run out of options.

There is one option I was sworn never to use. Passed down the female line for countless generations. A book written in an old language I was taught to read when I was a young adult. A doomsday book. I have no female heir to leave it too, and too old and too late to try now. I guess I could choose one of several candidates from among the others in our village. None I would choose willingly though. Not now, during a crisis. Not enough time to train them before we are likely going to have to abandon Frog Harbor and seek refugee status somewhere else. How do I explain a ten kilo book made of some unknown material that never rots with forbidden information inside? I am likely the last one to be able to read it. That makes it worse actually. Not sure I could survive torture if someone thought it was valuable. And once taken it will be lost forever.

That leaves only one choice.

I gather what few possessions I think I can use and walk out the door to the home I have lived in since birth. I grab what crops I can eat without getting sick because they are not really ready. There is an old path out of the village into the hills. Technically what I seek is outside the Hu limit. Only safe place to avoid someone accidentally finding it. Animals won't care and can't harm it. Everyone else is at the dock and unlikely to notice I am gone until evening. I hope to be back before then.

I get lost a few times, trying to remember the complicated route and landmarks from the one time I was taken there by my mother. The afternoon rains start just as I see the last landmark. I am soaking wet from the warm rain by the time I get there. I seek shelter in a pile of stones that must have been a building of some kind a time so long ago no one would know how to make one any more.

I count steps and stones to find the place where the book is hidden. The stone is wedged in hard. Time affects everything. I finally get it out and hold it in my hand. It is getting dark. I am going to have to spend the night here. Too dangerous to attempt the twisted trail in low light. The rain has stopped and I have a small amount of food I can eat without

cooking. Fire would bring unwanted guests. Only Hu use fire and I am not allowed here. Best to keep quiet and hidden for the night.

# Edwin & Myra's Adventure

"Edwin, Puu and Cat are back. We can go now." The little Meeps are circling around her. They seem to be as excited as we are. I have spent sixteen thousand years studying sen and nearly sen cultures. This will be my first experience searching worlds with life so new that culture has not evolved yet. Silver assures us all the cultures I have studied went through this stage some 500-600 million years ago. That was before the earth froth colony was established. We will have to be careful not to infringe on some other colony's territory.

Both Myra and I are carrying packs with lots of jars to collect samples. I was worried about affecting the time line, but have been reassured these worlds are not on our timeline and nothing done will affect anyone here. We will of course be careful not to leave prints or artifacts behind that a culture in the future would be confused over. Being TK8 means I can TK myself above the ground, so this should not be a factor.

The Meeps combine and make a shield around us of interlocking forms. Myra figured this out, having spent so much time in Meep dimension space. It allows us to travel to distant earths in a fraction of the time all but Silver and Turtle would take. These locations have already been scouted out too. Three so far.

The land masses are not in the same configuration. This is to be expected, depending on how far back this world branched from ours. Most of the sen covered by my colony are very similar, plus or minus an asteroid strike or two and of course seawater level. The Hu worlds were the worst but seem to be recovering. Even with the CO2 levels down the sea is still higher than it should be. I was told it takes time for the ice masses to grow to their former size. Only just recently have we had ice all year long in the arctic. This is causing some problems as ocean currents change and areas no longer support the same crops.

Alexandria is totally different. Not part of any 'thant colony fortunately. But all this means is that there was never any significant pre-intelligent life present now or in the past. Lichens and lichen sloths mostly. Now all kinds of animals and plants have been brought in by colonists. Most of the land masses have been set aside as off limits to help preserve local ecologies of course. Populations will need to be limited to prevent expansion of sen.

"We will do a survey from orbit first. Scan shallow seas, especially in protected areas. There is not much of any kind of life on land yet."

'thWhat happened? This world is as old as ours correct?'th

"There was a catastrophic event that reset everything is the short answer. If we have time we will look for fossils to see if life just began here or died and was reseeded by an OM."

'thPlantimal or plant/animal?'th

"The latter. Plantimals never seem to find the need for much in the way of intelligence. A more cooperative ecosystem. Feeds the OM intelligence, which is enough from its point of view."

'thThere are no plantimal worlds under our colony. But, we are a small part of the multiverse.'th Now that New Hope is gone of course.

"True. And the Meep world also expands possibilities. They seem to be self sufficient and have no need for technology. Not that they are not fascinated by it. The Meeps are always messing with stuff, going inside everything we build to see how it is made. Sometimes a piece of equipment that was working properly suddenly stops, only to find a Meep was inside." Annoying as the Hu say.

Our scans completed, finding nothing unexpected. There are sedimentary rocks as would be expected of a world four and a half billion years old. There are fossils, but nothing larger than a meter and no bones to indicate vertebrates. An invertebrate world. Of course 'thants would be considered invertebrates based on our body plan, but our insides do not match any live forms on any of the worlds we have seen.

'thI wonder where 'thants evolved and if there are or were any other life forms similar to us?'th

Myra turns to look at me, "That is a great question Edwin. A new project after we are done with this mission. I suspect you did not evolve on anything resembling an earth froth world though. We already know you can handle a wide range of temperatures, air pressures and atmospheric compositions. Would not be easy." I nod my agreement. The gesture would not mean anything to another 'thant of course.

We proceed to the surface, bubbled up so as not to contaminate anything, nor bring anything back. The landscape is barren. A lot of dust and hills scared by erosion. We proceed to the shoreline. Shallow seas as we hoped. I can see things below the surface from above. We slowly go below the surface. The sea is barely deeper than our bubble is high.

A lot of things attached to the bottom and waving with the surge. We already know it is not a plantimal world so I concentrate on anything that moves against the currents. There are a lot of flattened disk like creatures of sizing ranging from a few centimeters to nearly a meter. Others appear to be very primitive worms and crustaceans. Nothing calcified yet, so un-



less we are lucky, these will not fossilize.

"This is like the Ediacaran time period on the other earths. Nearly identical. This is cool to be able to see it for real and not just read about it."

<sup>th</sup>"But what happened in the six hundred million years since this that should have happened?"<sup>th</sup>

"Yeah, that is strange." Several of the Meeps take off on some errand.

"Keep looking. Maybe it is only this bay."

These would be easy prey. If anything is more evolved they would not be here. This bay has easy access to the ocean, not isolated. Still, we investigate several other bays finding the same thing. They got around anyway, even in areas with now obvious easy access for life that needs the shallow sea. Oxygen is low, only around three percent. That might explain why nothing more complex has arisen.

We spend several days searching in an organized manner over most of the world. Nothing at depth, nothing more complex than what we saw in the first bay.

Two Meeps come in and we take off following them. We enter dimensional space and it is clear we are now traveling in solid rock. My Meep senses kick in as Myra taught me.

<sup>th</sup>"Ah, fossils. The oxygen was much higher at some point. The creatures are much more complex."<sup>th</sup>

"That's not all, come look at this." She points to the left. We move closer.

<sup>th</sup>"Tech!"<sup>th</sup> She nods.

"There must have been a catastrophe of huge proportions. All the evidence of their lives and accomplishments is now buried in millions of years of silt and sand. Such a waste. Judging from the flattened forms, they must have had exoskeletons. Calcium phosphate not carbonate like I would have expected. Interesting. Usually only vertebrates have phosphate."

<sup>th</sup>"The phosphorus content of this world is twice as high as the earths we are from. Gravity is higher too. Possible that the collision that formed the earth/moon was not as severe and this earth retained more of its phosphorus. This moon is also closer. A more gentle impact was likely."<sup>th</sup>

"Life still exists and may eventually gain intelligence again. The sun will not go red dwarf for another four billion years, so plenty of time. But not on our watch. Onto number two?"

<sup>th</sup>"I concur. Others can come here as well if they have further questions. Definitely need to explore the fossils. What kind of culture did they have

and can we tell from what is left. Will enter our observations and this location in to the library of course.<sup>th</sup> I look at the samples in pods. Except for gold, which is present, most metals are dissolved over time and then crystallized into mineral combinations. Plastics and other organics will turn back to coal or oil again saturated with minerals. I am scanning the sample before me but cannot make any sense of it other than this is not a normal fossil.

Still it is interesting to have found an exoskeleton tech culture. We were not the only ones then. What decides which direction a world goes? Clearly it has to have happened very early or we would have seen such on one of our earth froths. Was phosphorus the only difference? Maybe with the smaller moon the tides were different. The day length is also longer here. Ah, the tilt is not as extreme either. Less seasonal variation. Much to consider.

What was their social structure like? What does it mean to be smart?

<sup>th</sup>Did they kill themselves or did a disaster happen? How good was there tech? What was their social structure like? Us or more like Hu?<sup>th</sup>

"Unfortunately not a lot is left after at least a hundred million years. Something did the oxygen in. Maybe that was enough. Would kill our culture for sure. We need to do a scan for 'thants. Can't believe they were not here during their height."

<sup>th</sup>We abandon a culture that dies. We would need to search this froth line to see if a viable one survived nearby. When we leave, we remove all 'thn metal and tech we were using. We were designed to observe, not leave artifacts that some other culture could use.<sup>th</sup>

"Would the tunnels remain?"

<sup>th</sup>Not for a hundred million years. These fossils are OLD. Definitely not recent. This was a real reset. Look at these creatures. They are little more than placozoans. Large, but still, not any more complex. It will be another hundred million years before the major phylums are present, assuming the oxygen comes back up.<sup>th</sup>

"A lot of ifs. Well, okay to go to the next one? Carboniferous type period according to the notes." I nod and we bubble out with the Meeps around us. Myra packs the samples we collected. No way to know if we got enough of the tech to even identify what the original purpose was. But Cat will kill us if we did not give it to her to study.

Even I can tell we have switched to yet another froth line. I am beginning to think it was hard to find these three worlds we are visiting. Who has that much time and persistence? Are Silver and Turtle playing with us again?

We pop out to a world below full of cloud cover, lightening, high temperature and oxygen content. A Hu would not last an eighth down there. At least we will remain bubbled. The continents are again in totally different positions. Most grouped together into a large super continent. That matches old earth at least. I look up. Moon is larger than the last world, closer to our own. Will take me a day to be sure of the day length. Ah, we are closer to the sun. That is the major difference. Not Venus close, but explains why it is hotter and steamier.

We descend to the surface. There is a LOT on land this time. Heavily forested. Because of the high oxygen, the arthropods are nearly my size. A millipede goes by that must be two meters. One meter dragonflies. Ah, some vertebrates this time. Amphibians and reptiles with small brain cases. I am not holding out much hope for social organization here.

<sup>th</sup>We need to scan for a 'thant colony. Advanced enough that they might be here already.<sup>th</sup>

"Good safety tip. If they have figured out warriors I really do not want to lose a few companions fighting them." She always has at least three with her, though I know she can make more.

"I found them. We have 'thants, but fortunately they are on the other side in the dark at the moment. I will set a companion on them to watch, just in case. We will leave immediately if we have to."

<sup>th</sup>Should be enough. We do not react quickly. If we just pass through as you Hu say, they should ignore us. Be on the lookout for scouts through. They can be anywhere on this world and likely are.<sup>th</sup>

"Got it."

We are about a hundred meters above and well hidden. We watch. No tech that I can scan at least. Now, is anything social? The fact that there are 'thants here means they think there is a possibility.

"Not exactly like what happened to us. These are different. The dragonflies have six wings instead of four and eight legs too. Some of the amphibians have six legs. Millipedes look the same though."

<sup>th</sup>They are trying out a lot of ideas to see what works. Must be a lot of competition. Whoa, did you see that? They certainly are not squeamish about eating each other.<sup>th</sup>

"Glad I am not actually among them. A period of rapid evolution pushed by competition for resources. In our carboniferous, fungi had not evolved fast enough to break down what died, especially the lignins in the trees. The period only lasted a few million years until everything piled up so high they sort of buried themselves in the dead. This later became coal, oil and natural gas. Because of this time period on our earths, the

Hu nearly wiped themselves out burning this stuff later."

<sup>th</sup>"Look for any small group working together for defense then."

"Larger animals maybe. At least something larger than an insect. Though those could be primitive ants over there." She points but we see inside each other minds and this is not necessary. She might be right. I record the observation for the records.

<sup>th</sup>"There are some lizards in a group. Similar size, so probably not worth trying to eat each other. Most Hu are similar in size too, possibly for this reason."

"Gee, we have not eaten each other for ten thousand years, but no one will let us forget it." She fakes sighing and then laughs. We eat our dead. Why waste resources?

We cannot finish this work in one day's time. But sooner or later a scout will find us. I have been scanning the colony. So far activity looks normal. We prefer to collect as much information as possible before acting. They appear to be following this plan. No way of knowing if a totally different type of 'thant would. They certainly look nothing like us. Larger, striped, more bumps on the surface.

<sup>th</sup>"What about fossils? This world is as old as our froth."

"I am not sensing anything other than marine shells. No vertebrates. Chitin would not fossilize well. Another insect tech world?"

<sup>th</sup>"Look over there. That is nothing like our worlds."

"Hmm, soft bodied. Definitely would not make a fossil. They appear to be all connected together into some large network. Reminds me of the plant network that makes up an Om."

<sup>th</sup>"Plantimals? They can use light."

"But the chloroplasts are separate. Not integrated like in a plantimal. Have we ever recorded a world that had animals, plants and plantimals?"

<sup>th</sup>"None have been recorded, but that does not discount the possibility. They are in an area of little interest to the animals and too low minerals for plants. With those tentacles, they are capable of catching animals that wonder in."

"Like Venus flytraps. Yeah, that could work. Oh, some are sticky too. They are carnivorous for sure. Interesting."

<sup>th</sup>"I see a creature that is escaping others accidentally run into the plantimals. It is not pretty as the Hu say. It is being torn to pieces and distributed by passing pieces along to those who need the nutrition."

<sup>th</sup>"They cooperate. We have our culture."

"We are being watched! Scout at 3 o'clock." Took me awhile to learn that method of direction telling. No one has these clock things any longer.

<sup>th</sup>It appears to be watching the plantimal colony as well and might not have noticed us yet.<sup>th</sup>

Myra pops us to a new location. This will of course be noticed by the scout. Word will be out about us. We are in a similar swamp near a shallow bay. The plants and animals are similar. I scan for scouts.

<sup>th</sup>No scouts within a few kilometers, but word will likely expand to the entire colony.<sup>th</sup>

"What will they do?"

<sup>th</sup>Observe at first. I doubt they have seen anything like a hard to focus on large sphere that can disappear in a click of a mandible.<sup>th</sup>

"I have found another plantimal patch." We move closer. I would have found a better place to hide. I do not understand the Hu need to be close to something we can easily use TK to observe.

<sup>th</sup>This is going to take a long time. More than has been allotted for our observations. We still have one more world on our list.<sup>th</sup>

"The last world is roughly equivalent to our cretaceous. We know for sure they will have culture there. That is where Sauron came from. I am sure his pod was not the first. No way TK suddenly appears. It had to have gone back for millions of years. There is a way we can spend more time observing without taking any time. No one has ever found a plantimal culture before. Well, except New Hope, but that was intentionally made, so I do not count that."

<sup>th</sup>You may be right, but how do we observe for a long time without taking time?<sup>th</sup> Is this going to get us into trouble?

"Trivial. We have a Meep shell. Meeps are six dimensional beings. One of those dimensions is time of course. I have learned a lot from them. We go into slow time and then when we leave we go back in time to when we started."

<sup>th</sup>Won't that cause a problem in the time line?<sup>th</sup>

"We will not be playing with this timeline or our own. Relax please Edwin. It will be fine. Trust me." I trust Puu, not sure of the rest.

Going into slow time. My first experience. It does not matter that the scouts find us. We are untouchable. To them we appear as a black sphere with absolutely no reflection. After a period that must have been years they give up and decide we are not a threat.

We can no longer see individual creatures plantimal or otherwise. What we are looking for are patterns. Days are no longer visible. Just a sort of dull light. Anything that moves disappears, but except when feeding, plantimals are pretty slow going. We do not attempt to link into the local OM. I am convinced that OM is the true source of social culture. Of

course OM has an ulterior motive, to make more OMs. Culture is only needed to produce the OM spores of sufficient complexity to get to a high enough TK level to lift off from the gravity well.

Sauron was probably a seven in my analysis. An eight after mating with Qr'thn. Silver made it to eight with Qr'thn's help, so they were roughly even. Sauron had some advantage of experience, but with no actual adversaries to hone skills. Roughly even then.

The colony ebbs and flows depending on season and circumstance. A good catch of insects means the colony grows for awhile. The entire colony grows. They are definitely sharing resources. I do not see any sign of making anything though. No structures, no tech of any kind. I scan to the molecular level but sense no made structures, only ones grown.

Talking is pointless in slow time so we depend on TP to com and have been sharing observations as they are made. We become one mind ourselves, even if I am tasked this time with recording such.

There is a change occurring. I do not know if we are lucky being in the right place at the right time or if this was bound to happen. I reach out and find other colonies also changing one at a time. They appear to be communicating over distance. A low frequency, but effective over time. The plantimals are linking together.

I suppose this is a natural projection of the individual colony's ability. Now any thing one colony learns is passed to everyone. There are no real individuals any longer. Ah, finally. Differentiation is occurring. Hu do this with skill sets and tasks. 'thant and apparently these plantimals also have morphological differences. There are warriors at the edges, but they do not fight other colonies, but absorb them. They do fight the insects and other animals at first, but then learn to surround them and 'farm' them for their own benefit.

Farming is certainly a sign of culture. A lot of ants in our earth froth farm fungi though. Not in and of itself a clear sign.

Ah, they are also raising the food for the food creatures. Waste is used to improve the yield of the plants used to raise the animals used as a food or nitrogen source for the colony.

At nearly a million years out suddenly the animals disappear and all farming stops. Strange. Myra checks out the DNA substance uses and finds the colony has absorbed the plant and animal abilities to make its own nitrogen compounds from air and water. The colony becomes massive. They have entered the Hu stage. They will overpopulate very soon and we speed up some so we do not miss it. The Hu went bust in a very short time, nearly normal time actually. We drop to sixty four times nor-

mal. We can start to see individual members again, albeit running fast almost as if they are animals. We know this is just growth and decline. Even plantimals can move some.

We suddenly drop into normal time and shield up. We are now more vulnerable.

'thWhat happened,'th I ask.

Myra points to the center of the colony. A 'thn is resting in the center.

'thI thought they were all gone?'th

"Some were revived upon request. There must be TK sen in this froth line who requested it."

'thAre we safe?'th

She smiles, but says nothing. I am sure she knows how to knock one out if she has to. The companions are all back with us and watching too.

A TK spark and suddenly the entire colony is TK2. Multiplied by millions of individuals. Collectively they can raise themselves to whatever level they want given time and experience.

"I don't think we should stick around. I am sure the 'thn has noticed us. The colony even at TK2 could easily overwhelm us just by numbers alone."

'thRandom path escape?'th

"Time escape." We are gone to where and when I do not know. If we have gone back to our own time we know we have millions of years to prepare. An interesting way to get back at us.

## Earth Two - Frog Harbor

I awaken cold, sore, hungry and covered in bug bites. I itch all over. In panic I reach for the book. It is still here. I know nothing could hurt it, but a large creature could still carry it away out of curiosity.

It is light enough to see. I finish the rest of my meager rations, bugs and all. The extra protein won't hurt even if some do not taste that great. I pass a stream on my out and take a nice long drink and wash my face. The cool water helps stops the itching for a moment as well. I take mud from the edge of the stream and put that all over me to cut down on further visitors and help ease my misery. I will look a sight when I return, but not important now.

In a few eighths and a few wrong turns I make it to within sight of the village. The Toad is still docked. Good. I need to get going on this project before they leave. At every rest stop I looked through the book, re-familiarizing myself with the contents and my options. I was well practiced on how to read in this language and only stumbled some. It will get easier. The tech in the book progresses and builds on itself. I can only really understand the beginning chapters. All I need for now.

"There you are. What happened? Where did you go?" Violet of course. So nosy.

"My two were on the Tadpole. I needed some time to myself."

"We don't know for sure. They could still come back. The Toad brought some food they harvested from the wild. It will not last. Best get some while you still can." She waves and goes about her business. Thank goodness. The docks will be just fine and I make my way down to them.

I know who I need to talk to and make my way through others with some strange looks. I am not crew, so technically have no rights here, but I need to see the Captain and I am in a hurry.

Captain Aric is on deck ordering everyone about. They are getting ready to go out again. I see bundles of arms being loaded. Expecting a fight this time. Oh, long bows and lots of arrows too. What's in the barrels. I go over to look and can smell them before I get there. Fuel oil. Likely seal blubber. Burns. Normally not allowed on a ship. Too dangerous. The only reason is if they expect to fire a ship that resists. About time someone with balls took over.

I walk up to him, "Captain, we need to talk. Now." He looks me over. We have met before. In a small village this is not surprising. He sees the book. Anyone who sees it can tell it was not made anyplace we know. He



nods and motions me to follow him into his cabin.

"Spill Rose."

"From now on you will refer to me as Mother Anne. This book will be our salvation. It is a book of tech. Illegal tech."

"So is pirating." He shrugs. I open the book and show him the diagrams in the first chapter.

"You can read this?" I nod.

"I need a few who can help build these and learn how to use them." He nods. We leave and he motions the 1st Mate over who then rounds up three, two women and a man. All warriors, but I can tell from the gleam in their eyes they are awake. Early forties, not among the stupid young ones. I do not need heroes, I need geniuses. We leave together. They do not ask any questions. Good. Don't need squawkers either.

I take us to an empty storage area. With no food, most of our storage areas are empty. We need space to work without snoops. This will do.

They gather around me, "We are going to make weapons. New ones that no one has seen before. This will take hard work, practice and willingness to work beyond failures. And all in secret. We cannot have any of this getting out. If you are the type to get drunk and tell, leave now." No one does. They chose well then.

"Okay, let's get started. We will need supplies. Use the Captain's name when you ask. There will not be any problems." They nod.

I cough a few times. Have not felt great since getting back. Probably the lack of real food and stress. I hope to change that. I have heard what the people north of us call us, Froggies. Not meant to be a complement. Yeah, we have had to eat frogs from the marshes. Have eaten a lot of things I would not normally touch. All because someone is not sharing. I intend to change that, by threat or force if necessary. I have nothing left to lose. It will take beyond the four of us. We need to enlist the entire community. Not everyone can know what is going on, but if we spit this up right, we can have a lot of people working on pieces of the whole until we are ready and none the wiser. We do not have the time or resources to do the fancy stuff in the book yet. Any leaks means they will be able to do the same, likely faster and better than we can. Once this gets out, there are always survivors, the knowledge will burn like a forest fire.

"Mother Anne, you should be aware that the others are already using illegal tech. They now have Cats on board their ships. Cats that can fight like devils. They are backed by a Hu who fights with them like a well trained pair. No one stands against them."

I smile. "These new weapons will get past them. I don't even intend to

board the first few ships. I intend to burn them to the water without warning. I want the sight of the Toad to instill terror. Then and only then we will ask for their load before we burn their ship and set the crew adrift in their life boats." She smiles back, nods and gets back to work. Good.

## Earth Two - Crab Cove

"Cat, this is Crab Cove. I have heard about it of course, but have never been here before. What's on the menu today?"

*A nap sounds good. But we have an appointment you need to attend.*

"Great. Whenever you introduce me to something new, it usually hurts." I sigh, but Cat does not care and I follow her anyway.

We march down the dock to only a few eyes watching. Word has gotten out and there are now a few more Cat ships as well. Not novel any more. Works for me. Do not like being the center of attention.

Up the hill to a larger than normal building. Writing on the outside says Library. Okay, why a library? Sure enough we walk in the front door like we belong there. No knock or anything. I am not surprised to find people studying at desks and totally ignoring us. We go upstairs and to the back. Into a room with a table and chairs. I sit, Cat curls up in the corner. I wait.

A moment later someone comes in and puts food and drink in front of me and gives Cat a bowl of fish still flipping around. The purring will disturb the scholars for sure. She does love batting them around a bit before chomping them. I should be used to it I suppose.

A male comes in about my age and sits opposite me. I nod a greeting. Food is brought in for him as well and we are silent as we finish our meals. Someone comes in and collects the dishes. We are now alone.

"That was good. Cat loves fish, but it gets a bit boring." He smiles.

But says nothing.

"My name is Mouse. Pleased to meet you." Still nothing.

Ah, he is talking with Cat. I relax and look around. There are some books on shelves. Not unexpected. He notices my curiosity, reaches behind him and grabs a book to hand to me. Something to do at least.

I open it and cannot read a thing. What the? Why have a book nobody can read?

There are drawings. No reading needed. Appear to be constructions of some kind. Mostly made from wood. My area. I study them carefully.

"Shit! These are weapons! What the hell is a book on weapons doing in a library?"

"You were right Cat. He is good. No one else I gave the book to figured it out."

He turns to me, "Can you make these?" I nod.

"Can you destroy them if you find them?"

"Wood burns or do you mean some other means." He waits.

I look at the drawing again.

"Hmm, I can certainly see how it could be improved. There are a number of weak spots that could be exploited to temporarily disable."

He nods, gets up and leaves.

Cat yawns and slowly gets up and leaves. I follow. I know my place.

I am brought out to a yard where there are others present. Everyone is sitting on the ground around a square area that has been marked off. Not knowing what to do, I find an empty spot and sit. Cat finds a place in the shade under a nearby tree.

Two claps sound. I do not know from where. Suddenly the area is full of tiny pebbles going back and forth across the square. I bat a few away. Some hit. They hurt, but I do not move.

*You are now TK2. Use your mind Mouse, not your hands.*

It is safe to do so here? I look around and see pebbles just miss the others. Subtle, but yeah, they are all TK. I do the same and no more hit me, even when coming from behind. Sneaky that way.

Trays are brought out with what look like glass marbles. These are good though and look perfectly round. Not so easy. A tray of five is set before me. I look more closely and see they are nearly filled with a liquid with a tiny drop of red just inside the top of the marble.

"Pair up and pass the spheres without mixing the dye. Begin."

A sphere comes towards me. At the halfway point it suddenly drops and smashes on the ground. Clearly mixing.

*You need to 'catch' the sphere coming towards you. You then send it half way towards someone else.*

"Got it." I whisper. No more come towards me at first and I watch how others are handling this. Most have their eyes closed. I close mine and a new sphere comes towards me. I gently take it from the person passing it and bring it to my tray where there is an empty spot. I lift one of mine and send it towards another. Cat had me do something similar so I already know how to stabilize the entire sphere and not just grab the outside. Mine makes it towards the center intact.

Two claps and it speeds up. Now two spheres can be coming towards you at once. Shit. I concentrate and make it through this round without losing any more. I learn to send two out while I am simultaneously receiving two from someone else. It gets complicated fast.

Two claps and I am expecting a speed up, but instead the two are coming from two different people. This is clearly harder and I nearly lose it and am nearly exhausted, but I make it.

It stops. Everyone gets up and we all bow to the other side. They leave.

The man who was in the library comes up to me and bows. I bow in return.

"Good. Cat has trained you well. Most do not do this well the first time at the game. Come with me." I follow. We go back to the room and then pass it.

"You two will stay here tonight. No one else wants to share the room with Cat, so you have it all to yourselves." He smiles and pets Cat on the head. I am shocked. Anyone else trying that would be missing a hand. She rises to it and he scratches the top of her head to purring. Who is he?

It is getting dark. Time for me to sleep and time for Cat to prowl. I am not really tired and am curious about my new surroundings. There is a gentle knock at the door and Cat gets up and stares at it. I open the door and several of the others from the game are outside. Finger to lips to be quiet they motion me to follow. Guess I will not be alone, but is this allowed or trouble? Cat wants to go too, likely trouble then.

We leave the library quietly and make our way to town. There are lights inside some of the homes as we pass. We keep going. Yep, trouble. We end up in the bad part of the docks and enter a bar. Low grade alcohol, still not interested. We all sit at a table and a young man comes up to us with food, a sort of stew, without saying anything. Guess they are regulars. We eat quietly. Everyone is leery of Cat of course, but she has chosen a spot near the door to clean herself and then nap. Makes everyone nervous as they come in. Won't be any trouble here tonight with her here. I smile. The others catch me noticing Cat and figure it out. They smile too.

We exchange names and when I give my name as Mouse there is confusion until they put it together.

"You are ah, a bit, ah, old aren't you? I mean, look at us. No one over twenty five and those are the old timers."

I add, "And then there is Cat." They nod.

I sigh, "We are pirate hunters. Normally stay on board ship, but Cat said I needed to meet the leader here. Never got his name."

"His name is Drup. Weird name. Must be a story behind it, like yours, but no one who knows is telling. Rumor is he is a TK9, so watch your step around here." I nod. Did not know it went that high.

Explains why Cat was nice to him. I smile and I hear a low growl. Fun to tease her once in a while. Oh, she teases back and it is usually painful. Still worth it occasionally.

"So, why are we here?" I ask.

"We are similar to you in that we provide order to communities. We are training to be sheriffs for small towns."

I whisper, "Are all sheriffs TK then?" They nod yes. Explains a lot.

"We are still not supposed to 'express' our abilities in public. But most mischief occurs out of view, so a win-win." She smiles.

"And no one believes the thief," Andrew adds.

I am dubious.

"Surely enough times and rumors start."

"We rarely need it, just for emergencies. Worst case we disappear too with the perp tied up in the town square of course." Of course.

A shady character comes in, sees Cat and decides it might be better to leave, but one of ours grabs his shoulder and brings him over to the table. A bowl and mug are brought over and set before him. He eats greedily and quickly, glancing over this shoulder to see if Cat is watching him. Oh, little does he know.

*He has information they need.* Ah, an informant.

He gets up to leave, "I got nuffin to say. Danks for da meal."

*He is lying.* I think they already know it. Danielle is holding him down.

He squirms a bit, but finally sighs and settles down.

"Look, it be only rumors, nuffin sure." He is lying again. Fact.

Cat comes up to him and rests her chin on his knee. He looks like he is about to shit himself.

"I heard a rumor that a Cat can tell when you are lying," Danielle says.

"And they eat liars." Arthur adds. They are burning this informant. He will never come here again.

"Da Froggies have sumpin up. Day be pirates. New trouble."

Now I am interested.

*You can let him go. I got everything he knows.* She lifts her chin and curls up at his feet. He gets out as fast as he can. I motion to the others not to bother him.

"Spill Mouse. What do you know?" Pali asks.

I hold a finger up and look at Cat.

*New weapons. Large flaming arrows. They intend to torch the first three ships that haul anchor and leave the harbor.* She rolls over and goes to sleep.

"New weapons. Large flaming arrows. They intend to torch the first three ships that haul anchor and leave the harbor." I relate word for word.

"Shit, no wonder they fear you two."

"And the other Cat-Hu are the same?"

I shrug. Each has their own abilities.

I am suspicious though.

"If this is what has been allowed to leak out, what are they hiding?"

"Fire arrows are illegal. If they have something else, it is too." Others agree.

I have to ask, "Why do we have pirates? What do they want? No metals to speak of in any one place. What is so important it is worth risking everything for?"

"Food." Others nod.

"Food? Why? I see no lack of food here or in any other port I have been at."

They look at each other, then Gale answers.

"Ah, things are not as good as they appear. We have been having problems with hoarders. They buy up food and then sell it at a higher price when the supply dries up."

"What the hell? Do something!" I am standing and clearly mad.

I am pacing back and forth.

"I had a nice life on a nice little island and then I was enslaved to Cat so I could fight your pirates because you have hoarders. On LAND, right?" They nod. Some are looking ashamed. They should be.

"Drup, I know you can hear me. Why has this been allowed?"

*Part of the training. I can't be everywhere on the planet at once. Local sheriffs need to know how to deal with this.* Everyone clearly heard that and is cowering.

"Then let's deal with this then." I motion everyone to follow me.

"Who made you boss?" I growl and point to Cat. He falls in line.

Outside we see the snitch leaning against a building talking with someone, who then sees us and runs away. His part is done. I am pissed. This should never have happened.

"Five of you gather more people, as many as you can. Meet back at the town square."

Cat, sorry, but I need to know who the hoarders are and if they are armed. Cat perks up. I can almost see her smiling. Scary. Really scary.

When we get to the town square there is a young male Hu and a Cat waiting. Cat hisses. She does not like the males.

*Not my time yet.* Great. All I need is kittens to take care of too.

I recognize them and give Calvin a hug. Hobbes just glares at me. Where do they get these names from?

"We are here to help. Feel bad it was not the two of us who decided enough was enough."

"Feel free to take over. I intend to take the spoils to Frog Harbor where the pirates are hanging out. They have a right to the food before we do. This should never have happened."

"Agreed. Still new to this and in training. I go where Hobbes tells me to go. So, here I am."

Calvin looks at the two Cats trying their best to ignore each other. And they think Hu are bad.

"Your highnesses, if you would be so kind as to tell us where the food is being hoarded, we would be so ever grateful."

I try not to smile. Laying it on thick. But what is needed unfortunately.

We are given directions to two locations, both near the center of town. Calvin and Hobbes head to one, Cat and I towards the other, with my young sheriffs in tow.

There are guards posted just inside. Being TK helps scout them out. I motion the rest to surround the building. I use TK to unlatch the door quietly. The door opens with TK and the two of us walk in.

The guards have hand crossbows. When they are pointed in a safe direction I set them off. They reach for knives. Big ones. I shake my head.

"Really? If you attack, she has the legal right to eat you, while you are still alive." Their faces go white and they drop the knives. I motion for them to leave and they do. At that point, the sheriffs come in with three more. They are disarmed.

"Get them to help load the carts. Let's get this over with. No sign of the owners I am guessing."

*I know who they are.*

I smile. They, as in more than one.

"Get the food to the dock. Cat and I am going on a side hunt." I wink.

We meet Calvin and Hobbes back at the square and march off together without a word to the owner's house. Up the hill in the 'good' neighborhood. More space, better view, less smells from the harbor and sewage treatment plant.

Calvin knocks at the door and a servant answers all dressed up. I sigh.

Calvin hands her a gold coin and tells her, "Find a new task. Away from here." She looks back and forth between us and the two snarling Cats, who are pissed at each other not her, but she does not know that, and takes the coin and leaves, carefully. No possessions worth the trouble is my guess.

I scan her form, "She has been beaten."



"You get the history orientation?"

"From the Cat book of Hu you mean. Yeah." He smiles. Does not laugh though.

Turns out the entire family are the warehouse hoarders.

"Wait up a bit. I do not understand this. I have been in the jungle most of my life. Alone. Behavior such as this makes no sense to me at all. It was not this way for my early life. We all worked together. No one 'owned' anything. We freely shared. The idea of hoarding was not even a nightmare. Yet, here we are. What happened?"

Calvin just shrugs. He can't really answer me. Too young to have seen the contrast.

We go in and gather them together without much complaint. They look totally confused actually.

"Strip. Completely." They are taken back by this and resist. I see some worrying gold rings and jewels. They still resist.

"The Cats can take it off for you. You might still have some skin and most of your arms and legs when they are done." The Cats play their part and sniff the air and lick their lips. They are naked very quickly. They cover themselves best they can with their hands. Why so modest? Surely they have seen each other without clothes before?

"Everything!" Calvin says. They look confused.

He sighs, "Rings, necklaces, everything. Are you idiots?" They comply, albeit reluctantly. Amazing how some can form attachments to things of no inherent value. I gather them up in a cloth bag I find on the furniture. A quick search of the very large home finds more. Why so large for so few? There appear to be rooms for no apparent purpose. Such a waste.

"What are you going to do with our property?" The oldest female asks.

"It has no value. It will be put at the bottom of the sea."

"Are you insane? What authority do you have? Others will hear about this."

"I hope so. Do you know what a Cat is?" They look confused.

I wave my hand behind me, "They are our masters and our authority. They have many talents. One of the more useful, as much as is it totally disgusts them, is the ability to read your minds. That is how we found you. Your warehouse is emptied by now. It is going where it should have in the first place. There are communities starving to death because of your hoarding. By now the entire town will have seen just how much you gathered."

"Let's go. Don't make us tie you up." I am so disgusted I want to

throw up.

Rand and Drup are waiting outside for us. Rand visited me a few times on board. We both bow to them and each Cat goes to one for a head scratch and belly rub. Of course this confuses the 'parasites' even more. Hobbes gets too close to Cat and a hissy fit ensues. A lot of snarling and very fast claw work. No blood though.

"We will take care of them. Thanks for doing your part. Best help at the docks, Princess and Lizat are there already. It will take two ships to move the food to Frog Harbor." We nod.

The naked ones look even more disgusted at where the food is going. I really hate bullies and hoarders. I could have easily gutted them myself if they had done anything hostile.

When we are halfway down the street the house explodes into a fireball. No one will profit from their downfall. Good. Wish I had set the fire myself.

Why did it take so long? How many people died there and here from looted ships? Why didn't they see it when the first ship was attacked? What is wrong with these people?

I am not sure I can continue. I need to be alone. Stupid monkeys indeed.

Cat comes up to me and rubs against me. She does not usually do that. We take off on our own and do not follow everyone else to the docks.

*We need to be on board the Black Wind when she sails. It is important.*

Why? Why can't we just go back to the island. I was happy there. Here, I want to kill them all for being so stupid. So mean. So cruel.

*Trust me. It is important.*

We go, but by back streets. Some see us and close themselves in their homes. I don't care. They all knew this was going on. How could they not? What causes bullies to have so much power? They were not strong physically. They could have been shut down easily at any time.

I am on board before I realize I am even there. I climb to the crows nest and take a nap. Others below me load the ship. It is very quiet except for occasional grunts or swearing if they hurt themselves.

When I wake, we are under sail and outside the harbor. It is night with no moon. The stars guide us. I look over the edge and see the sheriffs below me on deck. Several at the rail throwing up. I watch for other ships. In the blackness one could sneak up on us easily. Since I know they intend to fire arrow us, they have to have some sort of flame ready to light their arrows. Maybe. Maybe I can see that.

I see nothing.

Someone comes up the mast and enters my nest. Not a lot of room, but they push a few things around and make themselves comfortable.

"Mouse, it is Rand. Want to talk?"

"Did you know?"

"Yes."

"Then why the hell did you not do anything?"

"I did. I helped find you and get you trained and ready. Drup and I can't be everywhere on the world at once. We need to have locals we can trust to fill in the gaps."

"But this went on for years!"

"Yes. Do you have any idea how old I am and what I have seen?"

That makes me pause and my anger dies down, "No."

"Let's just say that I have seen the same stories over and over so many times it makes even me dizzy. It seems to come in cycles. Previous generations forget so fast what evils have happened in the past. Just distant memories of stories old people tell, who were not witnesses themselves. No one believes it will happen in their town, in their country."

"Till it does."

"It happens slowly. The family you took in is generations old. A great great grandfather was seen as a hero. By saving some of the harvest and setting it aside, he opened his stores in a time of need and the town was saved. Then it got to be they needed to keep the stores, even from needy neighbors, in case something happens."

"And that is soon forgotten. They have always had the most food, the biggest house, metals, etc. It is seen as normal. They are now the leaders, generational leaders. Offspring assume office, fit for the role or not. Just the way it is."

"Yes, you get it."

"Still wrong."

"Yes, but it takes an outsider to see it. Drup and I are not leaders. We are teachers, for those who want to learn. We could easily be corrupted too. There are many who resent our positions at the Library even. They want someone with more scholarship, better education. Of course they do not know us. The Family even tried to have us removed a few times, but enough came to our defense. We would have moved on and set up somewhere else before this of course. Like you, we need nothing and can be anywhere and find work to do."

"I was chosen because I do not need anything?"

"Partly. You can see the obvious the rest were missing. Even my stu-

dents did not get it. I told them to follow your lead. They did not understand why some old man whom they never met before a few days ago was suddenly their leader."

"That was why I had to be there for the sphere and pebble game."

"They needed to see you were capable. Yes. They also needed to see you could not be spooked into anger or fear."

"You mean they did not see the evil of hoarding?"

"It was not seen as hoarding by the locals. It was seen as care taking."

"But it was hoarding."

"Yes. Only an outsider could see it though. One of the reasons we mix students up some. Unfortunately, this is not the only community to suffer this fate. You were a test to see if someone other than Drup and I could see the truth and then have the guts to act on it."

"Cat said I needed to be on board. I could not go back to the island yet. Why not?"

He sighs heavily, "There are more lessons to be learned. This will not be easy. Hang in there. This is important, for you, but especially for those below us." He is indicating the sheriffs. I nod.

"You could have acted."

"Yes, but what about next time and the time after that. We are not parents. We are not gods. People have to learn how to rule themselves."

"Stupid monkeys." He laughs.

"The winds are with us on the way there. Even under a heavy load we will make good time." I nod and he leaves. Of course I did not see him come on board either. Cat did not like to admit there were any Hu stronger than her, so she did not fill me in what the next levels were. I only know for sure she is stronger than me and will likely remain that way. Fine. I never wanted power. I certainly never want to be a ruler, god or bully.

It takes us a little over a day to get there. Other than our sister ship, Moon Beam, we see no others. That is strange. This is supposed to be the pirates home. Why are they not out here defending their port? We are waving the white flag. Thank goodness I got them to remove the Cat flag. That really was aggressive. Not needed here. I dumped the loot in the middle of the night a day ago in the deepest part I could understand. Metals and jewels sink pretty well. No one will find this I am sure. I also scattered them in a little at a time. Someone who might have seen me just might try going fishing for the bag if they thought they would get everything at once. Now the odds of finding anything are near zero. Felt good for that to be gone.

The sun is just up and we proceed down the channel to where we think their dock must be. Eventually we do see some wood structures, but no people or animals. Likely ate them a long time ago.

A few people are at the railings, but I have a better view from above. The Captain and 1st mate are at the bow. He has a farseer at least. He signals to slow down and the 1st mate turns to be sure the orders are carried out.

"Be lively. If they attack, this is where it will be. We cannot turn easily here and could be easily sunk." Nothing happens though. Now, besides being abandoned, some of the structures have clearly burned to the ground. Are they fighting each other for the few scraps left? Or something worse? Could they have been attacked?

*I sense only one person still alive. There are bodies.*

"Cat says only one person alive and bodies present." I shout down to everyone. That changes our mission considerably. To what? Rescue the one and bring them back. Who would want to live with their enemies, no matter how contrite they be?

I have to wonder what happened to the hoarder family. I am guessing they were put on an island with nothing. They will have to work to stay alive now. I would have fed them to Cat.

*Too much fat. Not healthy. Lean meat is better.*

Right. Never known her to be picky before.

The dock is gone. The ship is destroyed and burned to the water line. There are no other ships of size. A few dinghies and tiny sailing ships. Looks like more for personal use for bay fishing and such. They do not look good either. Most as listing. In some cases only a mast is above water. What happened?

We anchor a good ways away. The Captain signals for me, Cat and the sheriffs to take the small boats and go ashore to scope it out. They will remain on board to defend the ship. A judgment call as to where I would be the most useful. I am guessing he is not expecting trouble. Wish Calvin and Hobbes were with us now. Have not seen Rand since that night. I hate 'learning experiences' and when I mention this the sheriffs all moan.

Of course the sheriffs have never rowed a boat before. I see the crew at the railings watching the fun. I give up and row our boat single handed. Faster that way. Someone is going to use TK I am sure. But, they still have to make it look real. I never told them the Captain is TK2 and he knows they are as well. The crew of course does not.

As soon as we reach what is left of the dock, Cat jumps out of the boat

and nearly knocks us over. Thanks Cat! She ignores me and runs inland.

We get everyone out with only a little bit of soaking. All of the warehouses are burned. I head to the ship first. She was as large as the Black Wind, but little more than wet charcoal now. I use TK to see below the water line. I see what is left of the fire arrow launcher. Expected and looks easy enough to make, but what the hell is that large cylinder thing?

The sheriffs are near me looking around too.

"Anyone have any idea what that was?" I ask.

"Hard to tell. Looks like it was smashed, but from the inside. What could cause that?"

"Forbidden tech." Drup is standing next to us. In a moment it is all gone like it never happened.

"If ever you see anything like this again, let one of us know immediately. Understood?" We all nod, but with mouths open. I shut mine.

"There is a survivor?"

"The blast is not what killed most of them. Something far worse. Come."

We all dutifully follow Drup up the hill past homes I would not let an enemy stay in. Lots of cracks for the wind to come in. No glass on the windows, only tattered cloth. Doors ajar.

"Shit!" One of us shouts. We all look and see a decaying corpse half-way out a door. Bones are showing. Nothing appears to have touched it though. Strange. Any meat anywhere else would be set upon by any number of creatures. Of which we have seen none.

We we get to the one intact house, Cat is in the doorway with a horrible look on her face. Like she just coughed up the biggest hairball of her existence. Then the smell hits us. Ah, yes, death or dying I am guessing.

A few stay back to lose their breakfast. I proceed. Death is common in the jungle. Never like it, but you get used to it too.

There are blankets on the floor with an old woman on top of them. She is barely breathing. Drup and Rand are standing next to her. She is holding an object I do not recognize. I would say a book, but it is made out of some material I have never seen before. I scan it. Pages at least, so a book, but not paper or skins. Too thin for one thing.

She sighs her last breath and only then does Drup retrieve the book from her. It immediately disappears.

I ask, "What happened?"

"There is a reason why some knowledge is forbidden."

"Actually a lot of reasons," Rand adds.

One of the sheriffs asks, "Why did they seek forbidden knowledge

then?"

I turn to Pally in shock, "Because they were starving to death because hoarders were allowed to hide the food they needed from them. The pirates and all of this, all the death, the forbidden knowledge, the stupidity of the Crab Cove people is all because you did not share what you had. You did not need it. No one starved in Crab Cove, but they did."

"Actually what eventually got them, though they were starving, was not that, but a plague. They almost got away with it. If she was not bitten by mosquitoes who happened to have fed on bats recently, the plague would not have been transferred to her and ultimately to everyone else. Who knows why she lasted the longest. Probably pure stubbornness to not want to let go of the book. It is over with now."

Someone had to ask what we were all thinking, "What about us?"

"We are all dead of course. I told the Captain to sail back without us. Can't spread it to other towns and ports. Frog Harbor is now a forbidden zone." Everyone but me turns white. I know I should have died a long time ago.

I exclaim, "Not bats, rodents. The place is overrun with them and they are dead as well. The bats I have scanned seem fine. Though they could be the carriers I guess." Rand shrugs. He could see the virus, so why not tell us.

No one says anything. Finally I can't stand it.

"Hey everyone. I am the loner, why am I the one calling us to action all the time? If this place is forbidden, then we need to clean it up before we die. We need to pre-dig graves for ourselves to not leave a mess and possible plague source. We need to put up signs and warnings. Let's get to work. I am guessing we only have a few weeks at most." Someone sneezes and everyone backs away from them except Rand and I. I shake my head.

Alice asks, "Rand, you and Drup could have cured everyone, including us. So, why didn't you? Why do we have to die because you are being lazy?" She is pissed. I smile. Everyone looks to Rand.

"Who made me your god? I am not your mother or father. You already have gifts beyond what norms could ever expect. You have had free lodging, education, and so forth, for years. Are we expected to save every person from every harm? Why stop at Hu? Why not extend to every creature and plant. Hell, you could become complete vegetables. I could plant you and water you when needed. It would keep you from harm. Never in the history of life of any planet has anyone been granted such a favor."

"It is not Rand and Drup's fault. The hoarders were such for genera-

tions. You grew up under their influence and control. You were given the means to change it, BEFORE any of this happened. You sat on your asses. Took an old grumpy hermit and an ornery Cat to come in and kick your butts into action. Yet, I accept my own death. I do not blame Rand or Drup. ALL creatures die. ALL, no exceptions. Even they will die eventually. No exceptions. So, get up and get to work before I put a real fear of death into you." I scowl at them and Cat does the same, not that she will help any.

I do not wait for them, but go to the nearest structure and start to dismantle it and scatter the wood, using TK to make smaller pieces of everything.

"Bodies should be burned to kill the plague." Someone suggests. Makes sense. Instead of scattering we gather the wood together and pile the bodies on top. This is then lit and the ashes are scattered afterwards. It is night, but I rarely need much sleep any more. Cat is out of course, curled up under a tree in the shade. She did not set this up. Not her fault.

*Stupid monkeys.*

I agree Cat, I agree,

I head to the dock when it looks like they have the homes in hand. I am still curious about the large cylinder. What is it? Suddenly it disappears. I look around and see Drup watching me. I nod. Forbidden knowledge. Got it. I get back to work. Wish I was a higher TK and could tell what it was made of. Will be dead soon, so it really does not matter.

It takes us nearly an eight day to finish up. Many of the homes had been abandoned or burned down before we arrived. All told we found about fifty dead people. No dogs, cats, horses, goats. I am guessing they all got eaten earlier. I did find rodents. Lots and lots of dead rodents. I add them to the fires as well.

Next I collect seeds. This confuses many until they see me planting them carefully. I plant them in the best places for them to thrive given drainage, shade, and needs for each type. Others work on the signs. We use the wood from the two boats we came in on. Not needed for dead people and they are already in plank form, although curved. It still works. Fortunately there are still tools about. The dock is gone, but the inlet still exists. We post signs at regular intervals. A few decide to see what trails go along the shore and find ones going both north and south. They post signs there as well. We run out of wood before we are done and have to make due with what we can find in the forest nearby. Without going further in that the one kilometer limit. Do not need to compound the failure.

Our food supplies will run out soon. The nearby forest has been



stripped bare. I could only plant seeds from inedible trees and bushes. The grasses will reseed themselves of course.

"No one is showing any symptoms yet. Looks like starving it is."

I shake my head. They are so helpless. I grab a sack and head for the mud flats. I soon have a full sack of clams, snails and a few edible worms. I throw them into the communal pot, add some local leaves and spices I recognize. Not exactly that same as Madscar, but if I poison everyone it won't matter, just quicker. No one complains and the food is soon gone.

The next day, several come with me to learn how at least. I show them how and head back. We need starches too. I find some roots that the locals had not found yet or knew were edible. I bring these back to our home and start pounding them into something I can cook in the pot. Does not taste great, but fills your stomach. We won't starve then. We can go north and south of where we are if need be.

Three eight days in and we have routines going. Everyone knows their chores. Some are better than others at different tasks, but everyone but Cat has something to do. She is not limited to the one kilometer limit and regularly goes off to hunt on her own, having turned up her nose at roots, stems and even slugs. Surprised at that, but to each their own.

We clear a space and start our TK practices again, more from boredom and the sense of doom hanging over everyone. I even learn a few things and teach a few as well. Using TK to help guide a knife throw without it being obvious. You have to at least throw it in the right direction. "It is all in the wrist," is a common excuse for making a good throw. "Just lucky I guess," is another.

It is becoming obvious that we are not going to die of this plague. It finally comes up at a nightly meeting.

Everyone stares at Rand. Drup has gone.

He sighs, "No, you are not going to die of the plague, through you would have spread it to others had we left too soon. On the other hand, if you thought you weren't would you have bothered to do as much as you have? This work still needed to be done." They look at each other and sigh. No, not likely.

"There are communities north and south of here that need sheriffs. Split up and chose a direction. Tell everyone this area is off limits for one generation. Dismissed."

I walk up to Rand before he disappears and ask, "Does this mean I can go back to my island now?" He laughs while giving Cat a massage.

"Sorry Mouse, but you have totally ruined that possibility. Had you

not stepped in so many times to save the day and then get these knuckle heads to doing the right thing, which by the way Drup and I could never get them to do, you might have been allowed to go home. But, you didn't and now here we are."

"Shit. Where are you sending us next?" *Us?*

He smiles. I really do not like that smile nor Cat's idea she will be immune

*I could train another monkey if you are done with this one.*

"What, and break up the perfect pair?" Rand is smiling. Doomed, we are doomed.

# Alexandria

"Rand, welcome back." Myra comes up to me and gives me a huge hug.

"You are just in time. Edwin and I are about to give our report on our mission. We spent a million years on a Carboniferous period world. Would you believe sen plantimals? Who are your new friends? Hope you have been nicer to them than you were to me?" She nudges me as she teases me and scares my charges.

I turn to them, "Myra was an early success story. She was on the original Black Wind ship a long time ago when both Drup and I were crew ourselves." Both Cat and Mouse are getting freaked out over the Meeps circling her. She notices this, apologizes and pops out.

"What were those things?"

"Meeps. Six dimensional sen beings. Myra is sort of their step mother. They reproduce at the expense of the mother by splitting apart. Once they are weaned of their learning curve they will be on their own. We have learned a lot from them actually. Very helpful to have around."

"So many people? I remember the books describing them, but never thought I would actually meet them."

"Welcome to the University of Alexandria. We are not on earth, at least not the one you know. Around you are sen from all over our earth froth. We all work together to learn, understand, train and just socialize. Look, here comes Drup now." I wave to him and he comes over. Unfortunately he is in his original form. This freaks Cat who is up the nearest 'tree'. To his credit, Mouse holds his own, though I know he is suspicious inside. Helps that he has accepted his own death I guess.

"You two made it. Have a nice trip?" He laughs, but coming from a Di this can be really intimidating.

"Drup, what have you been eating. Your breath could debark trees." Mouse says. That gets me laughing and Drup taken back. Score one for Mouse.

"It is a Rap delicacy. Fermented prairie rat. We can't get this on Earth Two." He sighs.

"Thank goodness. You are even more handsome in your true form at least." Drup bows and laughs again. Same result. Wish he would not eat that stuff.

Drup bows and heads off to annoy others is my guess. Surprisingly Squeak does not like this dish, fortunately. One of them is enough.

"We need to get you two settled in. I have set up housing in a more private space. We can walk if you don't mind the few kilometers. Once you are higher TK you will have other means of transport of course."

"How high will that be?"

"Everyone is different. The rumors are true, both Drup and I are nines. Myra is above that. How far even she does not know. She is one of our super TKs. You will meet the others at some point."

"Are they all this weird?"

"Oh, Myra is the best of the lot. Not that you are normal yourself Mouse. Best not to judge and just accept we are all different, yet can all contribute." Cat finally catches up with us. She is causing somewhat of a stir and Mouse notices.

"Why is everyone reacting to Cat?" He asks.

"Ah, because she is the first Cat to be accepted at the University. No one here has seen one before, well, obviously some of us have, just not the majority of students. I am messing that up."

"I get it."

"We have one problem. One of the super TKs is named Cat, or rather Moosa, the Hopi word for Cat, but most of us just use the Standard form. Calling Cat, well Cat, could get confusing."

We both turn and look at her. She decides this is a good time for a bath. Something on her hind flank is annoying her. Probably embarrassment.

"We both know your real name. It is about time you used it. You will not get special treatment here for being a Cat. A lot of sen here are higher TK than you and NO ONE will put up with bullying or arrogance. Besides, your name is honorable. I am assuming Silver gave you your name?" She nods looking curious.

"You are very fortunate. George was a very close friend of his at the beginning of his life. He has given that name to no one else. A great honor." She stands higher. Nothing like flattery to get to a Cat. Sigh.

I did not tell her that George was a house cat and not a Cat. Egos are a terrible thing to waste.

"This place is a wasteland," Mouse comments as we walk past the University proper and into the wild area surrounding it.

"We are slowly bringing in plants and animals from other froths. Of course, not everything gets along. We have already had to remove a few invasive species who think the entire planet is theirs and no need to share. Part of your training will be to visit other areas of Alexandria and perform assessments. We have over a million sen living here now. Mostly

they get along." Mouse smiles at that.

"I am sure the Hu are the worst in terms of speciesism, is that the right word?"

"I know what you are saying. We say speciest. Simpler. No, I would say the Ba are the worst. Not surprisingly, they are also the smallest in terms of weight." A few Raps and Ku run past us. They do both like to run. Mouse watches them.

"I used to like to run."

"Feel free to join a group. I am sure they would welcome you."

"Too old for that now. Lucky I can get up and down a tree or mast now. Any sailing ships? Sort of got used to that actually."

"Actually, yes, but we are hundreds of kilometers away from any coastline here. Oh, and you are not too old any more. We have excellent health care here."

"That's funny, I thought it was the excitement of being in a totally new location."

"I am sure that has some effect. Find a mirror when you can." He no longer looks anyway sixty, but a very good looking thirty. He will stay that way until he takes the shape shifting class and learns to assume any form needed. That was a very long time ago for me. Sailing ships are much better, not so confining and you feel the motion of the waves and wind. Might as well be in a box while on board a star ship.

I look at Cat. She is not happy about having to walk this far, though I know her personal range is much further. We are getting close to our destination.

"Listen carefully George. DO NOT EAT any of the sen. Assume it is sen unless at least two others say they are not. There are no wild animals to hunt. I'm sorry, but you are stuck with prepared food while here." That is one pissed Cat. She might as well be in hell.

I continue, "Get on one of the field trips to Di Eden and join a hunt if you have to." That will give her a run for her chow. A Rap hunt is twenty clicks at top speed. They will leave her in their dust. I smile inside. Put her in her place very quickly. Maybe they will take pity on her and give her a half dead rat to finish. A huge insult from a Rap.

We reach the stand of redwood trees. We had to cheat and use fast time to get this grove set up in time. Normally we would have to wait a few thousand years for them to settle in. It is in a gully where they get plenty of rain and humidity. Lots of ferns and other plants I never learned too.

"We are not on Madscar any more Cat, I mean George." Mouse is

looking up trying to see the tops. Nearly a hundred meters straight up.

"Wait, there are homes up there. I can see them! And bridges connecting them. Where are we Rand?"

"This is the Ba dormitory."

"I thought you said they are not fond of other sen."

"I did. You are now officially Hu and Cat ambassadors. Good luck. If you get tired of their teasing you can always move into the Hu dorm of cement blocks closer to the Uni. Sorry, no Cat dorm. Did not seem to be any point given that anywhere you are is good enough for a nap."

"He has you there George." She snarls in response of course.

"Remember, DO NOT EAT. Their movements are likely to set off all kinds of primal urges. RESIST. They look like easy prey, but . . ."

"They can glide long distances and just have to jump off any branch to get away from you. Remember Cats do not fly." He nudges her. Mouse read the books. We will never get a Cat to read of course. Probably depends on reading Mouse. That will change once he is a seven and can block her easily. That will be fun. No more freeloading knowledge. They think they are so superior, but compared to the more social species, they are jungle chow.

"And they are armed. These are sen, not flying mice. Albeit very large ones. Students have TK as well."

"And you are totally outnumbered."

George is looking totally pissed we are picking on her so much.

We come to a medium sized redwood.

"This is your tree. You are free to gather loose wood from below to fashion any structures you want up top. Higher has higher status."

"Not important. They need to learn this Hu is not impressed by status, levels, titles, etc."

"This should be interesting. Ba are VERY status oriented. The formalities of behavior will make your head spin. Fortunately they see Hu as total barbarians and you will not be required to know their ways."

"Which they will remind us of constantly." I nod smiling.

"So I do a good job and now am being punished." He sighs dramatically.

"Think of it as you did so good we had to hunt for an even greater challenge to test your abilities. Ha-ha. Well, I will leave you two to figure it out. Classes will start in eight days. Ask for Spikes or Marie for defense training. They will direct you from there."

"That means both of you. George, you have gotten really soft being around Hu for so long. A few good rounds with warriors will get you

back in form in no time." She yawns at me and curls up at the base of her tree after smashing down all the ferns viciously into a sort of bed. Mouse will end up doing all the work I am sure.

Maybe not. A group of Ba have been watching us. They make their way over.

"Superior Rand." They all bow in unison.

I bow in return, only not so far. I am their superior and have to play the part with them.

"These two are under my charge. Do not abuse them. You get bonus points for helping them to adjust. First day at the Uni and they have never seen Ba before and know nothing of your vast culture. Be sure to introduce them to your ballads of honor." I am laughing internally knowing what they are in for. The Ba are ecstatic. They will do almost anything for extra points to flout at their neighbors. And bore Mouse and George to death if they can with their ballads.

Mouse is not impressed. I thought their high voices would make him wonder, but he has seen an impressive array of creatures on Madscar. I know of several bat species there. Instead he yawns, pets George on her head and races up the tree faster than any Hu I have ever seen. George is soon after him and passes him to the first branch. They balance themselves on the branch like they are perfectly comfortable there and even look up to higher branches without fear.

This of course totally blasts the poor Ba minds. Not so special after all are you. Granted Hu cannot glide without TK, but not all are afraid of heights. This should be really interesting.

I walk back to the TK meeting room. I console myself to being bored to death by Myra and Edwin's report on the sen plantimals. Maybe if I take long enough I can miss the meeting and just read the brief later if at all. Silver did not bring us back from Farout to goof off though.

When I enter the room it is only half full.

"Such a disappointment. Where is everyone?" I tease. A few shrug. Everyone is busy.

+Heard you had a new set of recruits Randy.+

"Hi Twy. How are you? Enjoying your time here?"

+Very much. Being with many cultures can be overwhelming though.

+

"Definitely. My recruits are a Hu and a Cat."

+A Cat? Is that safe?+ Ku would worry about a Cat being here.

"Not for her, but we don't tell her that of course. Only TK3, so a low status Cat. Oh, and the only one on Alexandria. Should be easy to keep an

eye on."

She shows amusement, +Understood.+ Twy is a black belt now. I would love to see the first encounter.

Myra comes in with her halo of Meeps. Edwin follows with info sheets which he then hands out. Low tech.

I take one from him, "Thanks Edwin." He nods and moves on, leaving the extras at the back for late comers. Silver and Turtle enter and each take one. Turtle scans it and places it back on the pile. Silver raises his eyebrows. Why is Turtle upset?

The room darkens. Slides? Yep. Well more like color holograms. Ancient tech. Have they gone retro on us?

<sup>th</sup>We started on a world in the pre-cambrian state complete with one meter sized placozoans. Evidence suggests there was a high tech culture millions of years before the collapse in an unknown catastrophe.<sup>th</sup>

A hologram appears that shows the tech they recovered.

<sup>th</sup>With Cat's help if we compensate for the compression and aging we get this.<sup>th</sup>

Everyone inhales. Clearly a weapon. But what does it do?

Myra comes in, "Evidence of a world war that removed the oxygen and killed all but the most anaerobic primitive life forms and buried their cities under a layer of ash. Not radioactive at least. Otherwise they would have likely sterilized their world."

<sup>th</sup>Basically, multi-cellular life had to begin again. Given another five hundred million years they have every chance of sen life again.<sup>th</sup>

"We have placed recorders should anyone else want to investigate more about their tech and culture. Exoskeletons only, no vertebrate evidence found in the fossils. Not sure if they were the sen or were food of the sen. Further proof you don't need a backbone to be smart." Rooi raises three arms in agreement. That gets a laugh.

"Now the fun one. The Carboniferous level world at first looked as expected." Holograms are shown of several locations. Six winged monster dragonflies are expected?

"Then we noticed plantimals. Normally plantimals do not coexist on the same world with plants and animals. This peaked our interest of course."

<sup>th</sup>They communicate with each other. Given our experience with multiple world OMs this is not too surprising. They acted more like a neural network than as individuals. Intelligence could not be assessed based on an isolated being.<sup>th</sup>

"Given the limited time we had to observe their culture a decision was



made to use a Meep trick to see what would happen. We compressed a million years into an eight day. Individuals of course could not longer be observed." Wait, but they were only gone a few eight days right? How does a million years fit into that? It is clear I am not the only one confused.

<sup>th</sup>What our group needs to know is near the end of this time, they achieved natural TK status. This attracted the notice of a 'thn. Likely one of the babies we reactivated. They were of 'thn metal construct, not the 6D of our 'thn.<sup>th</sup>

"Given that an entire world covering sen raised to a higher TK level by a 'thn could prove dangerous, we left, in a hurry. But, to answer your obvious question, Meep ah, tech, allowed us to return to our own timeline here. We cannot go back now without causing a paradox. Nor, after hearing this story can any of you."

<sup>th</sup>At least not for a million years,<sup>th</sup> Edwin adds to amusement.

Turtle asks, "Are they are threat?"

Silver adds, "Are there others this 'thn has created? Any world TK could be a real threat." Turtle scowls at him for cutting in. He says he is sorry in a whisper. Males seem to cut in when women are talking I have noticed. Very common on Earth Two even though we have tried to cure the Hu of this.

"This will take more discussion and thought than an afternoon seminar can cover. Think about what you have been shown. See us if you want coordinates to the pre-cam world." The meeting breaks up with no answers. She is right, this will take time to digest.

Rooi comes up to me, ~Interesting, but of course there must have been high tech sen before our time period on other froth worlds. It would be very self centered to think otherwise.~

I hand her ~I agree. And if they were sen millions of years ago that did not kill themselves, are they still out there, possibly watching our childish behavior even now?~ Rooi shows agreement and amusement.

# Ku Eden

+Keki, we have a special mission if you are interested.+

I wait for more information. They sense my waiting. They are used to my accepting without question, but this sounds like more than a normal task. After looking at each other, one continues.

+We have a colony of Blue Birds on another world." That raises my feathers in curiosity. I run through the other worlds we have been told about through rumors. Baby chick tales really. Until this moment I did not really believe they existed.

+A special world. It is a great honor that we have been asked to help out. Normally we go unnoticed by those in leadership.+

I show amusement.

+They need our help in the poverty areas and waste removal has become a specialty of ours. From the reports it will be a large task. You can take two others with you if they are willing. There will be opportunities to recruit on location of course.+

+I accept. May I ask which world?+

+We are not being told that. We get reports back that have been heavily censored. We are not comfortable with this either, but none of the reports have mentioned anything unexpected. The reason we have been given is security for the world itself, not because of any dangers involved.  
+

I wave off any concerns. It would be fun to see something new. I already have the two in mind, if they will go.

+How is your 'thant coming?+

<sup>th</sup>I would not say I am fluent, but I can com with most workers without difficulty.<sup>th</sup>

+Excellent, you will not be expected to com with the queen after all. + We all show amusement. I am dismissed and told where to report whenever I can arrange travel.

Ryg and Jig were willing. My two best friends in the drain areas. I would have chosen Peter, but knew he would not be available.

Jig comments, +Three bad birdies in need of adventure.+ I feel this will become a song for us shortly.

We have to travel by rail car for several days. We ride in the luggage car at the back, sitting instead of perching. Nothing strange there. They let us ride for free. Management would kick us off if they knew, but workers respect what we do and find ways to get us where we need to go.

When asked, we just say some new city needs our sewage expertise. That usually gets some clucks of amusement and pretending of upturned beaks.

+This is the biggest city I have ever seen!+ Jig comments, bet Ryg and I are thinking the same thing. It is huge. So many birds in one place. And not a single Blue Bird so far. I take out the map I was given, figure out where we are and point in the direction we need to go.

+We are nearly out of food. Best to find a shelter.+

+That is where we are going. Something called a portal. I have no idea what that means.+ The other two don't either apparently. We are low level birdies. This is no surprise or cause for concern.

It is just after dark when we arrive, but there are artificial lights everywhere. We only had them at special places. I am nearly asleep from the dark. Inside has lights though, so that helps wake me up. We que up for a meal. They hand us a bowl of thick grain broth. No grubs. Maybe this is just the evening meal. We do not complain and find a place to perch.

Ryg notices, +Our bandannas are a slightly different shade of blue. They will know we are not locals.+

+I think we would stand out anyway. They are dressed here. I feel like I have lost all my feathers.+ Jig adds. She is right. We do stand out. Others are looking at us.

When we finish our meal a helper comes up to us and motions us to follow. We deposit our bowls in the washer bin.

+I am assuming you are the three we have been expecting from the Plains Coop Collective?+ We affirm.

+How could you tell?+ Jig asks teasingly. The helper ignores her and leaves after showing us to an isolated perch room. Enough for us and we are soon asleep after relieving ourselves.

When we come out in the morning we are apparently awake before many others. The dining hall is nearly empty, only Blue Birds present so far. I feel better if I have served others before eating myself and go to the kitchen to help bring out a large pot of food and the three of us set up a station to serve anyone who arrives. We do not have long to wait. The main doors are opened and hundreds stream in. We quickly lose track of time. I have no idea how many we have served. We went back for more food many times.

An older bird comes up to us, +Please sit. Others will take over now.+

We are led to a more isolated table and perch exhausted. We are served stewed grain with several types of dried fruit. This is a treat for us and well appreciated. The old bird eats with us. His bandanna is frayed

and faded. An Early Blue Bird I am guessing. Someone collects our empty bowls and cups.

+I am going with you to the new world. This is my last mission and it is likely that I will die there. It has been a lifelong dream to see more and when this mission came up I volunteered. We best get started. There is a lot of work to do once we arrive.+

I ask, +We were told it had something to do with drains and sewage. We are all experienced in these tasks.+

+I am an engineer and helped design these systems, but I wanted birds who actually worked them. I always hated it when I worked for so long on a project only to see it fail because the birds taking care of it could not do so. This time we will do it right and you will be part of the design process from the beginning.+

+We were told that 'thants would be part of this project.+

+They provide both labor and experience. We will be heavily dependent on their help.+

+Excellent. They did a wonderful job on our new system. It was always clogging up before they offered to help.+

+Ah, good, but they design best for 'thants, not Ku, so we are still needed to be sure access tunnels can accommodate multiple sen.+

+Multiple sen?+ We all chirp at the same time.

+I was told you were informed.+

+We were told the world held multiple sen. We did not realize we would be working side by side with different ones.+

He thinks about this, +A reasonable guess, but wrong. Where we are going all known froth sen live and work together. I was told by wire that you speak 'thant, how about Standard?+

We look at each other and Jig answers, "We speak some, but need learn more?"

"Fair enough." +We best get going then.+ He removes his cloak and now looks as naked as we do. We walk together through the city and out to the edge, near the ocean. We have never seen an ocean before and it is hard not to stop and stare. He is patient with us, but I can tell he wants to move.

We arrive at a very strange building. No windows, no doors, no markings. Looks like a huge cube in fact. One at least thirty meters on all sides. Nothing this big back home. There are buildings in the center of this city that are taller, but nothing else is around this one. Set back from the sea by a few hundred meters, but only a simple dirt path up to it. Nothing else for at least a half kilometer.

I go up to it and touch it. It has no feeling. Not hot or cold, not slick or rough. I have no idea what it is made of. A nondescript gray color. I see no shine off of it either. Very strange.

We proceed around the side to the face exactly opposite of where we arrived. The side facing the ocean in fact.

There is a black circle a few meters away from the face. We gather on this circle for some reason. It goes dark and then a door opens. What the? We were just outside and now we are inside a cylinder that opens to the inside of the cube? I can see the corners from the inside now up above us anyway. It is empty. Even the door we came through disappears. No evidence it was ever there.

+Creepy isn't it? This is my second time here and I still do not like it. I prefer things I can understand.+ I nod agreement. The other two appear to be in total shock and are not moving anything but their eyes.

+Come, we need to be in the center for this to work. Fortunately we do not need any supplies. Everything will be provided as needed.+

+Will there be other Blue Birds?+ Ryg asks.

+Yes, thank Goddess. We will not be alone. Some of my own flock have gone ahead of us in fact. Though you do not know them, you will be among friends and have nothing to fear. No flight school for anyone.+ That is an old reference I have not heard in years. Used to be a threat for low level workers by high perch Ku.

+It will take a few days travel time. Our needs will be met as we go.+ A few buckets of supplies appear.

+Ah, where did the supplies come from? They weren't here when we arrived.+

+All is being taken care of. No perches, so we will need to sit.+ Sitting always makes me feel like I am sitting on eggs, even though of course that is not likely. Both hens and roosters sit on the eggs of course, but we are a celibate order and I have kept to that oath.

I have no sensation of movement. Boring except for getting to know each other. Our host is Ebe, an old bird from way back. Likely her last assignment too. She tells us of her life and the stories she knows. My life has been boring until I joined the Blue Birds and after that there is not a lot to tell.

+I work. I am happy.+

+Best place to be Keki. Best place to be.+

One sleep period later, which was hard to know because there was no night and day inside this coop, just enough light to see, but no change since we arrived. Never determined where the light was coming from ei-

ther. It was just there.

+We are here and can depart this chamber.+ Suddenly, just like we arrived we are back on the circle pad outside the chamber. It looks exactly the same here. Even the ocean is the same. No wait.

Jig asks first, +Are those sailing ships?+ We stare with our mouths open. They are. Just like in the teachings. Not that I got that far.

+Somehow forgot to mention, tech is lower here. Not as much metal. No trains. Lots of walking and if we are lucky we get an animal drawn cart. Slow and bumpy, but beats walking the entire way. Let's get to the center. Not far.+

# Farout Hangout

"What the hell is that thing?" Commander inquires.

"Sir, it just appeared. Never seen it before. Appears to be made of wood. There is a button on top, Sir."

"I can see that Ensign. I am not an idiot." Could have fooled me.

"It will not scan at my level, perhaps you could try?" I offer. He is higher TK of course.

"And if it is a bomb that goes off when a TK scans it? Do you think I am that stupid?" Yes, but I also do not think it is a bomb.

The Scitech that I called in to have a look has arrived. She looks carefully at it with the two of us watching.

"I cannot scan it." She takes out an instrument and places it on top of the box covering the button and a sticky camera on the wall facing it. I had sent her a picture so she would know what to bring.

"We should leave the room in case it is an explosive, chemical or biological agent." The Commander looks at me like I am the idiot now. We leave though, with me getting the door. We can all DS, but we walk through a door that has to be opened and closed, 'thn metal that seals shut air tight. The Commander nods to the Scitech and she enters the command on her tablet. We hear nothing. She holds up her tablet so we can see. The object on top of the box is on the floor apparently undamaged. The camera is not harmed obviously either. The top of the box is missing and we can see partway inside, but nothing but the sides of the box shows.

"Well, don't just stand there, open the door," He sighs, but of course if I had opened the door without his command I would have been chewed out for that.

The Scitech goes in first, looks into the box and then reaches in to remove a piece of what looks like paper. Old paper. She hands it to the Commander, who motions me to take it instead. I do so.

I unfold it and hold it up for the others to see.

"We know where you are, signed Silver, Turtle and the rest of the Earth Two gang."

"Shit! Red Alert!" He yells into a com unit. Again, not needed as he has TP, but better to be redundant than not getting through. I think he just likes to yell.

He turns to me, "Ensign, get security in here immediately. I want this, ah, thing, scanned, dismantled, scrutinized, whatever. I want to know

what it is and how it got here. Someone is playing a practical joke on us and I want to know who." Probably blame us Tafa again. He looks suspiciously at me of course. Always blame a Tafa.

I leave the room. No point in sticking around to get whacked like he usually does. Hu are the ugliest creatures in the universe. I am totally convinced of this. Clumsy, stupid, delusional, paranoid, I could go on. How the Ksxy did they ever end up in charge? Forever! Granted when I and the others were first given the gifts I thought I had found the gold sah. Now I am not convinced.

After calling security, I make it to the break room. Why do they store food and fluids in a room called the 'break' room. That sounds more like place for torture or maybe a place for form repair.

I find the haja and heat it up with TK and siphon it down. Can't believe Hu air exchange through the same orifice as they consume both fluids and solids. Who designed them? Certainly no one intelligent.

The Mech is here cleaning up as usual. I can com with the Mech. The only one here who makes any sense. Now, it was designed properly. Of course it uses a TK battery and never needs anything else. No mixed up orifices. Self repairing even. The only one here who takes more abuse than me, yet never complains. Can you believe some purposely make a mess just to make the Mech work harder? How rude.

I talk with Mech when I am feeling like this.

"I miss my home world, but no one knows how to get back there. It has been over four thousand Hu solars. A long time for any culture. Hope they were not destroyed by the 'thn when they cleaned all of us trouble makers up. Why did they send us to Farout? We were not hurting anyone. Since being brought back to the Hu home world we learned of the threat to destroy entirely any culture that opposed them. No one was actively hunting or hurting them."

"Accessing database and historical records. Ensign, they were not destroyed. The 'thn threat has been neutralized by the same individuals who brought us to Earth Two and then forced everyone to this new location."

"Do you know why we were forced here? I was really hoping to get back to a world with more sen on it. Seeing the same ones every cycle is not conducive to continued sanity." I believe I am already insane.

"That information is not available to individuals at our level of access."

"Right, don't let those below TK6 in on anything. After all this time you would think we would all be at the same level."

"Hu in particular, though not the only sens, seem to enjoy a hierarchi-



cal power structure. A flaw in their character."

I show amusement, "Definitely." There are five other Tafa present and none of us is above or below another.

"Wait, you said they were not destroyed. How could you know that unless you know where they are. That means there must be a way to get home. My own kind again. All of us can go home."

"That is correct. Please gather the Tafa and meet me at the 3rd docking station after curfew. I am scheduled to be there then." After curfew. That is dangerous. Best if we got there before and then could claim we lost track of time.

I tell the others to be there at least an hour before. We all get there at different times and by different routes. Unfortunately this is a common process we have had to use many times. One of the reasons we are so low on the Hu lists. We are unreliable. Self fulfilling prophecy. They treat us as not able to have independent rational thought, we become what they expect us to be.

I am the last to arrive. The Mech is already there cleaning the floor with an attachment. Makes enough cover noise to make us hard to overhear.

I speak low, &Let us link& None of the Hu bothered to learn Tafa of course. To them it sounds like a lot of squeaks and pops. Yet we were all required to learn Standard of course. Six is the ideal number for a link. At least there are six of us. We would likely have all died without the ability to link occasionally.

We are like this for over an hour when the door opens and someone walks in. The Scitech. I ignore her. Unfortunately she walks up to me.

"Most sorry Ensign, but I got a notice you were looking for me and I could find you here. I can wait until you are done." She is a five and likely abused as we are, though being one of the 'approved' species, maybe not as much? I did not call her here though. What is going on?

It is another hour before Mech comes up to us and we unlink. That felt good and I am sorry to come out of it. The Scitech is still here standing next to the Mech.

We are all looking at each other wondering what happens next when the door opens again. It is after curfew, so this makes us nervous and we reattach link appendages to appear to be so.

"There you are. It is past curfew. What the hell are you all doing? Why are you here Scitech?" The Commander. In reality just the base commander, not the supreme overlord, which we will likely will never meet.

"Sir, the box is only wood. Nothing more. We can find no other aspects to it's construction or mechanisms. It should not have behaved the way it did."

"Never mind that now. What the hell are these doing? Is this their form of sex or something equally gross." Clearly showing disgust.

"Sir, this is part of their belief structure and this is a holy rite they are not required to share knowledge of with anyone." Whoa, that puts him in his place. I am surprised she even knows this much, though not strictly holy as the Hu define that term. We are rationalists after all.

"Yes, well, can't they do this somewhere else? Does it have to be in a public place where anyone can wonder in?"

"I am sure they are open to suggestions. Their rooms are not large enough and are in the open, therefore not private. No one is here at nights at the moment, so this seemed to be a good location. I am honored to be allowed to witness their holy rite, even though I obviously do not have a means to participate myself."

Something happens. I am not sure what until I turn around and am surprised to see Mech changing. I mean, really, really changing. When done it appears to be a living creature, not a mech at all. I do not recognize what it is though. It appears to have flesh and bones similar to a lot of the sen present, but its surface is covered with a gray silver fluffy substance I have never seen before. No wait, Ku have something similar, though we have no Ku present at this base. Feathers. These are feathers.

The Commander does a face down on the floor of the storage bay. Why? I am not familiar with this behavior.

*It is unfortunate that you chose to interfere Commander. As we cannot allow this knowledge to leave, you will have to come with us to Tafa.*

"Tafa does not exist. No one knows where it is."

The feathered shape changes again. This time it appears as a Hu in a gray robe. The Scitech changes too. She is now also a Hu in a similar robe. The Commander is visibly shaking now. Why?

The door opens, but not to the base corridors as one would expect, but to a forest. I can feel a breeze. The smells! All of us Tafa gasp in surprise and slowly venture out the door. We are home! We are home! We show supreme joy.

&It will take awhile to adjust yourselves to this changed world.&

The other one adds, &Your world has changed as you expected. The language has changed. There was a plague that removed 60% of the population a hundred Tafa solars ago. They have not yet recovered their tech and agriculture. They will need your help.&

&Who are you two who knew how to get here and change your form by desire?&

&Friends.& I recognize amusement on their Hu faces. The Commander comes slowly out.

The male turns to him, "You are no longer TK. You will spend out your remaining days as they see fit. You now serve them. Your life and existence are in their appendages."

"But, that is not fair. How was I supposed to know?"

"Really? I was your Mech. I saw and heard everything. No one pays any attention to the servants. Scitech felt your abuse directly. You cannot hide from your behavior. I have no sympathy for bullies. You were not this way until you obtained power. If I had been here you would never have been advanced. This was not the way Farout was set up. You broke that trust."

&What do we do?&

&Basically whatever you want. We will check in of course. Your culture has been set back to pre-tech times. It will take an enormous amount of effort to bring it back. Maybe this time you can avoid some of the mistakes of last time. You are TK after all. That gives you the advantage of time at least. You are now in the Commander's position. You will find the task is not as easy as you think. It is more than being good to everyone. Hard decisions will need to be made.&

&I would add that you should do what is right, not what is expedient, fastest or easiest to do. Doing the right thing can seem like going backwards at times, it is not. In the long time it will be better, if slower.&

"Time for us to leave. I can only imagine how much trouble our other kids have gotten into," Scitech says. They are gone in an instant. I have seen people DS before of course. But we got here, how many light years, dimensions away, in an instant. That does impress me.

I turn to the commander, "You will not be able to eat the life here. We will have to make all your requirements. Do not make us regret doing so. I for one would be just as happy letting you go even knowing this would mean your own death soon thereafter." He nods understanding and remains bowed.

&Ensign. Our TK is stronger. I can scan further than before.&  
I try it and ET5 is correct. I estimate a ten times increase.

&We are now TK6. This means we can DS now and will need to practice. It also means we can make our own TK2s if needed. Our world is much larger than the base was. It will take a lot of time and help to make this work.&

&I am afraid that four thousand Hu solars will seem like a short time period before we are done.&

&True, so true. Let us begin!& I am excited and afraid. Who would have thought we would awaken to this total change.

# Farout Base

"The Commander is missing. He does not respond to TP or hails."

"The Tafa are all missing as well. No great loss. But are they responsible?"

"And our Scitech too."

"We found a dead Mech in a closet. I think it is beyond repair. We need to make another one."

"I can't see how Tafa at TK5 could take on the Commander at TK8 and then disappear. They are not on this world anyway. They did not have DS capability, so they could not have left either."

"Blackmail? Convinced the Commander to take them somewhere. Back to their home world?"

"It was clear they were not happy here. We all know they wanted to go home, but as we learned ourselves, the worlds we left are no longer there. Physically yes, but everything has changed. We left high tech worlds that have largely collapsed since we left. We hoped to be going back to better worlds not backward ones. I for one do not want to go back to outhouses and diseases." Others concur.

"Susan, what do you think?"

I sigh, "It was not pretty on Earth Two. We thought with only two high TKs present it would have been easy to remake the world into our desired location, our home. Unfortunately we were ill informed. They have tech far in advance of ours. They have not been sitting the entire time we were gone. As Roger will tell you, even old Droopy and Randy, two nothing grunt servants from the ill fated crash on Magenta, are now high level TKs. Who would take losers like those two and give them such power?"

"They took out the entire multiverse of 'thn. You can't get much scarier than that, though I admit I am glad they are gone. They made their own mini 'thn like creatures from boost matrix that are sen. That is what took out our ships. They are ready for us if we attempt it again."

"I would not recommend another confrontation. We need to face the fact we are on our own. Better than Farout in that we can seek out other cultures and nicer worlds."

"From what I understand, they are sticking to their section of the earth froth. That still leaves a lot of earth type worlds, but hey, we started out as a space faring culture. I miss that. The only new sen we have seen in 4K years were the Tafa six we found at Farout and now they are gone. I

would like to meet others and learn from them."

"Why would the 'thn even put six low level TKs in Farout? There is something more to their story as well."

"Anyone know where the Tafa home world is?" No one answers. I did not think so.

"Water under the bridge as they used to say on Hu. Let's get out of here and seek new beings and new worlds. The Earth Two sens know where we are. They outnumber us. They outgun us. It is not safe here any longer."

"Agreed!" Even Earth Two was boring to me. Most of the Farout are Hu, not a majority, but the largest minority for sure. Spent too long with beings I know. I want to meet new sen too.

Now we need to convince the Cetaceans to go along. Or not. No one ever had a problem with them. They are free to plot their own destiny. We can't continue to fracture though. There are only a few hundred land sen left. And we have just lost eight more. I don't count the mech of course.

# Ku Town

My eyes are wide open and my feathers erect as the strangest creatures I could have ever imagined walk by. Some wear tool belts or even what look like cloth coverings. Some are so covered I cannot tell what resides underneath. Some are as naked as I am, only wearing a single item. There is fur, hair, feathers, nothing, shiny, dull, wrinkled, and muscles. Oh lots of muscles.

Small carts go by with no apparent driver pulled by creatures I cannot identify and have never seen before. They carry every imaginable kind of good. Food, wood, stone, soil, barrels, pots, sen. It is all I can do to keep up with everyone. The rest of my crew seem to be having the same problem. The only one who is comfortable is our leader Ebe.

We start to pass through an area that sort of looks like home.

+This is Ku Town. Learn its layout. This is where you will feel most comfortable. Everyone not a visitor speaks Ku at least. The food is not quite the same, but close. We have had to adapt to the other sen and there has been some exchange of cooking styles and tastes. Can you believe the Hu will not eat grubs? They would rather die.+ Ebe shows amusement. I would die to get to eat one. A nice large juicy one. My mouth waters and reminds me we have nothing but pellets since we left home.

We pass food booths like in any Ku city. The smell is wonderful. There are shops selling items that would work in any perch or clutch. There are fresh vegetables, grains, oh my, grubs! Small rodents even!

+Oh, this is a special treat. I will buy you some, just this once. Next time it is your treat.+ Ebe pays the vendor using some kind of ceramic disks. She hands each of us a stick with five baby mice grilled and seasoned. I try really hard to make them last savoring each bite, but I can't and I may have been the first one done.

Ryg asks, +What spice was that? Very tasty.+ Licking his beak.

+I have only been here once before and not long enough to learn everything. As I said, there is a mixing. We all benefit with exchange of cultures.+

I ask, +Is there a Hu town and a town for each of the others?+

+Good question. I believe so, but not every sen settles in every area and certainly not in the same numbers. It varies quiet a bit. Here we are. This should at least look familiar.+ A Blue Bird Hut!

+Welcome, oh, you are all Blue Birds. Ebe, you are back! You need to tell me all about how Ku is doing.+ Her accent sounds funny to me. She

gives Ebe a neck rub with her neck. They clearly know each other well.

+We will need a perch for all of us. We are together on the sewer project.+

+Great. Good choice, ah I mean at least in choosing you. I am assuming the others are also qualified of course.+ She nods.

+This Syi. I helped her get through graduate school in the capital.+

She turns to us, +This is Keki, Jig and Ryg. They are experts at the business end. I am good on paper, they KNOW how it is supposed to work.+

+Excellent. Glad they thought of it. Anything has to be better than what the Hu put in. It clogs all the time.+

I ask, +Only in Ku Town, or throughout the city?+

+Specism is severely guanoed on here. They would be kicked out of the city if they were caught. All areas are complaining unfortunately.+ A big problem then. Too bad, a few blocks of lines would be easy, but this city is huge. Much bigger problem.

+Ah, here is the manager of the City, White Cloak Flor.+ Another reason the Hu don't pick on us I am sure.

I bow down, she is legend. How can she be alive even? The stories go back at least a hundred solars.

+Relax Keki, we are not formal here. I only use the title for those who seem to be impressed by them.+

I cluck, "The Hu." She nods. I show amusement.

+And the Ba. They are even worse than the Hu about hierarchies and obsessed with manners. Don't even try if you work with them. You will just embarrass yourself and they are used to it and don't mind unless you are Ba.+ Good to know. Can't believe I am working for White Cloak Flor. My head is swimming.

She sighs, +Another one. Get over it. I need you to work hard, not faint every time I come in the room.+ She give me a hug and brushes off some of the dust from our trip. I calm down. If she is not embarrassed touching me I guess I can calm down.



## Earth Two - Fragrant Harbor

"This is another fine mess you have gotten me into Drup."

"Quit your whining. We have our own ship this time and can go anywhere we want. Having a Captain's quarters to hide in (and disappear from) helps tremendously."

"As long as one of us is on deck to keep order." He smiles.

"No, just once could we go somewhere not so hot and humid? How about Hawaii?"

"No one living there now. Kind of hard to plot a course to the middle of nowhere for no reason. Native plants and animals have taken over. No more pineapples even."

"Or sugar cane?" I do love sugar.

"Or sugar cane. Too dangerous and easy to convert to booze." There is that. Not to mention that it rots your teeth in a few months. We would be fine, but a crew who can't chew their food is worthless.

"Speaking of crew, they will want shore leave this time." He nods.

"Shifts. I want a workable crew at all times. No more than one third at a time. There are reports of pirates in this area too."

"Need to bring in more Cat/Hu pairs? We are running out of candidates for either half of the pair."

"Very few work out as well as the two we left at Crab Cove. I was not crazy about moving Cat and Mouse to Alexandria either, but we need more TKs here if we have to worry about the Farout group attacking us. Unfortunately it is almost the same criteria for both positions. We need people who could not care less about the power or wealth possibilities and are secure enough in themselves to not be pushed around or talked into something stupid."

"We would not have been chosen by those standards. I am more of the raise a few dozen and then sort them out based on behavior."

I laugh, "And I am the reckless one? That is crazy. Whole communities could go under."

"Frog Harbor. I hated letting that happen. But we needed to wake people up. I mean, look, we have pirates everywhere we go. Why do you Hu always fall to that position?"

"Hey, don't blame that one on me. Accident of birth in my case. Certainly not a choice."

He gives me an evil smile, "Are you sure?"

"Do you remember the last incarnation? I certainly don't. I certainly

do not remember having any say. Farout and Magenta would not have been my choice."

"Magenta was not so bad once we got used to it."

"Compared to Farout that is true. But give me a good ship and a gentle breeze and I am in heaven."

"You don't miss star ships?"

"You mean flying closets? We never got to see anything but the inside of a mop bucket."

He laughs a hearty laugh. It is true though. We look out at the deck crew washing the deck as we think about the good old days. At least here we have fresh air and fresh fish. Sap chow just sucks.

"Take us in slowly. They have signaled they have seen us. Watch the dock signals to steer us into the place they want us."

"Aye, aye Captain." She is great as a pilot, but drinks too much while on shore leave. We might have to let her go if she can't get it together. She has been warned. Last thing we need is for her to get raped and pregnant. People have the right to make their own mistakes, but I don't have to like it.

Docking occurs flawlessly and one third of the crew gets ready to go ashore. Drup goes below to do the necessary paperwork and get the goods ready for unloading.

"You are not needed while we are docked Pilot. You can join the first shift ashore if you like."

"All the same I think I should stay here." She comes up to me after most of the rest have left, "I know I have a problem. I want to kick this. Can you help?"

"You have a disease Pilot. Not the first nor the last. There is no cure. The best you can do is to keep it in check and NEVER take another drink as long as you live."

"That is a long time."

"Indeed, hopefully. The alternative is a horrible, horrible death. Many have gone that course. You really do not want to. It will hurt bad at first as your body gets used to not having what it most wants in life. But, the alternative is death. Keep that in mind and you will get through the worst. The desire never goes away though, but to give in is death. Death should be forever before your eyes with each breath you take."

"Shit Captain. No one is that strong."

"Ah, but Pilot, you are not alone. Neither one of us is going ashore. And you will never see me take a drink either."

"Ah, thanks Captain. I am going to the bow to watch the harbor."

If she had said she was going below I would have been worried. There are hidden stores of rum down there. I could remove them, but each has to face their own demons. If she is smart she will empty them overboard before she is tempted too strongly again. We will be here for an eight day. If she can hold out that long, she has a chance. Of course if she does others will be pissed. Hey, this should be a group effort.

An eighth later the first crew members come back and the second shift take off, after getting ideas from passing the first.

The 1st Mate comes up to me, "Strange place. I mean I know we have crew from Frica to Indland, but the people here are pale. It is like they never been in the sun or something."

"Welcome to Ahseeah. What did you think of the food?"

"No idea what I was eaten, but it tasted good. No offense to cookie."

"She is on second crew. We will see if she picks up any ideas. I gave her a few coin to collect spices."

Her eyes go wild, "Not more Indland please. Near took my head off it was so hot."

"Some like it hot." I smile. I do, but it is an acquired taste for sure. Just don't get me into a contest or I might be tempted to cheat. Oh, hell cheating on a hot pepper contest is fun too. Just watching the eyes bulge out of your opponent. And that's why I am one of the Captains. No one ever heard of sharing the position before, but it works. Of course they do not know we have continuous com with each other. Okay, I admit Drup is the better Captain and I defer to him most of the time.

"1st Mate. Any problems. It is safe out there?"

She pauses, "We are strange to them as well. They are curious of course. I am not sure if they are intrigued or repulsed though. We are never alone, so we be okay." She nods and then goes about her duties. The officers rarely have to be told anything. They instinctively know what needs to be done. Faster and better that way. Get good people and trust them to do their jobs. Never happened at Farout of course. This is way better.

By nearly dawn the crew are all back for better or worse. Cook has a large bag of new things to experiment with. Going to have some digestive issues until the correct ratios are worked out. We unloaded first thing. We were expected. Now what to bring back or pass further on. I am tired of Frica and would rather move on. Of course we do foraging when others do not know where we are, but not enough time to build up any relationships. Mostly just checking in on sheriffs. We use paper and ink most of the time for that, but of course, personal attention is needed occasion-

ally.

We are not totally against using our abilities, but just want to be sure it not bailing out peoples who should have known for a long time that they needed to do something different. I have no patience for the lazy or fearful. Bullies always win if they are never confronted. Crab Cove still pisses me off big time. Right in our own backyard. We gave them a lot of hints, but it was slow in coming and Hu adapt to the worst situations given enough time I guess. Like I was any different at Farout.

Still can't believe we nearly all died at their hands. Puu and Cat saved us again. Scary and humiliating. I should have noticed something. Puu said that their tech was really good. But I lived with them. I should have known better. Okay the last thousand plus years I was here, and thousand before that we were on Magenta, but still. Oh, and being a low TK I was not told a lot. But still. that was a huge embarrassment. Now I spend random times each day doing world scans, especially in uninhabited areas.

Silver does not think they will be back for awhile. Licking their wounds and playing the long game. Great. Next time, no questions or com, just destroy. Won't know what hit us. I know these sen. They hate being on the losing side. A huge chip on their shoulder. They will be back. No question about it.

Pilot comes up to me. I doubt she has slept.

"I want to go ashore. Will you go with me?"

"I am not your father."

"Nor my boyfriend. Got it.:" I look twice her age. Flattery will not help you dear. I already respect your abilities too much.

I go to our cabin and knock and tell Drup through the door Pilot and I are going ashore. The crew is used to this deception. Drup is off somewhere himself, but they don't need to know that. I have TPd him. We will both keep a scan eye on the ship and jump back if needed.

Pilot and I go ashore. Looks like every port we have ever been in. Part of it is simple necessity. People are different. More Asian and less African as would be expected, but as a port it has people from all over.

"Have you decided what we will carry next?" She really wants to know where we are going next and the cargo might give a clue.

I turn to her, "Relax, we are not going back to Crab Cove for a long time. Hope you have not left a string of lovers from there to here."

She pretends to look shocked at that statement.

"And maybe that is the reason I do not want to go back." She teases back. The crew know we are totally off limits. I am sure they are curious how we relieve 'stresses' that invariably build up. There is no privacy on

board a ship.

She asks me, "So where are we going? We have already passed the rest of the crew." Meaning the bars. Last place I am taking you dear.

"A surprise. Trust me."

We leave the port and head up hill to a lavish pavilion. I shake my head. Hope they are not hoarding here too. I hope this is all just show.

"Wow. Much warmer and drier here. Never thought it would be that different so close by."

"Every area is a little different. Here we go. In this way."

There are guards at the open gate. Glad Drup is not with us.

"参观原因?" They ask. I sigh.

"Do you speak Standard?"

"不" Great. Chinese only then.

I answer them, "机长和飞行员在寻找地图。" TP has it's advantages. They let us through, but I am sure our descriptions have been noted and passed on.

"Where did you learn to speak Chinese?" Pilot asks me. She knows enough to know what language it is. Good for you Pilot. By the way, they do not know much Chinese either, all a cover, but for what?

"Dear, I am a lot older than you and have been many places. They just wanted to know who we were and why we are here."

"I don't even know why we are here."

I smile but say nothing.

I stop at a few places and inquire, "地图?" and am given directions that of course take us in circles. This has given me plenty of time to locate our prey, but first . . .

"Hungry?" She nods yes.

We stop at a few ubiquitous food stalls and fill up. I gather a few special sweets to entice our prey with as well.

"I will need a nap now."

"Hang on, this is not the reason for our trip. Here we are."

We open an old wood door, go down a narrow passage. We are being watched. We pretend like we belong here and show no concern. Pilot knows how to behave so does not go all looky-loo on me. Not her first shore leave. Sailors can make easy marks.

I knock at the door and a servant opens it. No words are exchanged. They knew we were coming of course, that is why were sent in circles to give them time to prepare. We enter and are seated on a nice carpet around a table. Two others come in and sit too. We are served tea. The servant sits and pours himself tea. Once everyone has had one cup I bring

out the sweets.

"A worthless offering to thank you for the tea we are not worthy to consume." The bag disappears.

"How did you know we spoke Standard."

"If you did not we would leave."

"Yet I know you speak Mandarin."

"What we need has to be more than Chinese. You would need to know Standard to meet our needs. This is not about talking, but we are hoping to make a purchase of a special kind."

"We sell nothing here."

I sigh, "Donation to the guild then." She nods. Legally they are not capitalists, but there are ways around any law.

The servant then asks, "What areas are you interested in?"

Pilot wakes up and looks at me. She knows now.

"South and east of here. The islands specifically." She says.

"Rare." Meaning a large donation.

Another person comes in the room and places a scroll on the table and leaves. It is about a meter wide. The table is cleared.

I motion to Pilot to open it. She carefully undoes the ties and unrolls it on the table. Any damage will raise the price as they must charge for our carelessness.

It is all a game of course.

I let Pilot look it over carefully. The script is Standard. They would not sell many maps in Chinese only as so few can still read it. I suspect everyone here knows Standard and the Chinese is just for show or private conversations they don't want their marks to understand.

She sighs and waves her hand and shakes her head as if it is worthless.

"Fem does not know." Ah, that old game. Really? I thought we got rid of that. I give them a sour look.

She responds, "I am assuming if areas close by are not accurate, then the ones farther away certainly are not. There are islands missing, too large, too small, wrong latitudes. This map is worthless to all but some rich person wanting to make a wall look impressive." She makes a dirty face when she says rich.

She does not even bother rolling it up again. I half expect her to place a tea cup on top to stain it.

"This map is hundreds of years old. Last of its kind. Very rare."

I laugh, "You are making five more in the next room exactly like it, complete with aging effects. Come Pilot, time to go. They cannot help us. They only have souvenirs." We make to get up and are quickly motioned

to sit again.

More tea comes out and this time our sweets arranged on a silver platter. I scowl at this display of wealth. But I will use it to my advantage.

I sigh and pull out my enforcement authority, open it and show it slowly to everyone here. I have every right to arrest them on the spot for hoarding.

One laughs and pulls out their own and shows it to me. A copy.

"We can get copies down the hall on the right. Cheap."

"Really, maybe I should visit them as well. Yours is a cheap copy. Fine print is unreadable. Special seal looks really fake. Relax I am not here to take your silver plated tin tray away." Actually very little silver or tin and will be polished off soon.

"We really want a good map. That is all. We leave with a good map and you never see us again."

"Alas, we are out of 'good' maps. Maybe in a few months." Give them enough time to make another copy when they feel like it. Copying a good map really does not pay for itself. And they know we will know the difference now and won't be able to fake it next time.

"We can make our own copy from another ship in that time. Thanks for the tea." I have scanned their chambers and know they really do not have what we need. They are guessing I realize that and do not object to our leaving.

"Well that was a waste of time. Their tea tasted like piss."

"And you know this because you drink your own?" I tease her. She screws up her face. Guess not.

"Green tea, you are used to black tea from Indland. But, I was not here for a map." Let her figure that one out.

"You were here to determine what they do know. Excellent. They don't know much. We are going outside their maps, into the unknown." Not a question. Now she has a real incentive not to take that next drink.

When we arrive back at the dock they are getting ready to set sail. Drup meets me on deck. Pilot goes to her position.

*Storm coming. A bad one.*

*I know. A lot of this will be gone afterwards.* Including the fake map shop. The walls were not all stone, just plaster over cloth stretched on a thin wood frame to fill in the missing areas. We have seen similar cons elsewhere. Stupid monkeys. Ports make good places to con marks.

*They will recover. Not their first storm.*

*Pilot wants to know where we are going.*

*New maps in her chamber. She should be drooling over them by now.*

*Where did you find them?*

*Find?*

*Cheater!*

*Hey, I want us all to get there alive thank you.*

*Good idea. Hope you left a love note with them.*

*No one ever hits on old dragon face.* I laugh, if they only knew what he really looked like.

Hawaii here we come, with stops in Fiji and a host of other small islands. And yes, that is as close any of us wants to get to Cat Land. My scans say they have still not figured it out. Here kitty, kitty, I have some nice sap chow for dinner. I smile, yeah, I hate the stuff too.

I take a small barrel of rum and tie it fast to the mast where Pilot can see it. I burn her name into it and put a skull and crossbones on it as well. I will give strict orders that if this goes missing or empties, to throw Pilot overboard, no questions asked. She will complain that anyone could empty the barrel. Then she should keep an eye on it and not screw up. She has a dream job here, on a great ship going into the unknown. The crew place their lives in her hands. She should do the same.

It is clear that hoarding is happening here too. The storm will test them. Do they share from their hidden stocks or do they start wars among themselves. A hard lesson. Better to chose life through sharing than hoarding with wars.



## Earth Two - Crab Cove

"Hobbes, where are you? I need your help in here. Please!"

That lazy Cat. As soon as it gets crowded he leaves for a nap or to play with some hapless little creature.

"Calvin, the natives are restless today." My second says. I nod agreement. It has been getting worse lately. Did not help that Drup and Rand left on a new shiny ship to snub them. At least they respect Hobbes. Nothing like a creature smarter than you that would just as soon eat you to wake you up.

The food that came back from Frog Harbor, where the dead do not eat, has been distributed up and down the coast from here. Sheriffs are now the hoarders in the sense of having emergency stores set aside. We would much rather they took care of this themselves, but experience has now shown us they are not ready for that responsibility. Rand says this happens in cycles. Well, I was not born during the last responsible time. This sucks.

A deputy in training comes in with a sack of metal. She sighs as she sets it down. We are still collecting a lot of the stuff. It seems everyone was hoarding. I never realized it was contagious.

I tell her, "Log it and take it to the solars to be melted down. Much harder to hide a ten kilo bar."

"And a random alloy will make it all but worthless anyway," she smiles. She opens it up and I see copper, tin, iron, some silver and a few gold bits. That should make a nice soft fragile alloy. I nod and she takes it away. Or the ceramics guild can oxidize it and use it for color glazes too. Hoarding is a waste when there are so many other uses.

Give me a good ceram knife any day. Sharper and holds an edge longer. Better for cutting than stabbing though. I depend on Hobbes for the nasty stuff

As she is leaving I ask her, "How is it out there today?"

She smiles, "Normal, if you like chaos. Several fights and it is not even third eighth yet." I sigh and shake my head. Where is that Cat?

There is a commotion outside and the door slams open. In come two desperates in raged clothing and signs of blood. They quickly bare the door. This should be interesting. We stare at them and when they turn around they stare back.

"Oh shit. You are Sheriff Calvin?" I nod tapping my badge.

"Then that monster outside, is . . ."

"Hobbes. Correct." The door pushes open. Perps foolishly think they are safe once they get inside. We installed a latch he can operate. He sits in front of the two licking his paws of their blood.

*Caught trying to steal from community stores.*

"Awfully large rats you have caught Hobbes. Well, you know the rules. You are allowed to eat anything you catch." I turn around and talk with Deputy Lisa as she adjusts her pack to head to the smelters. She salutes goodbye and walks past the two and gives Hobbes a gentle scratch on his head.

"Enjoy your meal Hobbes." The two have already soiled themselves. Great, I hate cleaning up their messes.

"Well, take them outside. I already have a mess to clean up here. I don't need body parts spread all over inside. Please bury what you don't eat this time. Good for the garden if you are so inclined."

Hobbes growls and the two slowly squeeze by him.

"Oh, please try and make a run for it. HE loves prey that runs. Splitting up will not work either. He has the right to kill anyone who tries to escape. He gets the fast one first and then slowly hunts down the slow one."

Once they are gone my second nearly dies laughing. We know Hobbes will not actually eat them, but just run them out of town with a few souvenir scratches to mark them as thieves. This will make them unwelcome in other communities. A harsh punishment, but we really do not have jails for major offenders. I loath the idea of making them slaves either. Most will end up close by, working shit jobs for out of the way farms, or scrounging garbage at the edges.

I clean up their mess. I will not ask my helpers to do something I would not do. They have enough to look after without dealing with the hoarders.

"Deputy Max, could you check on the stores and make sure they are secure. If these two thought they could break in, others may too. They certainly did not look hungry."

"They weren't. They were regulars at the community kitchen. Got fed the same as the rest of us. I certainly do not feel deprived and would growl at anyone who tried to give me extra."

"I have taught you well Max." I smile and he smiles back.

Sue comes in with fishing poles. I had forgotten we were going to spend some time on the wharf testing our luck. I put the mops and pails away and wave goodbye to Max. This is a regular thing. We will bring back to the community kitchen anything that Hobbes does not eat.

"Do you think Hobbes is getting a bit, ah, pudgy?" She smiles asking as we walk towards the wharf. She knows I will not mate and am therefore considered safe to be around. Sex may not be the dominate thought on the young mind, but it is still pretty high on the list. She is a widow and really does not want that whole taking care of someone else again. She has a small place outside of town complete with garden and a few house cats. She enjoys her freedom to go where and when she wants.

We find Hobbes waiting for us at wharf #2, curled up in his favorite spot. We set up next to him and drop our lines in the water. Less than an eighth later we have a small bucket full of mackerel and Hobbes is full. A good day, though I think Hobbes got more than we did. Sue takes the bucket to the kitchen, minus one for her own. Will taste good fried with the seasoned rice and vegies. I am almost drooling at the thought.

Back in the office Max and Lisa are doing the paper work. Not sure why, but paper work seems to be part of the job.

"They make it out of town alright?"

I shrug, "Hobbes ate his fill of mackerel, so I am guessing they are still alive somewhere. Best to post someone near the stores though. Some decide to get even and burn the stores down if they can't steal them themselves." I agree with Cats, stupid monkeys.

There is a general feeling of unrest in town. The whole Frog Harbor and the burning of the hoarder house and now searches of everyone's homes for metals has made everyone tense. For some reason people feel safer knowing they have something to fall back on in bad times. But, no one starves unless people hoard and then it is only the honest ones who did not hoard.

*The two I caught worked for the Toles House. They got used to having extra stashed away and trading it for favors. Best if we go to their beds before someone else gets their stash. Hobbes is outside.*

"Hobbes calls. Gotta go. You two okay here?" They nod and I find Hobbes just around the corner. I follow him. He knows where they lived. At the edge of town. A trash heap. I am guessing they must have lived in the Toles compound itself. I am surprised they were not collected in the raid.

*They were on an errand during the raid and saw it happening from a distance. Decided it was best to stay away for a bit. Just recently came back to dig up hidden coins and try to build up what was here before.*

"Great. I have to wonder how many others had the same idea." Glad Hobbes can read their minds. I would hate to have to figure out all this stuff by deduction like in the old tales.

"Too bad you can't smell gold Hobbes."

No one is here, just scan for it. Likely within range. They would not want to take a chance of not reaching it in time to escape.

I scan, but come up with nothing.

"We are not far from the Toles place."

*It is a garden now.* Fitting to raise food on the hoarders plot.

"Yeah, and who would notice someone digging in a community garden." Hobbes runs ahead of me.

I find it eventually. Not in the garden proper, but just outside, near the compost heap. Makes sense actually. Someone working with the compost would be ignored, but hiding just outside would mean someone else does not accidentally find it.

*We have company.*

We hide behind some trees. Hobbes goes high in a few bounds silently. I TK a stone on the other side of the garden and the two go to check that out, effectively distracting them from us. They come back whispering to each other. One is limping pretty badly.

It is the two Hobbes chased out of town of course. Come back to get their stash. I had covered it again when Hobbes told me of their coming. I wait for them to go straight to the spot and start digging.

I stand, "Looking for something boys?" One has a club and swings it at me. Hobbes jumps down on him from the branch above him. The other one takes off dropping his weapon.

I cast a stone at the escaping one and hit him on the head, knocking him down. I go to him and bring him back to the one Hobbes has pinned to the ground and is purposely drooling on. At least this time the mess will be outside.

I sigh, "Really. You could not just take your punishment and leave? You had to come back? Are you insane?"

"We wanted our stuff. Could not start over anywhere without something."

"You mean at the level you were accustomed to. You could, oh, I don't know, try ah, working? You should try it. Works for most people."

We gather up their loot, including a few hidden in the trees and escort them back to the jailhouse. This is beyond the simple and the people will now need to decide their fate.

When we get back to the center of town there is a crowd gathered. Max and Liza are outside our house standing their ground, apparently waiting for us to get back. I bring the two inside and place them in the jail cell. Hobbes sits out on the front porch staring at the crowd.

*They are not here for good.* Never thought that.

I go back outside to join them.

After nervous glances a single person comes forward cautiously.

I start the conversation, "We have retrieved the hoarders. Once you have decided what is to be done with them I will release them into your care."

"No questions asked?"

"That was the agreement." What is this all about?

"Good, glad you understand. You can release them now please." I shrug, go back inside and bring them out. I would not want to be in their shoes as the saying goes.

The two cautiously go down the steps and the crowd separates before them. They gather courage and walk through them. What?

"Ah Sheriff. We, that is the Crab Cove community have decided it would be best if you and the other sheriffs and deputies left town." Whoa, did not see that one coming.

"May I ask why? There is still a lot of work to be done to clean things up."

"That's just it. We ah, disagree that things need to be cleaned up. We had a workable system. We all knew our place and how it worked. We will take over the stores and such as well."

"There will be consequences to this decision. Ships will stop coming to your harbor. If and when you need assistance, it will be freely given."

"We understand and accept this. We still feel we can go a better job ourselves without your interference." Interference? Were we that bad?

I turn to Max and Lisa, "Go get your things. Hobbes and I have everything we need." They go back inside and come out quickly.

I turn to the crowd, "Will you allow us to leave peacefully or must we show you we can and will defend ourselves." Hobbes growls. The crowd splits.

*I have contacted the Moon Beam. They will have a small wobbly wood thing at the docks. I hate being on water.* Poor kitty.

Sue is waiting at the docks, apparently packed to go too.

"I did not agree with the others. Looking for an excuse to leave anyway." I nod and grin.

"Where are your companions?"

"Those mooches? They will find someone else to beg from in a day or two. Would be hard to have them on board, not being used to a moving floor." She smiles at that thought looking at Hobbes.

We row to the edge of the harbor and board the Moon Beam. Hobbes complains the entire time of course. I find Lizat waving at us. At least I have learned how to row and don't make a fool of myself. Hobbes bounds past us.

Suddenly there is the most horrendous growling and hissing. It is like they are going to tear each other apart. I knew they did not really get along, but come on, you are the same species.

Lizat whispers to us, "Princess is in heat." Sue and Lisa roll their eyes. Max and I grin like stupid males. Going to be a long trip if small cats are any indication.

Max says, "I never had that much fun."

Lisa says, "Of course not Max, you are a virgin." That gets laughs.

"To stinky women I am, but not to everyone." He smiles back.

Touche. Of course that is gone now too because of TK. I have heard no one understands why it does not happen to Cats too. I think it is because they want to out breed their prey.

"Anyone know how many kits they have at a time?"

Lizat answers, "Just two thank goodness. House cats can have eight."

"Oh, that really would be too much."

"So, ah, where are we going?"

Lizat looks serious, "We need to talk. Captain needs to be with us."

We are well out of the harbor and nearly out of sight of land when the Captain and 1st Mate comes on deck. The Cats are still going at it. No one will let them below deck as the crew wants to sleep. I think they would prefer if they fell overboard.

It suddenly gets quiet. What happened?

Lizat sighs and says, "I told Princess to get on with it or end it."

I look over and find them both passed out on the deck. Guess we know what happened.

"In a few hours they will start it all up again." I need to talk more with Hobbes. I did not know all this.

Lizat sees my concern, "Males have nothing to do after the mating is done. All up to Princess after that."

"That does not seem fair," I say. I should have asked how many times. A lot is what I would find out.

"Good answer male monkey," Sue says. Everyone laughs, including the Captain. The 1st Mate just shakes her head.

Captain Bright starts our conversation now that it is quiet.

I quickly interrupt, "Ah, Sue is not TK, but can be trusted. I vouch for her."

"Nice of you, but I am too TK, level two. You did not think Rand would leave you two unprotected. Males." She shakes her head and everyone laughs, at me this time. Oh well.

"Okay, here is the situation. We have been excluded from nearly every port since we dropped off our stores. I am afraid we are down to what we can scrounge or fish for. Not a problem here, but they will set out with small boats soon enough and we will not be welcome anywhere near shore when that happens."

1st Mate adds, "Of course they do not cover every meter of shore. There are still small areas we can safely go ashore for other game as long as it is close to shore so we can escape if we have to." Great.

I suddenly get the weirdest feeling of being totally alone. I look over.

"The Cats are gone! I cannot sense them at all." I am freaking out.

"Relax silly monkey. They are on shore finishing what they started. They are not prudes, but realize we are."

"How did . . . wait, what? They are on shore?"

Sue looks at me, "Rand really blew it with you. Didn't you get the basic orientation? Cats, TK2 and above have TP and DS. These two are at least TK3 to reach shore from here."

"Or did so in a few hops," Lizat adds.

"Right, like Hobbes would risk falling into the ocean." The 1st Mate adds.

"Ah, hum, back to our problem please." We all turn to the Captain.

"Sheriffs up and down the coast have all been evicted. We have several on board now." Shit.

"And there have been no more sightings of pirates. We are both out of a job."

I come in, "I was told not to trade with any settlement that turns us down."

"Correct. We have the same understanding. What this comes down to, is we need to find another reason for existence. I am close enough to retirement I could easily set up on a remote island and live out my extended life comfortably, but I took an oath same as you and intend to serve. And I sure as hell don't want to turn the Moon Beam over to a bunch of hoarders. Well, think about it. We have time to work this out."

Sue asks, "Where are we going now? South if I am oriented correctly."

"Good for you land lubber, yes south. Cat and Mouse were rescued from a small island off Madscar. We will meet up with the Black Wind there, though Cat and Mouse are no longer on board."

I add, "And Drup and Rand set off on the Black Wind II to the south seas for adventure."

"They will check in at some point. Likely at Crab Cove first. Don't worry, they can find us no matter where we end up."

"I was at Crab Cove when the hoarders were removed. They don't intend to run things as we did. We are free to make our own decisions based on our own experiences and abilities."

"And we have learned a lot in the last few eight days haven't we. A lot to think about." We all nod agreement.



# Alexandria

*They could at least allow me a freshly dead one. I make an excellent corpse disposal service. Cat loves watching them in the trees.*

"That is not how they honor their dead and you know it. Ask Marie to dupe you some Ba flesh if you dare."

Snoot in the air pretending I did not say that.

*You are not wasting your time on a stupid leaf again. Stupid monkey. There is no point to what you are doing.*

"I am surprised. You actually understand. That is why we do it. There is no point to this art form. I love it."

They were not going to teach me until I showed them some of my carved knife handles. If I cared about money I could make a living selling knife handles to the Ba. They love the obsidian blades too. They appreciate the craft necessary to make both. Strange culture. The only way to gain respect in their culture is through birth to a good family or through pointless art forms. Of course I am a total mystery to them, a Hu who spends time carving handles that need no art and am now considered a low level master at the ephemeral art of leaf carving. No Hu has ever attempted that before nor done so well.

Of course I do not know the Ba life forms. I could copy other Ba art, but that does not seem right. I use creatures I have seen or imagined as my models. Another one that gets to them are the known sen. A good Ceph that wraps around the knife handle to grab the blade is a big hit. Getting tired of doing them of course, but one way into their society is through generosity. When invited to a tree house I gift the hosts with one of my works. The problem is I get invited to too many parties and am spending most of my time carving.

Fortunately I can do this while doing other things, including classes. This upset the instructors at first until the Ba all threatened to leave if I was not allowed to continue. This had never happened before, the Ba are usually very polite when it comes to authority. I am now allowed to work during class, but have to keep it discrete, working under the table so to speak. Being a TK3 now helps. In fact I am getting good at just using TK to carve. This had the added benefit of putting me way ahead in TK3 classes. Practice, practice, practice. Most of the rest want to get the 'juicy' stuff and are trying to get through classes as fast as possible. I wait for the instructors to tell me I can advance. That surprises them too.

Most of the sen do not know what to make of me. I do not fit any Hu

culture they know of, live with the Ba and am paired to the first Cat allowed at the University.

Speaking of Cat. She is now a black belt in martial arts. Not a real surprise. She was reluctant at first, thinking she did not need any training. Then this tiny Ba fem obliterated her in a match. That woke her up. What set the hook was when she found out that Marie, Puu and Cat trained Owa Moosa herself and beat her. Now I think she worships the three, though she mostly sees Marie. Puu and Cat are in the upper levels of heaven around here and most tremble at the thought of even meeting them. They do walk around the University same as everyone when they are here. Very nice and approachable. I have even gifted both of them with knives. A soaring bird for Puu and a raging Cat for Cat of course.

With my younger body I find I love running, but am also missing the sea. I am told we are due for a field trip soon to a harbor west of here and they have sailing ships for movement of goods between ports. I would love to intern on one. As an elective I have been studying to be a Captain. Of course living in a tree and being in the middle of what is essentially a desert gets a lot of laughs. I am used to humidity and the special gulch they set up for the Ba redwoods is heaven for me. Just right.

All of the ecologies are thin on Alexandria. They are trying, but there are thousands of species in each one and it is not so easy to get the balance right. We have all read about the ill fated New Hope and how Silver, Turtle and Green Man were able to set up a world ecology that worked. Oh, almost forgot Snap. The only one of the originals to have died so far.

"The key is the fungi I am sure of it."

~What?~ Professor Phosh asks me as she passes. She is wearing a translator patch that converts spoken to Ceph hand touch signs. I would love to take one apart, but am told only a TK9 or above could understand it. A form of the companion I was told. I have a buddy, but I am sure I am not using her to full capacity. She sits in my pouch most of the time. Just not used to sen floating things around me.

I do a deep bow in the Ceph fashion. She motions for me to rise.

~I am convinced that the reason the ecologies we set up here are always crashing is because we do not have the fungi set up properly. On the island I was on for tens of solars there were thousands of varieties that I could see and now I know that means as least ten times that number I did not see.~

~Very good Mouse. Most of our students do not see that. Most see the fungi as pests to be controlled rather than embraced as partners. How would you fix this?~ She is testing me.

~The fungi experts are the 'thants. They understand life at the subterranean level the best. Let me think. Ah, I would get the help of the Ku also. They understand fermentation and water systems.~

~Are you going on the field trip to the Western Port?~ I affirm in hand Ceph. ~Excellent. Glad we have at least one student going that gets it.~ She does a formal bow and leaves to go about her business. That is an honor. Most Ceph are picky about whom they do a formal too. I have to wonder what more trouble I have just gotten myself into.

I make my way to the Dojo. This is Cat's territory and she loves to tease me about how bad I am at hand to hand combat. I prefer knives. No one can best me unless they use TK. I have to wear a special limiter that is visible to everyone when I do knife lessons as no one believes anyone is that good. I wonder how Lizat is doing with Princess. We are allowed a limited number of letters to com with friends off world. I heard about the problems they are having. Wish I was there to help.

In the jungle, if they could touch you, you were likely dead. Best to fight from a distance. Not sure what the point of all this is. I have taken so many classes that I doubt I will ever use the information from. I am told this is the traditional student experience. It may be thirty solars before I need the information, but then, finally, I will be glad I had some exposure. Sure.

I am paired with a young fem Hu. She beats me easily. Of course I am forbidden to knock her out or harm her in any way. She looks at me.

"What?" I look around to see what she is seeing.

She points to the climbing poles. "I cannot for the life of me get up one of those. I am told you might teach me?" Ah, the sad kitty eyes. Cat has pulled that one on me so many times. Still, I am easy to catch.

I sigh, "Sure." We walk over. No one else here.

"It takes some good upper body strength. Best to be doing exercises that help. Push-ups, pull-ups, weight lifting, that sort of thing. Your fem hormones put you at a disadvantage." Her weight too, but I dare not say anything about that. Weight is an advantage during a hand to hand bout but not in climbing.

"Let me see the bottom of your feet." She looks confused, but complies. Yeah, I thought so. I go to the locker and pull out some climbing shoes for her. If she tried without them she would end up with splinters and blisters for sure. Not being able to walk around here is a handicap.

"Have you ever seen a caterpillar?" She nods. Good. Not all have had experience in nature. "You remember how it uses its back false feet to grab around a stem?" I jump on the first pole and exaggerate the method.

"Then you act like a worm and push off with your feet and hold on with your hands. There are other ways too of course, but best you build up your arms first. This will get you up, though not the fastest method."

"The test is not timed, so this could work. Will you spot me?" I nod and she takes the pole next to me. We start on the ground, position feet to grab sideways, reach up and wrap arms around the pole at a little over chest level, hug tight, raise feet, push off and get your arms up a little further.

"You will be able to take larger 'steps' once you get used to it. As with anything . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, practice, practice, practice." She sighs, but tries it. First few times she slips of course. Her thighs will be sore tonight, but she does get up a few meters.

"Come on down. You will be sore. This is normal. Go slow and work your way to higher and higher positions."

She looks down at me, "Ah, how do I get down?"

I smile, "Same thing in reverse. Take it slow. This is harder on your arms." She manages to get close enough to the ground to fall the rest of the way without hurting herself.

She bows to me, "They call me Sweet Pea."

"We both got the good names I see, I am Mouse."

"We don't choose our names. Don't know what my parents were thinking. Why did they name you Mouse? Were you a really tiny baby?"

I sigh, "I don't remember by child name. My master, Cat, named me Mouse. I am sure it was meant as an insult."

"You are a little big for a mouse. Cat is something else. She does not like to be beaten. I saw the match between her and a Ba Master. The look on her face after loosing was priceless." I can imagine and smile along with her.

"Good to be put in your place once in a while. Humility is a positive trait that unfortunately the Cats don't excel in." She laughs, looks around to be sure Cat is not listening, then smiles again.

"We live with the Ba. It made the tree news instantly. She was teased incandescently for several eight days. Now she is close to beating anyone who goes against her. She got special lessons from Marie apparently. I think she worships Marie personally."

"Ah, yes, the Hu who taught Owa how to fight. That would get her attention."

"They don't tease her any more. She likes to watch them while licking her lips. They are not so sure she will not break the rule about eating a

sen."

"I have had cat companions. I am sure it is incredibly hard for her. They are hardwired to attack anything smaller that moves."

"Cats have a few more brain cells, but the instinct is still there certainly. I have a question. I have been here over a solar now. Any idea how long they will keep me here?"

"Poor Mouse. I have been here three and feel like I am just getting started. Some spend their entire lives here. Each sen gets their own training, so it depends on where you go next I guess."

"Are you going on the Western Port field trip?"

"You too? Not that sewer systems are my thing, but it will be nice to get out of here for a day anyway. Heard they have some great places to eat."

"Looks like we will be seeing each other tomorrow morning then."

We bow to each other again and I depart.

I am likely to forget her name in a few hours. In the jungle you did not need a name. All you needed to know was it food, prey or to ignore it. Of course mistakes were made, sometimes fatal. Has one sen ever eaten another sen on Alexandria? I would hate to guess what the punishment would be. Does the victims race decide or do they just take away your TK and plant you on a deserted island. Not that I would kill anyone just to go back. With my luck it would be a treeless patch of sand with nothing but ocean in sight. That might not be so bad though. I have to stop thinking this way.

No sheriffs or pirate hunters on Earth Two. What about the hoarders? What about the ones at the bottom of this new hierarchy? A lot of people are going to suffer. So stupid. Why aren't they doing something about it? There must be enough TKs there now. Yeah, I know, they have to figure it out themselves. The entire TK school sat on their asses at TK school and no one said anything. No wonder Drup and Rand left on their own ship. I hope Lizat is okay. Princess I am not so worried about. I know that Cat and Princess would do just fine if left alone in the interior of Frica or elsewhere.

I have an orientation class to attend on the field trip. I sit near the back. I am not a sewage engineer, nor am I in to different foods that everyone else in class is going on about. I am hungry, I eat. Not that particular. I smile. The Ba were really surprised when I ate their delicacies with apparent enthusiasm. They love lots of squirming bugs. I am sure the Ku and Ba would get along just fine. 'But Hu do not eat live insects?' and I go 'Why not? Good protein isn't it?' They just laughed. Cat liked the

larger ones of course. Anything she can chase. They have some grasshoppers that could jump meters at a time. The kits and Cat were all over them.

Time for a run. I am quickly outside University grounds. There is someone up ahead, small fem. I have seen her at the Dojo. One of the best. She is fast. I am barely able to keep up with her. Usually my longer legs give me an advantage. We make the loop and are soon back to the University south entrance. I walk slowly to cool down.

She comes up to me. I thank her. "Nice run. Thanks for not getting too far ahead of me. I am Mouse."

She smiles awkwardly, "This one is called Spikes. This is not my true form."

"Ah, sen visa then. What do you think of being Hu and being at the University?"

"Hu is very limiting. Not a good form for killing or hunting. Cooked food is not to my liking either."

"Yet you excel at Kung Fu." I smile.

She attempts a shrug, "Passes the time. Marie is my sponsor. It is so confusing with so many sen being present." I nod agreement.

"I was alone on an island for twenty or so solars. I miss being there now. Then I was on a sailing ship for a year. This is very crowded to me as well."

"Oh, misunderstanding. Crowded is good. Too many different kinds of sen is what I meant. On my worlds, only us."

"That would be very boring to me. I like seeing different ways of doing and seeing things. I live with the Ba at the moment. I could never become Ba, but there are some positives too."

"Good fighters. I saw one beat your companion." She looks concerned. Did everyone see that bout? Poor kitty.

"I don't mind losing. No one learns from winning."

"You are smarter than most Hu. You play the long game. I will need to watch you." She bows and runs off like the run we did was a tired stroll. I am about to swallow my own words. Do I need to take running lessons too? I have got Cat disease. Relax, you do not need to beat others running.

When I get back to our tree there is a full scale celebration going on. TK globes are everywhere and lots of high pitched voices. I sigh. That is one aspect of the Ba culture I am definitely not in to. I climb our tree and decide it is still too noisy at our living level and continue to climb. I weigh less than Cat, so this is my favorite way to get space from her

when needed too. Being the largest tree means I have a great view. I can see the entire University. Other sen have celebrations too, but this time it appears to be just here. I can see individuals moving between buildings and com-ing with each other. Reminds me of watching an ant nest and trying to figure out what each ant is attempting to accomplish.

# Alexandria - Ku Town

I am overwhelmed. The last few lunars have been insane. I am a crazy bird. So much to learn. I thought I was coming here to help a Ku engineer set up a better sewage system for a town.

Well, it is not a town, but something called a city. Intended to house several hundred thousand sen of all different kinds, known and unknown. That means coming up with housing plans that can be adapted to each sen's needs. As well you might ask, what does housing have to do with sewage. Well, all sen produce waste. All waste can be recycled into something useful. Each sen is different in what it puts out and how that putting out is handled. Ku just squat on a designated location. Done. Others need running water or vacuum systems and the shapes of the equipment is different for each. Then there are areas that any sen can use if pressed. A sort of universal waste room.

Fortunately there are not hundreds of thousands here yet. Only tens of thousands which is already way more than any Ku town I have ever been in. The area itself is on a hill at least. We can and will use gravity to assist. Being dependent on mech is always risky. They will fail, only a matter of time. I much prefer passive means if at all possible. The problem with passives is getting it all to come together. There are only so many routes we can use.

Our first designs were night terrors. Too many pipes. Pipes can and will leak. We are also forbidden to dump any waste into the ocean. I had never seen an ocean before. During a storm they are quite scary. We have to account for storms with a lot of rain, waves, earthquakes, droughts. No snow at least. I have only heard of that.

Then the 'thants came in. It is a joy to work with them. They are so logical and not at all emotional. They are very direct, so you always know where you are with them. If your design will not work, they will tell you, no matter who you are. Even Flor, can't believe I am on a first name basis with Saint Flor, listens to them. She said if we are going to work together she can't stand ceremony, bowing, etc. She is just a bird, not better or smarter than any other. She does not have all the solutions.

If you are reading this some time in the future, know that we are required to keep a journal. I have never written so much in my life. And, we have to read the journals of others that have gone before us. At first I thought this was great until all the weird things happened. It read like a flight school horror. Flying sen who can't fly. Changing things from one



to another. Changing bodies even. Flying solids that can talk with you without words. Why are we reading all these strange stories I asked. They all just expressed humor and said to wait.

We made practice units to test our designs. We had other sen come in and try them to give us feedback. We installed ones that appeared to be working in different sen towns and then studied how they worked for sen who had never seen our work before. We had so many failures. It was very discouraging. Then the obvious hit. 'thants have it very simple. They are all the same, more or less, all putting out the same minimal waste. Easy. Even they had trouble understanding all the different needs. And they are the winners of simplicity.

But it turned out that simplicity was the key. Except for the 'thants themselves, all of our sen are carbon based with the similar 'biochemistry' a new concept for me. Diets varied, so outputs varied. Ba and Ku tend to have a lot of phosphate in their output. Di and Raps have a lot of nitrogen because they prefer vertebrate flesh in their diet. Hu are somewhere in between. Ceph live near the shore and take care of their own waste, going directly into sea farms to grow seaweeds to feed to small animals, which they then eat. Another reason we cannot dump the waste in the ocean, it would poison the Ceph Town. But, this is important, we can mix the wastes to produce a 'fertilizer' that is excellent to grow plants that can be eaten directly or used to feed animals that are then fed on. By using a mixed chamber we can direct quantities of the different wastes to where those nutrients are needed. Even the 'thant lichen and fungus farms benefit. Win-win as the Hu say.

I do not sleep as much as I used to. There are artificial lights we can use to stay awake, but eventually I should still need to sleep right? I am down to only one eighth a day of actual sleep and another eighth split into two sessions, one before sleep and one upon waking, that I think instead of sleep. Before I would need to sleep, no thinking time, an average of three eighths.

Guano, this pen is almost out of ink, I reach out to get another squib to fill it with when suddenly it is in my hand. I look up and see the rest of the squibs across the room. How did it come to my hand? Oh, no, they didn't, did they? The stories were not stories, but records of actual events, well at least from the point of view of the writer. And now I am . . . changing too.

I carefully put down the squibs and pen, close my journal and set it down in the drawer. I slowly get up and leave my space. We are each given our own space to work when we need to be alone. No one else will

use the same space. Seems inefficient, but I have come to appreciate it.

I go to the healer. She is with someone else, so I wait. I am visibly shaking when I am finally called in.

"Keki, what is the problem?" We all had to learn and use Standard. Just easier with so many different sen. The Ba have the hardest time trying to make their voices as low as they can. They tend to keep their words short.

Without looking, I open my hand and a piece of equipment from her table comes to me. I then hand it to her.

"Ah, it has finally happened. Took long enough. The others all snapped days ago. You are the last in fact." I have never been to a Hu healer before, but they all seem to know Ku well enough.

"All the others you mean?"

"The others you came with. Of course your leader was already TK. I will leave it to him to explain. 'thants naturally have TK abilities necessary for their given tasks."

"Do all the sen here have TK?"

"Oh no, that would be a nightmare. Stuff would be flying all over the place all the time. You will need to take classes to help you adjust of course. Though, given what I suspect is only your second attempt, you did quite well. Most look at the object they want and reach for it, when this is not necessary of course." My head is light as I try and take this in.

"Go back to your ah, coop, and get some rest. I have signed you up for classes just after morning meal. Here, I will show you on a map where you need to go." She shows me a map on a board and points to where we are and where the practice area is. It is well away from the living areas, but still a nice morning run. I will enjoy that part at least.

"One more thing. Do not show your ability at any time for any reason to someone whom you are not absolutely sure is also TK. The 'norms' as we call them are not aware of these abilities and it might upset them unnecessarily. We serve them, they do not serve us, but having extra abilities might not seem fair. We only allow these abilities to develop in individuals we are sure will not use to them for personal gain or revenge. As a full Blue Bird, you already passed that requirement of course."

"I have seen enough evil to understand." I bow and leave for my room, as the Hu call them. I have gotten used to using Standard most of the time. Hope I do not forget Ku altogether. I don't dare think of anything I might need for fear it will come flying to me.

When I get back to my space I close the door. This is not at all normal for me, or for any Blue Bird. We think nothing of personal space or pri-

vacy. But I am afraid of being seen accidentally.

Now I am curious and after a few attempts I learn to float in the air above my perch. I go to a reference book about TKs we needed to read to understand the journals and determine, based on my weight, that I am TK2. The normal first step on the TK ladder. I decide this is a good time for sleep and turn off my glow globe.

All Ku have flying dreams. Now it is real. I can fly!

# Alexandria

"Cat is out of the no-no box."

"At last. I hate having to do her duties as well as mine."

"Hey, I did some of them too."

"When you weren't time skipping with Edwin?" I smile. She looks guilty.

"I meant too. Did not expect it to go the way it did. It was exciting though. It is clear that eventually the 'thn will re-exert their influence."

"We knew that would happen. It is their purpose after all. At least we culled the heard and hopefully removed the negative code from their kind."

"Well, maybe for a million years, but remember, half of their personality is from the fluidic sen. There are so few peaceful fluidics."

"If any. I am not convinced there are. The few we think we have found are likely to be otherwise once we observe them over time. It is easier to be nice with a monoculture. Add another sen and all hell breaks loose."

"Puu, so negative." Myra pretends to be offended.

"Did Cat hear about your trip?" Myra nods. I sigh. I scan for her. She is not close by. Myra sees me concentrating and points up.

"Really? The only reason she would go there is to do something really dangerous."

"What did you expect? First the Farout Gang nearly takes out E2 and then we come back with the 'thn collective making a reemergence."

"They were not going to take out E2, they wanted it for their own. They just wanted to kill you two." Myra smiles. Thanks a lot.

"We do not do well with bullies. Let me know if she starts hunting them. Defensive I will accept, if it does not kill us, but no offensive arts. They have a right to try their method as much as we do. Lots of space in the universe." Myra nods.

<sup>th</sup>Myra, we are needed at the Western Port, <sup>th</sup> Edwin says.

"Gotta go. A tour of the sewage system for the Uni students."

"Oh, that has to be a lot of fun." Glad she got that assignment.

"Hey, there are some new Ku techs who are really doing a great job. Likely will be a model for everywhere on Alexandria. All passive, no TK or outside power needed." That is impressive. Bet they used TK to set it up though.

"Just glad I don't need to worry about that any longer."

"Periods were worse," Myra smiles and they pop out. Yeah, don't

bring back that horror.

## Earth Two - South Seas

I stare at the cask on the mast everyday. The others see me staring at it. I already know their orders, "How far can you swim?" Ha-ha-ha. They think that is the reason I do not touch it. They would only be partly right. The main reason is I am on an adventure of a lifetime. I do not want to miss it. Being drunk means missing everything.

I am on break as the 1st Mate watches over things. We are out of sight of land, but have a good idea of where we are by some new tech that Drup and Rand have brought aboard and shown the two of us. They called it a sextant. At noon we sight the sun and it will tell us latitude. Knowing what time noon is in relation to something called standard time tells us longitude. The clock is the most precious thing on board. The entire ship could be wrecked, but without the clock and sextant we are lost. The rest of the crew sees this process as magic and they would not be that far off. I understand in principal, but in reality it is magic. A magic I am glad we have.

I find Rand, "Captain, may I ask a question?"

"Of course Pilot." He puts down the carving he is doing. We all do them using the bones we find. The scratches are filled in with carbon black mixed with beeswax. Some of the crew are amazing artists. We can trade what we make a ports to gain special items not on our normal supply list.

"The people at Fragrant Harbor. Are they always that way?"

He laughs, "No worse than anyone else. Fragrant Harbor is a major port for all the islands near by. The one kilometer rule goes a lot further on an island. For that reason they are sought out. Some are entirely Hu settled in fact, mostly because they are thin enough for the one km rule to essentially cover the island. Anyone who knows how to get to these special places has useful knowledge. Knowledge that others might trade well for. Copying a map is easy compared to finding one of these special places in the first place."

"So they hoard knowledge in the same way that Crab Cove hoarded food, metals and glass."

"Correct. Same thing, though as you can guess, knowledge is more portable."

"So is gold. I don't get gold. Not very useful. Too soft."

"It does not tarnish. Crows like shiny things as well. Some people are addicted to shiny things."

I laugh, "They falsely think it makes them look special or important. I avoid anyone wearing anything shiny for that reason."

"Good idea. You may have noticed that none of our crew are addicted in that way."

"I have noticed and appreciate it. I would rather see the world than gather useless garbage."

"Experiences over things. Good choice. It has been three lunars since we left Fragrant Harbor. How are you doing?"

"You mean in regards to the cask? I know it is there. It is a good reminder of what I never want to do again. This is far better."

"Land Ho!" I look up the mast to the crows nest. The shipmate is pointing slightly to port. I nod to Rand and run to the wheel.

Rand says, "Take us in Pilot. There is a nice harbor with an entrance on the starboard side of the atoll. Reefs that will be trouble at low tide, so we need to time this right. Take your time."

He then turns to others and yells, "Sounders get ready."

The water is so clear once we get close to the atoll. There must be millions of fish below us. Sharks too. The coral is scary. The 1st Mate is on the bow directing me.

"Three degrees starboard." I make the correction. Most of the sail has been reefed. Slow going is the difference between life and death.

We get into the atoll center without incidence, though it was scary at times. I am sure I heard a few scratches. Will need to send mates overboard to check things out.

Rand yells to me, "Sunset soon. Drop anchor and we will go ashore in the morning."

He yells to others, "Drop your fishing lines, let's give cook something tasty to cook for supper. Unless you really want sap chow again." Lines are flying over the side from nearly every member of the crew in all directions. We have not really been eating sap chow, but dried rations is not all that much better and harder on the teeth.

Rand comes up to me, "When you are ready meet me and Drup in our cabin." I nod. He goes below and I wave my second over to take over watch. We are not moving and it is more to prevent surprises.

We have not seen any people in over a lunar now. A long way from where we started. Never heard of anyone going this far out. Even in ship school we never discussed this area of the sea. Most ships would never even attempt going this far out. The seas can get really rough. Being near a port is safer. We encountered one storm on the trip so far. We had to strap everything down and just wait it out. Too far from any land to worry

about hitting anything, but still the danger of capsizing. The waves were several times higher than the top of the highest mast. I was very happy to see calm seas again, even if that meant a lull with no movement for days.

I knock and told to enter. Captains Rand, Drup and the 1st Mate are present. Leadership meeting then. Glad I was included. I was not at first. I am guessing they wanted to see which way I jumped on the cask. Glad I made it this far.

"Sit Pilot." I make myself comfortable.

Captain Drup starts, "We have a decision to make and you are part of that decision because it mainly is about you, but of course will affect all of us."

Captain Rand takes over, "Do you hereby swear off intoxicating substances taken intentionally. Obviously if someone slips you something without your knowledge we can't hold you accountable. But all the same we expect you to be careful and try to avoid such a situation."

"I so affirm." I wonder what this is all about. Strange. Why here and why now?

"You have said you like adventures, ones you live through obviously." Several are smiling at this.

"More the kind of meeting new people and seeing new things, yes." They smile again.

"Yes, people. Define people."

"I don't understand."

"What are the defining characteristics of a person."

"Ah, rational human. Gender, age, ancestors, even knowledge and skills are not important. Everyone has a right to exist and try to do their best."

"Good, but can someone be people without being human?"

"Oh, you mean like Cats? Those lazy things. Well, I suppose they are people too, not that I would want to depend on one. I met the one called Cat along with Mouse once. They seemed nice enough." That gets a laugh.

"Even I have a hard time referring to Cats as useful. But, sigh, yes, we have to include them as sen."

"Sen?" I ask.

"A living being capable of intelligent independent thought."

"You mean beyond just reacting to circumstances? Hell, most humans are not much beyond that most of the time."

The 1st Mate laughs, "So true." First thing she has said.

"How would you feel about meeting sen of the non-human kind?"



Other than Cats I am guessing. What are they talking about?

"Do you mean with all of you or totally on my own with no clue about what was going on?" Please don't drop me off on a Cat island.

"You won't be alone. I am going to invite someone in who is not human. This will seem frightening, but you are totally safe with her. I mean totally." I nod. What the hell are they talking about? Certainly no one non human is on board unless you count the occasional bird. I know parrots can learn to talk. A large parrot species?

<sup>R</sup>Squeak, you may come in now. Slowly please. She has never seen a Rap before.<sup>R</sup>

"What language was that sir?" I am confused. People speak local dialects all the time. Just like the Fragrant Harbor people pretended to understand something called Chinese. People from southern Fricka sound a little different from Inland. But this does not sound like anything a human should be able to sound.

The door opens and a creature comes in slowly. It, excuse me, she is well dressed if you count tool belts, light armor and helmet as clothing. But she looks like an over sized lizard with a huge feathered head and larger back legs than front. She walks on her back legs like we do.

She addresses me, "You can close your mouth now Pilot. I promise not to eat you."

I bow to her fully, "Not my fear, I trust what the Captain says implicitly. A pleasure to meet you. They call me Pilot. May I ask your name?"

"It is a long story, but I am called Squeak. It was because I did squeak a lot when I was hatched." Hatched?

Drup sighs and hands over a gold coin to Rand. I look at them questioningly.

Drup sighs again, "I bet you would freak out. Rand said you would not. Good for you." He smiles when he says this.

Squeak turns to me, "I am a Rap sen. I need your help if you are willing. It will involve travel and adventure beyond belief." Her Standard is quite good.

"With the Captain's permission I am willing."

I turn to them, "I am assuming her ship is nearby. My second would make a good replacement for me sirs." They nod but do not say anything. The 1st Mate smiles like she just ate a bird whole. I can almost see the feathers sticking out of her mouth.

I whisper to her, "What do you know? Spill it."

"It will be wonderful." She is still smiling that way. She was already board when I came to be part of the crew. In fact I was one of the last

hired. Everyone else was from Crab Cove or nearby.

"So the bit with the cask?"

"Was a test yes. Everything that happens to you is a test as our instructors taught us."

"Was there actually anything in the cask?" Both of them laugh now, but they say nothing. I am guessing not.

The 1st Mate finally answers, "Everything is a test, but choices have consequences. Nothing is free, there are always side effects to any decision no matter how pure your thinking and intentions."

"Don't give it all away Sal." First time I have heard her name used and it was Squeak who said it.

Squeak turns to me, "Gather your things and we can be off."

I run down to my bunk. As Pilot I did not get a hammock at least. Though a hammock would have been better during the high seas, even if I doubt anyone slept through that. I stuff everything important into a small sack and run back to the main deck. Everything looks normal. Plenty of fish have been caught and people are busy gutting them to bring to the cook. We have been getting some really colorful ones out this way. I look over the side and see no other ship. Strange. I also wonder how she got on board without anyone else seeing her. I am sure if anyone had seen her without the introduction I got it would have caused a huge commotion.

Confused I go back to the Captains cabin and knock before entering. Only Squeak is still present.

"Are you ready?" I nod. Everything around me except Squeak disappears and I am standing on sand on an open plain. Hot. No wind. I orient on the sun, but no idea what time it is. Clearly not just after sunset. Looks more like noon.

<sup>R</sup>Follow me.<sup>R</sup> "That is how we say 'follow me' in Rap. Of course the grammar rules are totally different too, but you will learn quick enough." Grammar? What is a grammar?

She takes off at a good run. On board, running is not a useful skill and I must have looked like a walrus on land chasing after her.

There are some plants, strange ones. Lots of the rocks have rock moss on them too. Not going to eat fish tonight unless we get to a lake or stream. Too bad, I was wondering what those strange fish would taste like.

I have to stop and rest many times. I am just not used to this. Dry heat gets to me as well, even though Squeak gives me water at regular intervals. I really hope this is not my new life. This was definitely what I

imagined when I was told I would get to experience adventure.

"Are you going to complain the entire time? I was told you rarely complain." Squeak has turned to face me.

"I did not say a word." She taps her head, turns and starts to run again. I could sleep on a bare rock tonight. Did she guess or can she somehow read my thoughts?

She shouts over her shoulder, "No guessing." Shit.

# Tafa

&We don't know anything about Tafa. It has been too long and everything has changed. What do we do?&

I come into the discussion, &We work with what we have been given. We have four thousand solars of study in the info room. We have seen how countless cultures and times have dealt with the same situation. Every sen has gone through this many times. Now it is our turn.&

&But how? Where do we start?&

&Same way we learned. We start an info center. The Hu called it a university. We become the first instructors. We need language, engineering, and agriculture to start.&

&Arts like our historical plays too.&

&War? Not everyone is going to accept us as leaders. I for one do not want to become like the Commander.& We had made him a small place to live and set him to working on a small garden. We will need to strip the alkaloids from the food so it does not kill him of course. Too bad, that is what gives them their taste. But if he does not work, he does not eat. The last thing we need is for him to become a kept pet.&

&We may not agree with his methods and certainly do not want him to have any power, but he has had over a thousand solars of experience running things.&

&Do we let others know about our abilities or do we keep it a secret?&

&I hate secrets. So much was kept from us that we had to find out about by subtle observation and back corridor whispering. I may never speak Standard again.&

They all yell, &Agreed!& This should be fun.

&I have another request. We just call the former commander, Hu. He is the only one. It is easy to say in Tafa as well. I am sure he has a designation, but I don't even want to give him that much.&

&Agreed!&

We get to work. Linking makes us of one mind and we quickly raise structures, infrastructure and the start of free range farming. The others who come need to learn how to do all of this so they can take it back to their own communities.

We were warned to be slow and careful. To be prepared for mistakes and move past them. We are making a start. We are making a start.

# Unknown

"The Tafa will need watching. They are like kids set loose in a candy store at the moment."

"As were we when we began the Game. We owe it to them." He raises an eyebrow and smiles.

I continue, "I am more worried about Cat."

"I am more worried about Myra. She is way beyond anything ever recorded in any incarnation."

"I think Cat is learning how to stop an incarnation."

"We have known how to do that for a long time. Still here."

"But we are not pissed enough to do it. She is."

"You could be right. Does it matter?"

I sigh, "I suppose not. Just getting tired of resetting everything and trying again. She did stop the 'thn for a bit. That was a relief."

"That is how we learn. Talk to her. She trusts you."

"You mean she has not had great experiences with males you mean."

"You were her teacher at a critical time in her life. I was just the strange uncle."

"You got that right." He almost laughed this time.

"You remember what Tafa means?"

"Flexible. They pride themselves on being able to adapt. They were under that asshole commander for a thousand years. That goes to the extreme of flexible."

"And they are fine. He is even still alive. I put a life tracker on him out of curiosity. They are not revenge seekers."

"Till they find out what happened and why they were at Farout."

"There is that. Should be interesting."

"Everything is interesting to you Old Owl." He hoots to annoy me.

# Field Trip at Western Port

"At least learning a new language is easy. Can't believe we know Hu, Ku, Ba, Ceph, Di and Rap."

"And every time it meant a bad headache." I smile at Sweet Pea.

"The problem is, is that there are dialects to worry about too."

"Yeah, you can't believe how many ways the Ba have to insult someone without their knowing." They are the smallest and weakest of the sen here. Would be dangerous if others knew.

"Ah, the poor little ones. Smart though. There have been a few Ba Kung Fu masters. Marie likes to hit the newbies with them to prove you do not need to be strong or big to defend yourself. Makes the weak ones feel better that there is a way to even the odds too."

Cat comes up to me, gives me a nudge to suggest it would be a good time to give her a head scratch. I automatically do this without even thinking. Habit.

"Cat, this is Sweet Pea, Sweet Pea, this is Cat." She does a formal bow. Cat loves this and rubs against her to mark her. I don't dare tell Sweet Pea this is what she is doing.

"I belong to her now. Good. Makes things easier. Anything I should know to watch out for." I forgot she has lived with cats.

"Never laugh around her. She finds the sound of monkey laughing to be extremely irritating. She can also read your mind if she wants, so be careful there too." That widens her eyes.

"Actually, that makes sense, given how long you two have been together. Makes it much easier to tell you what to do." Cat and Sweet Pea take a few steps ahead of me, clearly com'ing. Sigh.

I see Squeak and wave hello. She has someone with her I have not seen before and get closer to find out.

<sup>R</sup>Ah, Mouse. Good to see you. Are you on the field trip?<sup>R</sup> I nod.

<sup>R</sup>This is Pilot. Pilot, this is Mouse. His companion is that Cat over there who is simply called Cat as she is the only one on Alexandria.<sup>R</sup>

Pilot looks over and nearly loses it.

"She is from E2 I gather." Squeak nods. We were all taught to be deathly afraid of any Cat on E2. Being out of their territory meant no good. Still convinced of that one.

"Welcome Pilot. It is not so bad once you get used to it."

"I still don't have my land legs. Feels like I am still swaying. Squeak tried to run it out of me to within an inch of my life, but still swaying."

<sup>R</sup>Rand and Drup said to say hi.<sup>R</sup>

"Surprised they remember me." I smile.

"You were on the Black Wind weren't you. You are the pirate hunters. Where are we and what are we doing here?" She looks at me pleading. Clearly Squeak has given her Rap at least.

*She is TK2, so go easy on her. Not through orientation yet.*

Got it. Head probably still hurts.

"I am guessing that being called Pilot means you were also the Nav?" She nods.

"Apparently we are here to learn how to be leaders. You already know how important it is to plot a proper course. Same with communities."

<sup>R</sup>Very good Mouse. You are learning something here.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Reluctantly.<sup>R</sup> I sigh and Pilot laughs until she hears a growl behind her.

"Sorry, Cat hates the sound of a monkey laughing." Sweet Pea tells her.

<sup>R</sup>Looks like the four of us are together for this. Best get to the portal.<sup>R</sup>

"Portals. I hate those things."

"Short trip this time. I will help you and we will all be together. Easier for us too and standard procedure. We rarely do anything alone until we get to the upper levels." I hold up two fingers for Sweet Pea and she nods.

<sup>R</sup>Pilot, you can trust these sen with your life, even Cat.<sup>R</sup> Her eyes go wide. Cat comes up to her to be petted. She reluctantly gives Cat a fast pat on the head and Cat leans into it till she does it proper.

"Like a large ship cat." Cat hisses and she backs away.

"Maybe not. Just don't eat me and we will get along. I do carry sharp things and know how to use them."

"Don't encourage her. She likes to play games, especially pounce."

"Just want her to know I am not a pushover and will inflict damage if provoked."

*Well met for a stupid monkey.* Pilot's eyes go wild again and she checks to see if we heard that too. I sigh and nod.

"This place reminds me of stories my mum told me as a kid."

"Some of them probably came from this place. If you see anything strange, check with one of us and we will let you know if you need to worry. Cat can read your thoughts, so you do not need to say it out loud even."

Sweet Pea adds, "Don't worry, she finds Hu boring as hell and has no interest in your personal thoughts."

"Any idea where we can get some decent food around her?" Squeak

only gave me emergency rations."

Sweet Pea and I say in unison, "Sap chow!" Even Cat looks disgusted.

<sup>R</sup>There will be good food at the Western Port. <sup>R</sup>

*Fish?*

<sup>R</sup>Yes, even fish. <sup>R</sup>Cat begins to purr and Pilot almost laughs but sees the horror on our faces and stifles it. Cat looks at her funny and that almost sets us off.

I see Spikes in another group ahead of us. Guess we are all going. Surprised some of the ones who have been here longer have not already gone. She is talking with one of the Ba from the colony. Guess that conflict is over with at least.

We finally get near the building where the portal is. Like Pilot, I remember the trip here. Not fun. There is an opening at the other side of the room and everyone is just walking through. Strange. Where is the portal?

"Where is the portal?" Pilot asks thinking the same thing.

Squeak points to the exit, <sup>R</sup>That is the portal. On the same world it is much easier. <sup>R</sup>

As soon as we leave the building I can smell the sea air.

"Look, there are ships!" Sure enough, this is clearly a harbor as well. Must be twenty or thirty ships. All three masts. Lots of activity of loading and unloading. I almost feel home, except that is every imaginable sen, including ones I have not seen yet. That huge one must be a Di.

Cat sniffs the air and purrs.

<sup>R</sup>Okay, I know Cats well enough. I was raised with Owa. Let's get food first. We are not due for another eighth. They can't take us all at once after all. <sup>R</sup>

Squeak apparently knows the way and we file after her. I think Pilot's eyes are going to pop out of her head every time we pass a new sen.

Cat runs ahead and we see her sitting in front of a Ceph booth.

"It appears Cat has chosen where we will eat. Ceph prefer their food raw, as does Cat, but will cook it upon request." There are two Ceph handling all the orders. All arms working at once, each surrounded but the materials they need.

"Cooked please." Sweet Pea and I add our requests for the same. Cat and Squeak go for raw of course. Cat is the easiest order. The Ceph just takes an entire fish out of the box and places it in front of her.

We end up with a mix of seafood, rice and some vegies. Unusual spice combination, but I know better than to ask. Pilot appears to be over joyed and quickly finishes hers.

"Just like home." She insists. Is she originally from Indland? The yel-



low color and hot peppers may be a clue. Though a lot of cultures use them too. I stop worrying and just enjoy it.

When we are done we all follow Squeak again along the waterfront. We see where the Ceph Town is. Remarkable homes and work places. They are the ceramics masters, so we also see smoke coming from kilns.

"I thought their kilns were all solar." I comment.

<sup>R</sup>It is foggy here most of the time. They have to use wood to supplement when solar is not enough. They switch back and forth as needed.<sup>R</sup>

Pilot is cold, "Is it winter here?"

<sup>R</sup>It is actually the height of summer.<sup>R</sup> Squeak shows amusement. Coastal towns are all different.

Sweet Pea adds, "We used to get snow every winter where I came from."

"As in frozen water?" Pilot looks horrified. Surely she has heard the tales. Must have always worked close to the equator.

We walk clockwise around the edge of the city. We are now clearly in a bay. The wind and waves are both much calmer. I see large areas of what look like nets in the water in some sort of rectangular framework.

Sweet Pea exclaims, "The aquaculture farms! I was hoping we would get to see them." Cat and Pilot are foodies and Sweet Pea is into sustainable food sources. I have a lot to learn if they expect me to lead a community.

We go around a bend and enter a tunnel. I hear water running. A Ku meets us just inside. Cat licks her lips and I give her a gentle tap on the head. Sen, do not eat.

*That is the biggest chicken I have ever smelled.*

We have Ku back at the Uni. Stop it. You just ate.

*One tiny fish.*

That thing weighed at least twenty kilos. Not tiny.

+I will be your guide. My name is of no importance.+

"I will be your guide. My name is of no importance." Nice touch.

"A Blue Bird. We read about them in class." Sweet Pea whispers to me, but clearly Pilot also heard.

"What is a Blue Bird?" she asks. Sweet Pea whispers back to her an answer I do not hear. I read the same lesson.

Another creature comes forward, a 'thant. Male from appearances.

*I will use TP as I know most of you have not progressed to learning 'thant yet in your lessons. My name is Edwin.* The Edwin? Sweet Pea and I do a respectful bow and Edwin returns it. We do not have the mouth parts to speak 'thant and some of the sounds are too high for us to hear. I

have a hard enough time with Ba. Glad they made me younger again or I would never have been able.

Pilot is between Sweet Pea and I hanging on to both of us. I think Squeak might have pushed this one too fast?

*Possibly. We will see once she has started classes and has to interact with other sen on a routine basis. To be fair, this would have been hard for a new Rap student as well. Pulled off a ship and set down here is a lot. But she was chosen for a reason.*

Sweet Pea and I would be happy to help.

*Much appreciated and I accept your help. Sweet Pea has agreed to be her roommate.*

That is a great idea. Sweet Pea nods to me. TP is weird.

We follow our instructors deeper into the tunnel and arrive at a larger section with a lot of pipes going in all directions. There is something set up in the middle. No, it can't be that can it?

"This is our latest model. Anyone want to try it out?" We have seen each other naked at some point and it means nothing. Half the sen don't wear clothes anyway. Only Hu seem to be concerned about it.

"Fortunately we bring samples to test it with." He opens a jar and reaches in with bare hands. Certainly smells like the real thing.

"This is our universal model. Any sen should be able to figure it out and use it. Now where do you think the waste should go?"

"Well the hole is the most obvious, but what about aim? Not everyone has eyes on their backside." That gets a few laughs.

To demonstrate the Blue Bird purposes does a poor job of depositing the waste. Immediately a stream of water and air washes over the whole surface and cleans it up, including the Blue Bird's hand.

"Might get your clothes wet." Pilot comments.

"You won't be wearing them when you use it right? Oh, hot air after dries everything out. Nice. Can I try it?"

"Of course." Pilot drops it all and does her work to stand there to see the wash and dry happen. We are not modest on board, so why should we be here. Squeak goes next. Oh, that does stink big time. Cat tries to produce an even bigger one and then instinctively tries to bury it only to get her paws wet. She shakes them off and then licks them dry.

"Euu!"

"She normally cleans her butt the same way. You get used to it."

*Actually a great way to know if everything is working inside.*

"Euu!"

"I can't reach mine. Guess I will just have to take my chances." Sweet

Pea trying to be smart.

*Let's move on.* Is this normal student behavior? No wonder I normally sit in the back of class.

Suddenly another group of students come running past us screaming and upset.

*Safety Positions everyone.* Edwin broadcasts. We group together facing out. Edwin is the strongest TK and likely the best fighter and assumes the front. Cat comes up next to him. Sweet Pea, Pilot and I take the next position, the ones with experience fighting on ships and land. Blue Bird, which are forbidden to fight, stays in the back with a few other students from the screamers who decided to stay with us.

Nothing happens at first and then slowly a few worker 'thants come limping in. Edwin goes up to them to examine.

*They have been attacked. Likely by blunt objects. They will recover in time, but two of them are dead further on. We go to the aid of anyone else there.*

Good place for an ambush.

"I will stay with the workers and offer aid. I am skilled in 'thant aid." Edwin nods a thanks. He would be a liability in a fight, becoming an easy hostage.

I scan ahead. I know we are not supposed to use TK in a public area, but scanning is not usually noticed by norms. I am sure the others have already done the same.

We quickly find the dead ones. They have been taken apart. Pieces of them are everywhere. Legs are missing entirely.

I offer, "What is the strongest metal we know of, 'thn metal. They purposely killed these workers to harvest 'thn metal."

*This has happened before. Time to put a stop to it. We have them cornered up ahead. I have notified the rest of the nest and exits are blocked this time. There are ten of several sen types.*

So much for no TK. I confirm this information with my own scans. I have my knives ready.

"They are armed with clubs and projectile weapons. Short range hand crossbows."

There are a lot of side tunnels here. Would be easy for them to hide and ambush one of us. Pilot is the weakest as I am sure she is not ready with her own skills yet. Fighting on a ship is totally different than tunnels.

*You are correct Mouse. We need open territory to ensure success.*

*Cover your eyes, bright light in three, two, one.* We are on the surface in an open field.

Edwin, Cat, Sweet Pea and I are together. Squeak and Pilot remain in the tunnel. Edwin has every right to seek justice for his fallen. Squeak will protect Pilot and hopefully explain things to her.

*Please assume lead Cat and Mouse. Us?*

"It's fighting time!" Sweet Pea is right next to me though and Cat is on her left.

*We need them alive to question.* Now he tells me. Makes it a lot harder.

They are gathered together facing us. Ten to three. Edwin takes up the rear.

*Stalk. They need a good scare more than anything.* Cat licks her lips and goes in with a low run. Scary as hell if you see this coming at you.

*Anything I kill I get to eat right?* This is broadcast and gets the group of ten's attention, making them exceedingly nervous. One is a Rap. The problem is Raps hunt best in a pack. They do not like to be cornered.

A few crossbow bolts go wide, apparently intended to scare us. Sweet Pea picks up a few stones and hurls them at incredible velocity hitting two in their chest. I throw two knives that stick in their crossbows making them unusable until they are removed.

We are within two meters of them when we stop. Edwin comes from behind and removes their weapons and the 'thant legs. Cat comes up and sniffs them as if deciding which to eat first.

*These will be used as evidence in court. I hereby arrest you on charges of murder.*

"They was just workers. Ain't no sen." Their leader boasts. Amazing how much misinformation gets around.

*Any attack on the nest is an attack on the entire nest.* The ten disappear.

*They are in a secure area to be questioned. These are the first we have captured alive. Thanks for your help. I will now return you to the others.*

We are back in the tunnel waiting for our eyes to adjust and depend on scanning not to run into anything.

The Blue Bird explains, "We suspected this might happen during a school field trip when they thought we were weak." Ah, a set up.

Squeak adds, "They blend in with normal workers, so we do not know in advance who they are. Afterwards they blend back into the others to disappear."

"Can't you scan for 'thn metal legs out of place?"

"This is the first time they were successful in removing legs. We have lost twenty five workers in the last lunar. It is getting worse."

Sweet Pea asks, "Nothing like this happens without a reason, so why are they seeking 'thn metal? They can't work it easily. Certainly cannot cut or melt it."

"We do not know. Hoping that questioning the captured ones will help."

I add, "If they are smart, these ones will not know. Under orders to get the pieces and turn them over. Likely those individuals have scattered to parts unknown by now. Always have an escape route."

"It is a slow process. I do not understand. This system is for the benefit of all. Everyone will have clean water, clean food and pleasant waste areas. We reuse the waste to grow their food." Cat is cleaning herself. Disappointed no doubt she did not get to finally taste Ku.

These sen were desperate for something. What? This is paradise compared to most home worlds. Okay, lower tech for some, but still, fresh air, good food, lots of interesting cultures to experience. Yeah, I still want to go home too.

# Alexandria - in the wilderness

"I really do not understand what happened. They did not go through a portal, but suddenly they were all gone. Now we are suddenly out here away from everyone. What the hell is going on? Please."

"And I am not the normal Hu you are used to. Seeing a large lizard speaking Standard I am sure is disconcerting." I nod.

"First, you are not mad or dreaming. All of this really did happen. Oh, and everyone is fine, though I would not want to be one of the ten who were captured. This is the world you are now part of. It is expected you will be doing these things yourself in a short time, well maybe a few solars anyway."

"So, I have been recruited for a new mission. Will there be ships? I saw some in the harbor."

"If you like. First we need to get you trained properly."

"Just go easy on the running please. Never ran so much in my entire life. I am a ship rat through and through."

"I am more accustomed to open land. We will work it out. Tell me, are you more comfortable here at the Western Port or back at the University. Sweet Pea and Mouse have both offered to help you. Mouse has spent time on board a ship, so knows and understands your needs there. I can also give you portal passes for you to visit here when you want."

"Portal passes for all three of us?" She nods and I smile.

"Do you do hugs?"

"I am your teacher."

"And you are sen and we are not going to mate. Affection only."

"Hu have funny customs. If you must." I give her a big hug.

"You are warm. I thought you would be cold. Feels nice. Love the feathers."

"We are warm blooded as you Hu say. Please do not tell anyone else you, ah, hugged me."

"Must preserve your dignity. Got it."

"Why me and why you? I would expect you to take on a Rap student if anything. And I was just an ordinary Pilot on a nice ship. Nothing special there. I am sure no one misses me."

"Rand and Drup helped raise and train me." My eyes go wide. Squeak snorts. I am guessing this is her version of a sigh.

"The abilities are rated as levels of TK. Drup, Rand and I are all TK9. You are TK2."

"All normal Hu are TK2 then. The lowest level. Got it."

"No, Hu are TK 0 except for rare occasions. Mouse was a TK1 natural. Very rare."

"How long does it take to get to TK9 then?"

"I am over a thousand years old. Not all are raised to this level."

"Not everyone becomes a Captain. Got it. Wait, a thousand years old. How is that even possible?"

"There is much you need to learn."

"And the best place is the University." She nods.

"Will I see you again?"

"Often. I am your teacher. We will go out for special training from time to time as circumstances permit. I do have other tasks as well though."

"Will I get to visit your home world? I assume I understand Rap because you taught me?"

Squeak does what I hope is a laugh, "I'm sorry. You really are adventurous. Of course, we can visit Di-Eden. Yes, I did teach you Rap to save time. Hu is not the easiest for me to pronounce."

"Not Rap-Eden? Your Hu is fine."

"Di achieved TK status first. At some point I will introduce you to my Hu foster mother."

"What level is she?"

"Unknown actually. At least TK13. First lesson. Every increase in TK adds a new talent and multiplies all abilities by ten fold approximately. Some variation depending on sen type. The order of abilities added is also sen specific."

"What can a Hu TK2 do then?" Hey, if I got it I want to be able to use it. I hold up my hands to look at them and then back to her. Kinda of cute once you get used to her. Love the blue feathers on her head especially. Might have to come up with a hat with similar features as a way of saying I am her student.

*You do realize I can read your thoughts?*

"Good, saves time. Teach me TK2 please." She is not going to dissuade me that easily.

Of course I had no idea what I was in for. I did eventually get back to the University, who would have thought an orphan like me would end up there? I had no formal education, taught myself to read and write. Needed that to get my pilot's certificate. I still have that, though not much use here of course. But a land map is similar enough to a sea map that I could get by. Wait, maybe at the port. I need to get on a ship again, even if just

for a short time.

Squeak drops or rather pops me to close enough that I can walk in myself. I can see it easy enough. I am sure the first thing she does is go for a nice long run. But, I got through my basic TK2 training and can move objects of different kinds and see what is behind doors and walls. A hundred meters would not have been that useful at sea, but works on land to get me around. Most sen here are TK, though different abilities. Signs exist in several languages. I am curious about Ceph myself. The sea can be really loud and having a hand or sign language would be extremely helpful. We only use a few on ship.

I am told where I will bunk and put my bag on the empty bunk and sit to catch my breath. In walks Sweet Pea, to much commotion and hugging. Nice to see someone I know, even if for just for a few eights.

"I was told you had agreed for me to be your roommate. Nice to have a third year who knows what is going on to help."

"Nice to hone my own teaching abilities on a willing victim." I laugh, then look around for Cat, which sets both of us off.

"Don't worry, Cat and Mouse are in Ba Town. We can visit them soon if you want. Mouse will be happy to see you, Cat could not care less. Ever been owned by a cat of the smaller variety before?" She asks.

"You mean a ship cat? They pretty much keep to themselves unless it is dinner time." She laughs. Guess the land ones are the same.

"I used to be owned by a few. Grew up with them too. I like companions who can take care of themselves."

"Noted. I will try not to be a burden. I am used to being self reliant."

"Oh, you are fine. Don't worry. I can't keep my mouth shut. I will tell you if it gets to be too much. The beginning is the worst, but there are no grades and you chose your subjects, though your trainer may suggest ones they think you might need."

"Speaking of which. I am getting the impression that we were all chosen. They do have something in mind, long term, they want us to be doing?"

"Yeah, I got that too. Don't worry about it. Enjoy your time here. No real responsibilities yet and you can do what you want."

"Sounds too good. I don't seem to get tired much any more. I can't seem to fall asleep even. Why have bunks?"

"Still good for meditation and a quiet place to think. I mostly just store stuff on mine. I guess it is mostly for appearances for when a norm wanders in."

"That happen often?"



"Rare, but it can happen. Usually some young male on a dare. We love to play with those." She has the most evil look in her eyes. I might come to like this place.

"We can't get drunk, but they try anyway, so they can have their way with us. I can show you a few tricks to mess up that behavior quick. Have you scanned yourself yet? Even a TK2 can pretty much see everything inside and out. Press on a few select pressure points and all kinds of fun stuff can happen to a norm." I am going to like this place. Wish I could have done this on the ship.

"The norms do not know about us? At all?"

"They know we can be dangerous, but some like the challenge. Male Hu are really stupid about that." I agree. First thing a fem officer has to do on board a ship is make it clear you are off limits. The other officers do not help you here. It is a test of sorts. I laugh inside. Now I could just throw them overboard.

"Let's go find Mouse so he knows you are here." I nod.

"You can leave everything. No one will mess with it."

"This pouch always goes with me. The extra clothing I don't mind leaving. I am assuming there are places to get more? Do we pay or what?"

"No money at the Uni, well at least for students. They charge the Uni for whatever we receive. Don't go crazy though or a teacher will visit you. Most of us live a simple life. You can see from my bunk I do not have much either. Basically my class clothes and my workout clothes. Yeah, sorry, we are all expected to take some sort of physical training. I can show you the Dojo if you like. Mouse is the knife instructor in fact. VERY unusual for a 1st year."

"What level is he and Cat?"

"Know this, it is considered rude to ask anyone. We are both higher than you. No one knows that level Cat is. Cats are VERY sensitive on the topic."

"Got it. Expected I would be on the low side, just having gotten here. I have already learned that looks can be very deceptive. Did you know Squeak is over a thousand years old?" She nods.

"Squeak is our froth history teacher."

"Oh right, froth is how there can be so many sen here now."

Once outside I look up and see two suns, one normal sized and a much smaller one too. Sweet Pea notices me.

"We are not on Earth Two any more dear. The stars are totally different too." Yeah, we are definitely not on earth.



# Cat Land

Marie dumped me off near their palace, best description I can give, though there are no structures. Not good to be in Hu form here. Glad I had practice with Cat, aka George at the Dojo. I tried to convince Marie to let me have my own form back, but she said it would only freak them out into thinking I was invading. I was given no instructions, so maybe it could still go that way.

A young kit came by, but I hissed at it and it backed away. Well, best to make my appearance. I am carrying no obvious weapons other than the TK2 status I was allowed to keep since arriving in this froth space.

My understanding is this is Earth Two, though originally they were on Earth One. Problem with being on a different world is you cannot keep an eye on your enemy from a different world very easily. It can be done, but then you are DSing back and forth a lot. Owa and Sylvy can see the entire world from their location. I would feel better too under their circumstances. As far as I know Silver and Turtle are not here. Do not need them on the defensive over those two just now. Just a little fem Hu with low TK status. Not a threat.

The University had many sen species all trying to get along. My world had only one. This world has two, Hu and Cat, separated by an ocean. It was easier with just one. Then we got interstellar travel. That brought us into contact with the Others. Nasty species that could group together for defense. A failing in my kind where everyone wants to be lead and there are constant fights to determine dominance. The one thing I have learned at the Uni was low sen see more, because everyone ignores them. When my time is up here I intend to use that knowledge.

For now, I have to survive what has been described as a brutal species that likes to torture their food before eating it. I can relate to that. I should feel at home here.

Of course they know I am coming, but they let me proceed until I reach the honor guard. A loser position that still gives minimal honor. Even know I could probably take them, but I do not need to make enemies even before I have started.

I stop, purposely looking annoyed and bored.

"I know you can read my mind. I am here to com with the queens."

*No one sees the queens you worthless bug I would not feed to my kits.*

I sigh, "And I would not use your worthless hide to wipe myself with after defecating while sick. Besides, I doubt you have any kits and are

likely a virgin judging from the size of your balls."

Hissing and growling commence. I just ignore them, looking at my finger nails and cleaning some imaginary imperfection away. Cowards and victims run and rightly so should be eaten to improve the stock. I hold my ground.

Suddenly I am in the open before two very large fat Cats. I instantly bow to the ground and plant my nose in the dust waiting.

The two let it continue for a bit, as expected. They need to show others I know my place.

*We are busy. Come back some other time. Best visit the butcher area first to see if they need any monkey meat for the next meal.*

"If you will read my mind you will realize I am not actually a worthless monkey who would not even make good fish bait."

I am really feeling right at home here. Why did I end up at the University. This is a much nicer place.

A low rank comes in with a piece of meat in its mouth. It drops it in front of me and walks away to sit and watch. It is clearly a Hu leg from a child. Likely duped as I don't think there is a Hu herd nearby.

*Eat then. You will taste better fattened up.*

I nod thanks, pick it up and start gnawing on it without hesitation.

"Needs salt, but otherwise pretty good. Nice and tender. Do you raise them yourself or are they free range?" There is blood all over my face.

*Leftover from the last hunt.*

"Ah, free range then. Excellent. Though I believe young antelope is preferable. But, as I am new here with no status I accept that I am only worthy of the less desirable cuts. Certainly kits of the great queens would not eat such garbage."

*This might just be interesting for a few minutes.* One rises and yawns. The other just rolls over and ignores me. No idea which is which. I was not told that much.

I feel my form being torn apart at the seams and being rearranged. It is insanely painful. Clearly not as graceful as Marie was. Maybe in my next incarnation I will succeed.

The pain stops. I open my eyes, all of them! I am whole again!

*This is your natural form before an evil one took it away.*

%The evil one was Marie, whom you both know.% The Cat hisses. I am still just TK2 though. Hatchlings are that high, but it is good to feel whole again.

%I am deeply appreciative of your great gift. It was horrible being confined to such an inferior form.%

*How long were you in the stupid monkey form?*

%Three solars.%

*That indeed is a great punishment. Why were you so treated?*

%It happened the instant I arrived at Alexandria.%

The other Cat is instantly awake and looking at me.

*Do you know how to get there?*

%No.% True, I was well masked before the trip and without DS I could not see the dimensions as we passed.

%I can tell you it took many days for the trip there and then to here. Oh, and there were two suns, a large one and a much smaller one if that helps any.%

*Silence. You chatter too much. Must be because of your time in monkey form. I bow my apologies.*

A guard comes up to me.

*You will fight me to the your death. May the Cat gods grant you mercy.*

%That would not be a fair fight.%

A large hiss, *We are not Hu and do not care about fair. Prepare to die dinner!* He lunges at me. They never learn or listen. I warned him.

I use one of our simplest moves and the Cat is in pieces before me, still twitching.

*Thank you for disposing of a worthless one. You just might be useful.*

That was my hope, though I never imagined I would get my own form back in the bargain. It feels so good.

*I can make you Hu again in a moment and it will be even more painful next time before we eat you. You belong to us now. Remember that worthless one.*

I have been accepted. I have said similar things to those under me. I almost feel like I am home. Trees are weird here. Used to a warmer climate, but can't complain.

# Tafa

The local language has changed so much we can no longer understand them. Instead, we offer food and they slowly learn our language as we learn theirs. Each area has a different way to com, so it is important for our visitors to learn Tafa Standard so we can all eventually com together again. At least we no longer have to rub appendages together to speak Hu Standard. I still have worn spots where I had to do this.

It would appear we were abducted near the height of Tafa culture. There is no record of our disappearing of course as all records have been lost. This conjecture is based on the myths that have survived.

The only consistency in the accounts say we were attacked by an infectious sen. All sen have had to deal with infections of course, but the myths say this infection was controlled and purpose directed. Tafa, Aaaha, and Hggy were all affected. Tafa are the only sen remaining. We will make a memorial to the Aaaha and Hggy so future Tafa never forget our friends. It will be hard to make a stable culture again without them. Who would do such a thing?

There are no remains of our invaders, who long ago returned to their world or died out. There are no remains of our culture either. No structures, transports, farms. Nothing. Sacred pools are drained and are again simple streams. We estimate that near fifty percent of the species that were present are now gone. Most of what remain are ones who survived on remote islands that recolonized the mainland after the invaders left. It is likely going to take a hundred thousand years to set things right again.

The committee agrees we need a defense system in place in case they or some other sen decides to attack us again. These should be foreign ideas and terms, but we learned a lot at Farout that went against our beliefs that might now be useful. We may even have to unfortunately extend the existence of the Hu to gain information from it.

As it has behaved itself and tried to be useful we have improved its living situation. One of us had some sap chow in their storage pouch that we have duped to feed it with. This simplifies care considerable. It is responsible for its own water and waste disposal. As long as we feed it, it serves us. Is this how we were seen by them? Useful, but of no consequence? The thought is disturbing. We do not want to become like them. At the same time, we do not want it to think it is being granted any power over us. A delicate situation.

One idea presented is for us to give it a Tafa form. It might think it

was being granted full sen status which I am leery of. We forbid rank here, but on Farout rank was indicated by colors that could be seen by the sen present. Sometimes this involved patterns or textures as well. We could so label it so that everyone knew of its status among us. This is being considered. Grant it respect due any life form, but do not accept commands from it.

Meanwhile, by accumulating locals we now have a super hex of 216 parts. Not all have equal status, which normally would be anathema to us, but a necessity considering their lack of training. We hope this will change soon. Efficiency is gained as we grow.

It is unfortunate that so much time has passed since the invaders were here. The stories do not match. In most cases all we have is it was called the Terror. Something whose behavior was so horrible as to be beyond description.

The Scitech and the Mech said we were returned to Tafa to rebuild. Is this why we were taken to Farout in the first place? To survive in a safe place until we were needed again? What sen could see that far into the future to see this need and carry it out? Who were they really?

All the other sen came shortly after we arrived. They were sent there because of some disagreement with the 'thn. The 'thn never had problems with us and largely left us alone after granting us higher TK levels. For that we are appreciative. What did the others do to upset them so much? Though there were hundreds, actually thousands at first, this most certainly was not all of their kind. Why only these individuals?

It was also clear they had achieved a very high tech level. Able to easily navigate between worlds of great distance. However, their life skills were exceedingly primitive. A stable ecology was never set up on Farout and we relied on duped food for survival and waste disposal. The simplest organism on Tafa knows better. Is this why they were banished? On Tafa this would have been a just punishment for eco breakers.

## Earth Two - Crab Cove

Hobbes, they do not call this place Crab Cove any longer apparently. They call it the Kingdom of Ah.

*You promised fresh fish. It has been forever since you promised. I am going to hunt.* I wave him off.

I traded clothes with a vagrant leaving town in a hurry. Used TK to change it up a bit. Last thing I need is to be mistaken for him. If you want to learn something about a town, do not go in rich. If you do you will only learn lies.

It has been nearly five years since I was kicked out of here. I am now TK6 at least. One more and I can TP myself and not be so reliant on Hobbes.

*I heard that. This place is nearly empty. Not even a rat.*

Well, you can't come here. I am in town now and sight of you would give us away. I will DS something to your location as soon as I get it.

*Best head to the docks. It is late afternoon and no one is sight.*

Strange. I scan. Everyone is inside. It is warm, maybe cooler inside? A nice cave would be good about now. I get halfway down the dock when I am confronted by two bullies with clubs. I hate bullies.

"What have we here? ID please." ID?

"I am new in town, hoping to find some work."

"Well, this is your lucky day. Follow us kind sir and we will set you up."

"Thank you. Mighty nice of you."

"Ah, there is a fee for our services." We stop and they have their hands out.

I empty my pockets to show I have nothing. "If I had money I would not need a job." One decides to give my gut a good push with their club. I play along and pretend to be winded. One get behind me and pushes. One leads me back up the dock.

They knock on a door, it opens, they shove me in, it closes. I pretend I can't see in the dark and fumble around for a moment. It is full of unwashed males all chained to the wall. Straw on the floor. All of them except me are very thin. Great, slavery has returned. I am grabbed and locked to the nearest open spot. Where did they get the metal? Expensive if you add up all the hardware here. Unfortunately the tech is low and I am soon out of mine. I release a few others near me with my finger to my mouth to indicate silence. One refuses to let me free them.



Our guards are playing some game in the only corner with any light. That means they can't see us very well. What's to see? All emaciated men chained to the wall.

Someone comes in and we hide our hands behind us. They go up to the guards and whisper something, then leaves. The guards sigh, put down their game and come over to us.

"Need twenty to work in the King's garden. Lucky you. If you are caught eating anything . . ." It is left unsaid, but there is no doubt. In the meantime I locate the castle and dupe a fish, then DS it to Hobbes.

Sorry Hobbes, I am busy, best I can do.

Everyone has locked their irons again coughing to hide the click.

"New guy, you look strong. You get to pull the plow. A rare privilege." Not.

We are marched out down a dusty path and up a hill. I am guessing roughly three kilometers. It is a hidden trail. Clearly we are not meant to be seen. We pass behind one building and there are a few people outside attending a small garden. They bow to us as we pass. They are all wearing robes. I TK and see a sign on the front of the building saying, "Church of the Holy Ecos." Religion has returned? Who was Ecos? It has only been five years and we have kings, metals, slavery and religion? A few hundred would make sense, but five? What happened?

We arrive and are quickly put to work under heavy supervision. So much so it would have been more efficient to make the supervisors work and not have to feed us, not that I am expecting much. When I try to engage the man next to me I am whipped. If I even look anywhere but straight ahead, I am whipped. I am strapped to a plow as they said and whipped again to get me going.

I know they are expecting me to resist so they can beat me senseless to prove their superior position, but I do not give them the satisfaction. Oh, they try hard, purposely putting rocks in my path or tugging on the reins to slow me down and then whip me for going too slow.

We are given a break and line up for a single cup to dip water. I am last and the barrel is empty by the time I get there and we are ordered back to work. I had read about this in training of course, but it is totally different thing to experience it first hand.

An eighth later I pretend to collapse. They do not need to know I am super Hu and I have to appear to be mortal. They whip me until I stop jumping. Someone throws salt on the wounds. Really? Where did they learn all this? Hobbes is in the forest just out of sight and growls. That gets their attention, but of course they have no idea what it is. Still it gets

their attention off me and back on the job they need to complete.

We were nearly down the hill anyway and a few of the others lift me to my feet and we march back to the barn on the wharf. There we are given a weak grain soup not even warm. At least it has water in it. We are chained back to the wall. It is soon night. Of course I do not sleep and have already healed my wounds now that they are out of sight. I release myself and make my way out the door. Time to have a look around.

Most of the buildings are empty. They should be full of goods coming and going. There are no ships on the dock. We did say trade could no longer be by sea, but we expected them to fill in with smaller boats. None. I scan and see only one road to the north and one to the south.

Hobbes meets me when I get near the edge of town.

*They are farming past the line. Signs they have hunted out the area and will soon need to progress further inland. Your fellow Hu are all captured from other towns.*

Captured? As in war? Shit. We need to visit someone.

I lead the way and end up at the Church of the Holy Ecos. I knock and a moment later a door opens to see both me and Hobbes. They look around to see no one else can see us. I have already scanned and know this is true. They wave us in quickly.

"Here, put this on quickly." I am handed one of their robes. Hobbes instinctively heads for the kitchen of course. "I need a name."

"Calvin?"

"Brother Calvin, good to have met you. You have been here for months. Follow me." I follow her to the near the back and am shown a straw pad on the floor. Better than the barn, but not by much.

There is a heavy pounding on the door, almost to the point of breaking it in. Someone slowly attends to it. Once the door is unlatched it swings open hard and slammed against its stops. It is sunrise. Explains when they finally noticed my absence.

"We are looking for an escaped prisoner, step aside vermin." He pushes the door monk down, who smiles and slowly gets up. He motions to me not to do anything. I grab a few bowls to take back to the kitchen, but am stopped by the bully.

"Who are you?"

"This is Brother Calvin sir."

"Can't speak for himself?"

"He is under a vow of silence."

"Convenient. Strip now!" He holds a sword to my chest. Again with the metal. I show no emotion and let the robe drop. I had already noted

how the others were attired and did the same. I am sure this will get some questions later. He swings me around to look at my back. I smile inside. No welts to give me away. He scowls and stomps out.

I put my robe back on and proceed to take the bowls to the kitchen. It is another hour before anyone says anything.

"Okay Sheriff you can drop the act." Liza! And Max is standing next to her! I give both a good hug.

"Is Hobbes full yet?" I inquire.

"Poor kitty, he was starving to death. Bad monkey." They shake their hands at me. I almost laugh. Even I forget sometimes.

"What the hell is going on?"

"First, where have you been? You left us all alone with these insane monkeys."

"Yeah, not my idea. We were taken for some advanced training." I look around and scan too.

"We need to go someplace without, ah, norms listening in." They nod and I pop them into the interior. That gets some surprise.

"That makes him at least a six!" Hobbes pops in annoyed. licks his flank.

There are eight of them, all twos. Perfect.

"Lie down please." They look confused but do so. Hot here. They will all get sunburned or heat stroke. I make a tent to cover them.

It takes a few hours before they come to. I motion the early ones to remain sitting and be quiet.

Once they are all awake I begin, "Welcome to TK3. At this level you can make molecular changes, but not atomic ones. No converting sand into gold I am afraid. This does give you some healing ability in that you can see inside someone and remove a tumor or parasite, that sort of thing. Most things organic will break down to water and a few gasses which you can vent to the surface through a temporary pore. Ah, you should practice on yourselves first before attempting an emergency. This does not reduce the pain involved. As usual, no hand waving or even looking at what you are doing. Don't give it away that somehow you are the one doing it. Got it?" They nod.

"Now stand and let's get back. Oh, if the eight of you work together, you can raise someone to TK2. So, if you have candidates waiting to join us, you may begin."

"Secret ceremony!" I roll my eyes, but it might make sense given the cover they have created.

"Be REALLY careful whom you elect to bring in. People can go

rogue even at TK2, though more likely at 3, yeah, watch yourselves. If you get into trouble, isolate yourself until it passes. The royalists will be looking to infiltrate your numbers or pick you off one at a time. ANY TK can be killed, though of course harder as the levels increase."

"Sir, . . ."

"Never call me sir, I am mortal too."

"Calvin, we can't turn wood into gold, but can we melt it? Gold that is."

I smile, good question, "You can turn it into a gas even." Oh, that gets their attention. "A toxic gas. We were not designed to breathe gold." That gets a laugh and Hobbes looks up and hisses. Everyone quiets down.

"So, we could be like a km away and melt their metal coins into a puddle that goes between the cracks in the floor?"

"Or you could just lift it out of a window you have opened. Takes less time. Drop it in the sea even."

"They keep most of it locked underground in a stone room."

"Then dig a hole and bury it. Will still drive them crazy looking for it."

"Hmm, how about a small hole in the wall, easy enough, we pass the liquid metal through it to the outside via a tunnel."

"Over thinking this. Keep it simple and quick."

"Deform the gold, pass it through the bars and out a window."

"That's better, though coins should get through just fine." Yeah. Newbies always overthink things. I certainly did.

I pop us back to the room, first checking to be sure no one else is nearby.

"Now, what happened after we left?"

Liza sighs, "The hoarders were put back in their position and admin of any stores turned over to them. No one was punished. A new castle was built for them and they became royalty again. Any stranger wondering in becomes a slave, usually until they die. Ninety percent of the population are basically their servants. A small percentage their, ah, henchmen (is that the proper term?) insure everyone behaves. They get better living space and more and better food."

Max comes in, "A lot of people have decided to leave town, but other towns nearby are similar, so they took their chances and went over the km limit. They get raided by the henchmen from time to time, but not enough to dissuade them from growing crops inland. The royals are careful. A hungry mop is a dangerous one."

I ask, "Any more plagues?"

"The usual colds and flu, but nothing more serious or more fatal yet. We were sort of wondering why not."

"Plagues hurt other species too and do not know where the line is. If we had infected everything past the wall, we would all be dead by now. Frog harbor was a chance encounter even we were not aware of. Could just as easily happened within the wall."

*Were is all the food? There is almost nothing to eat out there?* Hobbes snorts, but does not rise.

"Hunters and trappers." Someone says. That won't last once the game is gone.

"He had a metal sword."

"Thin metal over ceramic, just looks more intimidating. One good whack and it breaks, same as ever. The metal tipped arrows and cross-bows are more likely to kill you."

"Or your neighbors. Boats?"

"The towns have taken to burning each other's boats to slow down invasions." Stupid.

"The harbor stunk like sewage."

"Hence the Church of the Holy Ecos. We are trying to convert them back to sustainable practices, but it is slow going. People who are hungry take the easy path, even if it hurts them later."

"Speaking of which, why do the royals put up with you?"

"If they harm us or this space, ah, accidents happen that cannot be explained. We have set up chapters in other towns too. We are now just part of the background noise. We do not gather mobs to attack them, they leave us alone."

"They have enough people to burn all of you to the ground."

"Then a nearby chapter will do the same to them. Don't think they have not thought about it or voiced the threat. We show no emotion when they do. You did great with the guard by the way. I saw you when you came in. They whipped you good, but it was all gone by the time he got here."

"It's a miracle. I figured you would more likely take in a vagrant escaped from the barn." I smile when I say this. They nod.

"Now what?" I look confused at Max.

"Are you staying? Do we take over again and set things right? What?"

"Ah, no, we have to up some other towns as well. We will know now to go straight to the Ecos people. Beside, eight TK3s should be able to handle it."

"We are deeply appreciative of the gift." The bow in unison. Creepy.

"Listen, we could have prevented all of this from happening in the first place. You know that. Just us in this room could take on a large army and win easily. But then what? It is a RARE person who should receive the gifts. Note my emphasis on the word RARE. We really do have to be careful. A group of royals with TK would really be a disaster.

No, we can't force them to do the right thing. After the downfall it was resolved to give the Hu another chance, but it was their decision. They can fail again and again and again. All by choice. We make the alternatives available and known. That is what you are doing now. But, ultimately it is their choice."

"Sorry, I still don't get it."

I sigh, "Does a criminal like being a slave? No, of course not, but if you free them, they will likely go right back to being one. It is not until they realize the way out is to change, before anything happens. All the beatings and bad treatment in the world will not affect this change."

"Only make them mad and blame someone else. Like a bottler, an addict to alcohol." I nod agreement.

"This could take forever." I sigh and nod.

"Are there any places who do get it?"

"Yes, but they are few and easy for bullies to take over and ruin. We try and keep these communities separate, but as people here and elsewhere look for a way out, these places are likely to be found."

"Or something else happens like a drought, famine or plague." I nod.

"It would be better for everyone to work together, helping those in need and living a simple sustainable life, but it is hardwired into what it means to be Hu that makes us want more."

"How come? If this behavior is so bad, then why do we have it?"

"Basic makeup changes slowly, very slowly. For our ancestors it was a survival advantage. Look around you? Is there any creature who does not try and grab the extra nut or piece of fruit, even from a neighbor? Why do crows hide their extra if not because someone else wants it. Creatures will even kill others to protect their homes or get to the food."

Everyone looks at Hobbes, but say nothing. I see this and come back with, "You eat fish? If there is an excess of rabbits some year and they threaten crops, do you kill and eat them? Of course you do. I am not saying be perfect. I am saying THINK about the impacts of actions."

Liza sighs, "There is always a side effect. Know what they are and be ready for them."

"Any mistake is also an opportunity," someone else says. I nod.

"We are no better off than they are."

I look at her shocked, "Why did you think any differently?"

"The reason we were kicked out the first time was because they saw us as special. Special to the point where there was zero chance any of them could be part of the power elite. They even thought we were taking the best food and best homes. In reality we weren't. Totally misinterpreted our purpose, but we never took the time to see ourselves from their point of view."

"And is now any different?" I ask. That quiets them down. Good. The the idea of Ecos is interesting, but even I cannot say it is the right one or will work even.

We pop out.

# Earth Two - Hawaii

I set the ship down in a cove near their settlement. Of course I have already scanned everything. No surprises. I send my two companions out just in case though.

"Ready to disembark Captain?" Mouse salutes me.

"Stop that please."

Sweet Pea comes up, "All set Captain?" Aggggh!

"Touchy today dear?"

Only Cat does not care. In fact where is she? Ah, already on the ground in the jungle looking for a snack no doubt. *That may be against the local rules Cat. Be careful.*

*No one will catch me.* I nearly burst out laughing.

"She knows Drup and Rand are here?"

"Not to mention a load of TK6s. Looks like your entire crew were turned to the TK side." I nod. Looks that way. I cannot detect anyone less than a six even. Of course they could all be nines hiding as sixes.

We pop to the shore and walk up the trail to their homes and such.

When we get there we are greeted with everyone in costumes of some sort. A party of some kind. Our necks are covered in a string of flowers and we are handed a coconut with a fluid inside and bamboo straw. There is a banner saying "Welcome Home Pilot". At least they got my name right. I know the others are teasing, but still. Makes me nervous. I really don't want the responsibility.

There are lots of hugs and such. Some of these people I only knew for less than a year and now it has been five years. Maybe it is because we are the first visitors in that time.

Rand sides up to me, "So Starfleet Captain, how does it feel?"

"Makes me sick to my stomach."

He laughs, "Welcome to our world Pilot. It never goes away either." Great.

"How come they are all sixes?" He looks at me strange.

"Sorry, part of our training." I relax my TK shields.

"Ah, a seven. That makes more sense. We chose the crew very carefully with this being the ultimate goal. Of course none of them knew it at the time." I nod, certainly did not tell me I was going to be piloting interstellar ships.

We can see the cove from here and he looking the ship over.

"Seems small. The ones we had a Farout were much bigger, crew of



fifty."

"This is just a froth world scout. They let me use it for the trip."

"Well, we are glad you had not forgotten us. Yes, we did get the Cat-boxes. Hope you got ours." I nod and smile. Some were really silly.

"Ah, Cat has caught something." Mouse mentions.

"It's okay, still some wild pigs we have not gotten rid of yet. Left over from the colony period. As no one else lives here we aren't that vigilant. She should be asleep for some time after that chase and meal."

I scan further out. No Hu on any of the nearby islands. Going further out I find them well to the west of us.

"They don't want to risk being this close to Cat Land I suspect." He nods.

"Speaking of which, did Owa and Sylvy get the gift from Marie?" Sweet Pea asks.

"What is the story behind that anyway? Yes, they received the 'gift'."

"As you know Cat Land has been having a population problem. Owa wanted something, ah more challenging to keep the skills of the lessers up."

"Well, they got that and then some. Don't know which one did it, but they gave Spikes back her original form."

Sweet Pea looks really pissed, "It was a chance of course, but even we did not think they were that stupid."

Drup says, "Spill it."

"Let's just say we need to monitor the situation carefully. Spikes came from a very intense competition world. By tooth and claw type of competition. Rank is gained by killing those in the way. Like the Cats they are ambush predators that like to play with their prey to show their superiority."

"There was no play in the first dozen encounters and it is still TK2." Shit.

"Against other TK2s?" I ask. He shakes his head no.

Mouse asks, "What is their TK series?"

"Same as the Cats, TP and DS are the first two. Add the death of a thousand knives to the equation and the Kung Fu training gained from Marie."

"That is one way to solve the population problem."

"Worse, there is now more than one of them. They reproduce asexually. There are now at least three of them. All having the same knowledge and skills."

"Three? I could see two or even four, if it had already happened

twice."

"They divide into three equal parts. Do the math, it will be Spikes Land in a few solars."

"I could see that, Owa and Sylvy will DS to another froth world with a few of their closest, but what do we do then?" Rand asks.

"He means that sooner or later they will find a way to Hu Land." I nod my understanding.

"Above my pay grade. Will ask when we get back. We have a few things we need to take care of first though. Send a Catbox if it gets too bad, but monitor closely, would be my advice."

Rand nearly doubles over laughing. What?

"Our little Pilot has all grown up." Drup smiles too. I am never going to live this one down.

Mouse asks, "Do you know where Calvin and Hobbes are?"

"They were doing some undercover work along the Fricka coast."

"Crab Cove?" Drup nods. I know the stories. Sad situation.

"Hey, when are we going to get a tour of your ship." Rand asks.

Mouse looks at me quizzically.

"That's not her ship. That is just one of the runners for her ship." Now why did you have to say that? Before I can stop him he points up.

Both Drup and Rand nearly fall over.

Then they bow down, "We are not worthy, we are not worthy!"

"Stop it right now. Please. Please stop." They both come up grinning. I am afraid they will always have that silly grin every time I see them now.

"It is noon here, so night at Crab Cove. Good time to visit them if you are going in the 'runner', which really should be called a toy ship." That is the reason I did not want to tell them. The runner is many times the size of the Black Wind II still sitting in the cove too.

"Okay, okay. Might as well see what a runner looks like. A lot of the tech is similar to the mother ship."

Rand tells a few of the others where we are going.

"Can we come too?" Rand looks at me. A nightmare.

"Maybe next time. It is only designed to hold five." Sweet Pea says like this should be obvious.

"But, it is big enough to hold hundreds?" She says.

"Let's just say it is mostly hardware." I say.

"Oh, oh! I get it. Right." *She is a smart one Drup. Keep her.*

*We intend to. Who do you think was your replacement on the Black Wind II?*

I sigh and we pop aboard to give the tour. I will not bore you with the

details. They return to their boring old wood ship. I suspect that will change soon.

"Secured for dimension shift Pilot." Mouse states. I do not let them call me Captain either. Still too new to the position. Still learning myself.

## Earth Two - Crab Cove

As a TK3 I can scan the entire town from well outside of its perimeter. Safer here for everyone. Max and Liza are with me. It is night and we are using scan to watch our surroundings.

"Most of the people are asleep, if they can. The ones in the barn are not in good shape. The royals are holding a party well into the night. They are all drunk and stuffed. The servants are cleaning things up, licking the plates and bowls clean. I wish I could TP to know what they are thinking."

"That is how they are paid. Most in the town would kill to trade places with them. You will note, none of them are thin."

"I noticed. There is a lot of metal here. Where did they get that from?"

Liza sighs, "They have reopened old mines and use slave labor."

"But we were taught that the mines had played out and now are not worth the effort."

"Unless you are using disposable slave labor."

"This has to be causing a dip in the population. Slavery only works when you get an excess of population. Since the Plague it is not easy for a lady to get pregnant."

"Ah, but all love trying. Er, or used to anyway." None of us are interested any longer. That old joke falls here.

"That's interesting. I would say being malnourished makes it harder too, but all of the fem servants are pregnant."

"Oh shit. No, really?" Liza and Max have both looked down.

"That males are all castrated. So, the royals get them pregnant. That is going to cause massive inbreeding problems." They look at me.

"Sorry, advanced training. Their children will get weaker and weaker from mating with relatives. Happens with most animals actually."

"That is why it is good to trade stock from another town." I nod.

*We are not alone.*

"Hobbes has noticed someone."

Purring commences. Very loud purring. Suddenly there are two Cats. Then none. Hey, at least I will not have to deal with the kits. One good thing about Hobbes being male. Downside is the need to mark his territory. No one ever gets nose blind to that smell.

"A fem Cat." I announce and everyone sighs.

"I never had that much fun."

"You are a virgin Max, you never had any fun."

"Hey, I thought about it a lot."

"I don't want to know. Are all of you Ecos this silly."

"Mouse! You are back too!" I give Mouse a hug.

"You remember Liza and Max? They run this area now. My range is the entire Frica."

"That keeps you busy. I brought two guests from the University."

"What is a University?" Liza asks.

"I will tell you later. Let's meet the others then."

Two more pop in, fem.

"This is Pilot and this is Sweet Pea. Pilot is a ship Captain and Sweet Pea is a diplomat and cultural attache."

"A what?" I ask as I give them both a hug.

She sighs, "I help solve cultural difficulties. Get both sides to agree to a solution that is mutually beneficial."

Max say, "We could use this skill here. It is really sad. We used to be a nice respectful culture and now we have slaves, royal condoned rape, starvation, beatings, even something close to wars." Both raise their eyebrows. Mouse remains passive.

"We are here to help." He says instead.

"We are under a mandate to not interfere unfortunately. We can watch, suggest, tempt, but not change anything directly. And as Max did not state, it is like this all up and down the coast. The entire area has gone dark. They are past the line into the interior, hunting and farming."

Liza comes in, "Using slaves to mine metals. Iron weapons and lots of gold." Never understood the allure of gold.

Mouse smiles, "We are not under such a mandate." Oh!

"You promised not to go crazy Mouse." Sweet Pea states.

"There is one way they get iron you should know of. Blood. From creatures and Hu." I did not even know of that.

"Do whatever you can. May I suggest getting rid of all iron metal and the forges." I was trained some too.

"Done." Hey, some warning next time buddy.

"Oh, shit. I was not expecting that."

"What?" I start scanning. The servants have noticed almost immediately. I would have been freaked out pre TK if this happened around me, but they appear to see it as a miracle and are not waiting for the metal to come back.

"They are killing the royals. The fems are especially vicious."

"Have you ever been raped Max? Don't judge them till you have." Pilot says this. I dare not ask.

"The guards have fled. Outnumbered."

"The slaves have revolted, freed from their chains and shackles. I am afraid their warden is dead and they are outside. They are going to burn the town down!"

"A little water should quiet that down." It starts raining.

"What level are you three?" I ask, breaking TK politeness.

"Not us, well at least not directly. Our, ah, transport ship helped."

My buddy squirms out of my pocket and joins the others zipping around us.

"A buddy reunion!" Liza and Max's have joined in.

"Sorry Buddy, should have let you out as soon as we were out of town."

*Yes, you should have.*

"The other monks are helping out. Getting people to safety. We need to get back to Calvin and help them. This is going to be a complete rebuild now. This is our chance to present an alternative to the royal method."

"We will leave you then. Glad we could help." They pop out.

"They did in a few seconds what we have been trying for years to do."

"We did not have permission. And we will be doing most of the work. Going to get messy, at least at first."

"I will help for a bit, but this will likely spread. I would rather it spread peacefully though and not by force. I can delete iron as well, though not as fast. Once you get settled some, I will go north to the next royal setup."

"The two towns north of us are gone, victims of war."

"Well, then I can lead the survivors from the slaves back to their homes."

"Make it so." Where did that phrase come from?

## Earth Two - far north

"We are above the coordinates. There are two waiting for us below."

I take us down and land nearby.

"Cold weather gear everyone, it is -30C out there."

Cat jumps ahead of us landing right in the snow. Then proceeds to play like it is the greatest thing ever invented. A moment later she is back on the ship trying to find the warmest spot. Once the door closes, we all break out laughing.

We have no idea who the two figures are. We wave and they wave back. They have seen the ship and not freaked, but with all the furs who could know.

When we get close, I say, "I hope one of you is Sami?" One nods. Finally the other removes their hood. It is Drup.

"I figured I could help. Rand and I spent a long time on their ships after all. Not a creative lot. It will be important to know if they made changes."

Mouse says, "And you volunteered? This will be boring as hell, and cold."

"No other Hu here. TK can keep us warm. Well there she is." He motions to the empty field of snow around us. "It is just an empty hole now. Everything above ground has been removed. We did not bother with the underground."

"Does not matter. Unlike them, our tech is constantly changing."

I pull out a handful of tiny spheres and throw them into the air. They form a matrix around us. I motion them to come back to the ship.

Sami turns to Drup, "You used to fly these things?"

He smiles, "Oh, no. Rand and I just cleaned the toilets."

"Be nice Drup, they did not have toilets. We don't either if anyone asks." He shrugs and smiles. We dare not laugh with you know who so near us.

"Telemetry coming in Pilot." Both Mouse and Sweet Pea are watching the time matrix.

"Okay, space yourself around the, ah, visual. Looking from different angles might help. We can zoom in or go back and forth in time as needed." Sami and Sweet Pea appear to be having a private conversation.

"I need everyone's attention please."

"I know nothing about star ships Pilot. Not sure I can do anything."

"Pay attention anyway. One thing we learned at the University was to

expect knowledge from unexpected places," Mouse says.

"This is our current time. Should look pretty much the same as when we were outside."

"You can even see our foot prints and where Cat did her play thing."

"If we go deeper." All we see is snow.

Sweet Pea uses a tablet to control the display.

"Now we remove water from the visual." We get the basement of the scrubber, complete with stone mounts where equipment used to sit. There are outlines on the floor to match whatever was here."

"If we overlay the design of what was supposed to be here."

Most of the space is filled with the scrubber device that goes up to the top of our display.

"So far. So good. Keep that last visual in your minds." It disappears.

"Now back in time to when the Farout people left." The space is empty again. Not entirely. There are things against the walls. Equipment of some kind. Not a design I know.

"This was their stuff. They removed all the old scrubber tech and used the mass to build what they needed. Probably assumed no one paid any attention to these long abandoned devices."

"We are recording."

"Proceed slowly."

Suddenly two people show up in the center then disappear. Next a ship that nearly fills the room appears. People start coming in and out of the room apparently servicing the ship.

"Back up to just before it disappears and do a high level zoom."

The ship reappears. The outside shell goes semi transparent. We can see the interior now.

"Give us a scale so we know how big this is." A scale appears. It is several times the size of the runner. Not unexpected. Looks to be more for transport than information gathering like the runner.

"There are weapons, though not very sophisticated. Meant for close combat only."

"Good enough to wipe out this whole sector for kilometers around."

"Not atomics at least."

"Ah, sorry to interrupt, but is it possible to see outside the scrubber tower?" Sami asks.

The display expands and shows above and to the sides of where we were in the basement.

"This was just before they popped out. You can see Puu, Cat and myself in the space above. You will note that the rest of the scrubber equip-



ment appears intact here. Outside the huts are intact and look like they should. We were caught unawares. Never thought to look below or they had some kind of shielding. Everything looked normal, well for a old structure built over a thousand years ago. Water and ice are not forgiving to tech."

"I thought it was sealed?" Mouse says.

"It was a CO2 scrubber. Air had to get in and out, so water, snow also could do the same." That makes sense.

"For what it is worth, this all looks like normal Farout tech. We did need to defend ourselves against other sen at Farout. Granted we were spaced out, but we all suffered from curiosity and were there for thousands of years. We did eventually find each other."

"And some where already there when you arrived?"

"Yes, a few odd species. Even they had no idea why they were there. They had no trouble with their 'thn. They were space fairing, but not expansionist, just curious. I did not interact with them, different section." That would be the Tafa.

Sami asks, "I thought the Farout Hu were brought here with limiters. How the hell did they build three ships of this size?"

"Sweet Pea, if you will, see if you can find the answer."

Drup comments, "They did know what a limiter was and of course shielding. Put a tracer on the ones brought here and follow them in shielded. Of course they could not land at Crab Cove, but this place is nearly on the other side of the world. Unfortunately, we were not as vigilant as we clearly should have been."

"There was no trouble for a thousand years and the two we brought in, Roger and Susan, were limited to TK2 and that was only to allow them to defend themselves if they got in trouble with the locals."

"This is not a blame session, but more trouble shooting to avoid the same thing happening in the future."

"Go back further please. I want to see how they started and when. Can you show a time scale too so we know when this is happening?" A scale appears.

The display goes backwards and the ship can be seen to be deconstructed back to an empty room, which then suddenly is filled again with the scrubber tech.

"Shit, they did all this in less than one year. Does this match when Roger and Susan appeared." Drup nods.

"Remember, they probably made a thousand ships in the time before and during Farout. Think four thousand years of working on this."

"Where did the others come from? Weren't they all being watched?"

"You would have to ask Silver and Turtle about that. My understanding was the majority remained on a green froth chosen for them some distance from here."

"And they still had all of their tech or could make it again quick enough. Hell, a TK6 could do it if pressed."

"Make a runner like this?"

"No, a simple shell that could get between froth worlds. This runner is part of a larger ship that took hundreds of very high level TKs to put together. And it is not the only one. Just the one they trusted us with."

"Still impressive." Drup says smiling.

"We have captured the information we needed. It will take time with a lot of sen to deconstruct what we have gathered."

Sweet Pea asks a question, "Would it be possible to have some private time?" To do what?

Sami sighs, "I am her uncle. She grew up here." We all turn to her in shock.

"Wait, you went from a frozen wasteland to a desert wasteland?" She smiles and nods.

"You are all welcome. No TK though."

"Warning, the food is horrible if you did not grow up with it. I could never open a food stall on Alexandria."

"What raw seal blubber does not sell?" Mouse teases.

"An acquired taste." I add.

Cat comes up and nudges Sami and Sweet Pea. I bet she would love the fair, especially the fish.

"I am afraid Cat that the locals have never seen a Cat your size."

"Okay, command decision. Sweet Pea go, take as long as you need. You know where we are going next, so come back to the ship when you are ready. The rest of us will start analyzing their ship. That means you too Drup." Sighs from the others.

"Okay, listen up. This tech is a thousand years in advance of whatever Drup and Rand knew of. See if you can find the differences. Drup is lead here while we have him. Everyone else concentrate on figuring out what everything does." This is just a non-functional model, so we can't exactly turn it on. Drup helps identify what he can and the rest sort of fit it together in a logical way. Sort of. Sometimes it is obvious they just fudged it in hurry to get it to all work.

"To be fair, they did not come back with a functioning ship. They had to rebuild from just their memories."

"We know they succeeded and likely have many more now. Probably enough to evac their entire population if needed."

"And attack us if needed too." There is that.

"Any possibility they are avoiding us and are accepting defeat."

"Naw!" Is the consensus. I hate egos. They get in the way of all rational thought.

Sweet Pea pops in with Sami.

"Sami wants to go. How about Drup?"

"Have not asked him. He has a lot of duties here after all."

"Do I get to see the Mother Ship?" I nod.

"I'm in. I would not miss that for all the TK levels in the froth. First tell me how this thing worked? Is it a time machine?" Not exactly.

# Tafa

It is very frustrating. So much has been lost. It could take millions of years to set up stable ecologies again. We have had a few successes that ultimately crash and end as a decaying mess. Duping enough food for the survivors is not a good long term strategy.

&Ta& I have chosen a Tafa name again and dropped all reference to Farout. My attention is drawn to two of the six.

&We have visitors.&

&Let us go meet them.& We remember this much of our culture. Always be polite to strangers. I hesitate.

&Please forgive me. Are they threatening?& I keep forgetting to ask this.

&Off world. Several sen. Four are Hu.&

I express sadness, &Then we go prepared.&

When we arrive, they are in a large open field. Very little grows here. The are all sitting or lying. The four Hu wear outer clothes. There is a Di. The last one I do not know. It is covered in fur, I believe that is what it is called. It is similar to the Di in having five extensions to the main mass. It is lying on the ground. Is it ill?

When we approach all but the one lying give a formal Tafa bow. That is strange as I have never seen a Hu attempt this before.

The Di rises, *Please forgive this brief TP. We will add an appendage so we can com proper Tafa.* It and the four Hu add a pair of arms at their centers so they now each have six arms.

&My chosen is Drup. I survived Farout as a servant as well. All the others including the lazy one are from forth Earth Two.& It indicates each in turn. &Pilot, Sweet Pea, Sami, Mouse and the prone one is Cat.&

&My chosen is Ta and this is Hg. Pleased to meet you. Are you dangerous? Do you intend harm?&

They all do a bow of shame. Why?

&Please rise.& I am confused.

&Others like us have been evil. We are not of that grouping.&

&Are you here to retrieve the Hu?& My best guess.

&It is anathema to us. Do what you will. We are supremely ashamed for its behavior.& They do the bow of shame again.

Hg says, &They are at least attempting to be polite. Never seen Hu do that before.&

&May we ask why you are here?&

&Please ask.& Definitely not rude Hu behavior we know all too well. They are a very impatient sen that wants everything immediately.

The large one offers, &Shall we eat? We brought Tafa food.&  
&Please. Be at ease.&

Vessels are brought forth with many Tafa delicacies. The colors, the shapes, the smell is all Tafa. How can this be? How can they eat this without harm? We could not produce such food here if we wanted to. We follow form and all assume relaxed pose.

Time passes for all to witness the moment. They know of this as well? Who are these sen?

The largest Hu, as if on cue, rises, bows to everyone, including its own group and carefully chooses a bowl of exquisite delicacy and brings it to set in front of the one of our group who has been suffering depression. How did it know of this? Each bowl is brought to another. Set before each of us is our most high desire. It proceeds to place a bowl before each of its own, with the lazy one last before assuming a relaxing pose before the last bowl of the simplest and least interesting food.

We all bow to each other, including the lazy one this time. It eats directly with its food port without covering it. One nudges it and it raises an appendage to cover while consuming. So this is not its normal behavior. Why do so now?

I am being very rude trying to understand the new ones and concentrate on my own bowl. It is amazing. I take a polite amount of time for me to finish. I leave a tiny amount in the bowl to indicate I cannot possibly consume any more. I set my bowl down. Nearly everyone finishes at the same time. A true sharing.

&You honor us with your food. You are welcome to be among us as you please.& We bow to the new ones.

&You honor us with your acceptance.& Formalities are now over.

&I will be rude. Why?&

&I am sure you have many questions. We are here to help. We were sent by the Two to bring needed materials to assist you in rebuilding.&

Suddenly around us, the entire field is full of plants, animals, supplies of all kinds including transports. No portal this time. How?

&Cat and Mouse will assist with the life form placements. Before you, are all items from Tafa, but from before the plague, kept in stasis for this event. These two have studied your ecology and are experts where they were from. They are here to help and to learn. Please correct their errors without shame.& The large Hu and the lazy one rise and bow to us. We bow in return.

Pilot Hu comes forward nudged by the Di, &Drup and I will assist in setting up transportation. These devices have been designed to be used by Tafa without the gifts. We can also set up portals where you decide for distance travels. Please correct our errors without shame.& They bow to us and we bow in return.

The last two rise as one, &Sami and I will assist in social structure, government and trade. We have extensive experience in multiple sen cultures and ways. It will not be possible to return to before the plague. With the limited resources and Tafa present, simpler alternatives will need to proceed final excellence. Please correct our errors without shame.&

They are all returned to relaxed pose.

The creature comes running up to me and prostates itself in front of me. I hand it a com card and it scurries away. The new ones give it no attention. The creature is assigned tasks too demeaning for a norm, but that still need to be done. At one time there might have been Aaaha or Hggy in the same position, or even a former Tafa stripped of one arm. Having been at Farout this thought brings shame to my understanding.

The next six by six light/dark bring much progress. Each of the new teams receive four Tafa volunteers to make a complete group. When they leave two Tafa will fill their positions and the groups will continue. My own group coordinates these groups.

The transportation group shows us about the carts that run on TK power. This method was used for nearly everything on Farout, but was always behind panels and such where we could not learn. Here it is in the open and each of the core six know how to make more 'batteries' as needed. We can make entire carts in fact as simply as we made the buildings and other structures before they arrived. We make a portal that takes us to the edge of the sea. There they construct ships of different sizes so norms can move between safe areas along the coastlines. These depend on the wind instead of TK batteries and are more in keeping with guiding principals. We are appreciative of both though.

Our four best ecologists work with them to place the new plants and animals. They were all ones we were missing and none that we have in abundance. How did they know so long ago what would be needed? Most Hu do not understand ecology. These two understand all the complexities and readily place their appendages in soil and waste to teach and learn. Hu are usually ashamed of their waste and do not see it as a resource. My understanding of the Hu has been offered new insights.

The last two I was most concerned about. How could Hu who abused all politeness be of any use now? They knew each other before they were

gifted and lived in a very harsh cold location. They both knew from a small size to respect those around themselves and to offer help whenever needed at whatever cost. Most un-Hu like. The six in this group understand that this will be the hardest to implement. There is nothing physical involved. Nothing we can make or move outside of our minds. After much linking, yes, they do this too!, an understanding comes. Small groups that become large groups as needed. Small groups are more flexible, especially if knowledge is available, but large groups are needed for coordination across space and time.

We return to the empty field where we started, now planted with food plants in a seemingly random, but very aesthetic manner. It is a pleasure even to move towards the meeting location.

We bow to each other. Hg and I bow the lowest. They may have saved us.

&We are deeply appreciative.&

&We are deeply appreciative for the learning and experience.& They return our bow as low as we did.

&Is there any assistance we can offer?& Hg asks.

&We are curious about the time of Terror, so as to avoid it happening again to others. If we may ask where did it start?&

I am shocked, &No one told you? It happened, it is done. Now is now.& They must have been too polite to ask before now.

&We understand that you take no blame. We have seen the weapons you are prepared to use if something like this happens again.& Hard to hide such from high level TKs.

&Such weapons would have been useless against us, so I assume they were for some other reason? Did you think we were the Terror returned?&

&It was a possibility we needed to be prepared for. In the time since we were brought back here we have investigated as well as possible what happened and what ended it. You are standing in the very spot we believe it started.&

&That explains your concern. Hopefully the gifts we have brought have helped cleanse this special place.& We really do not have a word for sacred and use special place instead, but life among the Hu taught me the meaning as they understand it.

Pilot then asks, &We have a means to 'see' what happened and would like to share this knowledge with you. It will be very disturbing. We cannot change what happened, we can only be witness to it.&

I look at Hg, &We understand and you may proceed.&

Pilot throws an appendage full of tiny spheres into the air where they quickly rush to their apparently assigned positions. A short time later they return to her appendage.

&To show you, we need to take you to our star ship where the viewer is ready.& We affirm and we are suddenly aboard a ship again.

&This is not a Farout ship.& Hg nudges me. All of the walls are covered with art and designs of all different kinds. I recognize Ba leaf designs, Ku feather works, Di stone carvings and so on. We are met with species beyond those we met at Farout.

Sweet Pea hands me a device, &We are your group now. If you ever have need, press this device and we will be here as soon as we can.&



# Alexandria - Hotevilla

It has been some time since I have written in my journal. Never been one for writing, but I was reminded recently that it is part of our duties.

Tia and I have been here a few years now and could not be happier. I miss New Hope of course, but here, it is like our original home. We never lived in the actual Hotevilla, either of us. I was from Flagstaff originally. Long gone. Now it is in the middle of Cat Land and all Hu effects are gone.

Hotevilla was a small town in the middle of the Hopi Nation. Might has well have been Mars for what little grew there at the end. The plague was bad of course. The ash did make it there too. None of that matters now.

Here we are. We run a general store in the middle of nowhere on the path from West Port to the University. There is an inn across the path that can handle most sen types likely to be found here. There are a few of those lichen trees about, but they do not even provide shade and nothing but a 'thant would eat one. Not that different from the cactus and scrub we had before.

"Sam, put that down and come help. We have visitors." Not that I am complaining. Visitors are our entertainment.

I go to the counter. A Ku is waiting for assistance.

+Greetings Honored Ku.+ He is wearing a blue bandana.

+I be but a poor blue bird of no consequence.+

+You are a long way from any town containing Ku. How may I help you?+

+A simple meal of grain and grubs and some water to drink.+

+Easy enough, be ready in a moment.+

+I am on my way to the University. Have you been there?+

+Yes. I have friends there. You are taking an unusual way to arrive there.+

+A few years ago I was scrubbing sewers in a nothing town on Ku. Next thing I know I am setting up a system for a large city on this world.

+

+Ah, the West Port sewers. Excellent work.+

+Scared the guano out of me. Next they say I must go to University, but they agreed to my choice of means of getting there. I have walked from West Port.+

+In this desert? That is insane. What did you do for food and water?+

I place his meal before him.

+I am an expert in the ways of water. I know where to find it and the signs to finding it.+

+Good enough. A useful skill around here.+

+I know enough to know this water is not from any spring around here.+ My mouth falls open.

+We have springs. There is one just to the west of here. Simple enough.+

+That could be an explanation of course, but taste this. It does not have the right mineral contents. Taste is off.+

+We filter it. Too high in some heavy metals for some of the sen.+ I like playing this game.

+You are TK. I know of no filter that could do such.+

+A still could.+

+This is not pure water. Would not be healthy either.+

+I can see why you were recommended. You should do well.+ I smile.

Tia comes in, "Stop teasing the guests old man."

"How old are you sir? You do not look over sixty."

He speaks Standard. That is expected of course. Could not get into University without it.

"Sixty is old for a Hu. Especially out here."

"For a TK it is nothing."

Tia asks me, "What did you tell him?" She is clearly upset about what is supposed to be a secret.

"Relax dear, he is TK4. We can talk around him."

Now it is our Blue Bird who is shocked.

"She is right. I chirp too much. I best be going."

"No need. We are all family. Your secret is safe if that is what you wish. You are still new to the family. It takes time to adjust."

"It is not the family that concerns me, but the gifts themselves. I am a humble servant who only wished to serve. The gifts are a great burden are they not?"

"True, but also a blessing. As with any new skill learned, it becomes more comfortable with time. Look around you. There is no TK tech visible. A simple outpost in the middle of nowhere. We like it that way too. Besides, you need not ever use the gifts except during an emergency."

+The rest of the time, you can be just a poor birdie.+ He bows to me and I return the honor.

Sheriff Tewk comes in, in a hurry. I think this is the Sheriffs normal state actually.

"This is the most excitement we have had in a year Tia. To what do we owe the honor Sheriff?" Most come in, get what they want and leave in a hurry. Who would want to spend time here? We almost never see the Sheriff, a Yesan, who chose this posting to get away from the politics of its kind. Turns out to be very useful. S/he can run over forty kilometers per hour untiringly. Of course it is a shape that most sen would have nightmares over. That helps too.

@There is a rather large star ship outside.@

@A what?@ I ask.

It suddenly gets dark with almost no light coming in through the windows. I rush outside. Of course I have already used TK and know it really is huge. But I still have an act to perform for the few in town who are not TK at the moment. The mounts in the stable are clearly upset.

Tia and the Ku come out more slowly and dignified.

A portion of it comes off the whole and descends to near us. Too large to set in the street, so it sets down just outside town. A hatch opens and Droop comes out in full Di form. Magnificent. He runs towards us.

^We must go.^

@I can take care of things here. I will close the store and guard it.@

^What about our Ku friend? He is set to be a University student.^

^Best he comes as well. We have been wondering where he was. We have need of his services on the ship.^

+It would appear new friend that your wish for simplicity must wait a bit. I am sorry. This is not normal or expected. I have never seen this star ship before either.+

Droop looks at the Blue Bird, +Can you run brother?+

+I love running.+

+Then run with me to the ship. The others will cheat and DS. No appreciation.+

Keki turns and bows to us, clearly happier than when he arrived. Oh yes, I know his name. Companions are good for that sort of thing.

Our companions DS ahead of us. They love new tech and are probably all over the small ship by now. Keki's buddy wants to be loose to join them, but is secured in a closed pocket. They are rather hard to hide from norms. They are all just a cloud of dust running ahead of us now.

@Thank you Tewk. Wish you could come too. We will tell you all about it when we return.@

@Much appreciated. Be safe.@ S/he turns and goes to the Store to secure everything, at the TK level. Pesky norms get into everything. The sight of Tewk should be enough for most of them.

# Mother Ship

"Everyone is aboard Captain. Decom complete. Not happy about that. Oh, they even managed to find Ku Keki." I wish they would put Cat trackers on the ones we want.

"Very good. Take us into the deep dimensions and hold us there."

"Aye aye Captain." Where did this language come from? We certainly never used it on any of the other ships I was on. Maybe it is a star ship thing.

The deep dimensions. Even another star ship is not going to find us here. Perfect.

"We are here Captain."

"Put her into lock down Ensign and keep her there until I say otherwise."

"Acknowledged and done."

"I will be in conference and not to be interrupted."

I am off the bridge at last. Why do they call it that? Sigh, I am not in charge. Just one among many Captains in the new Star Fleet. Not the biggest ship either of course. I am only TK7, but I have a good crew, some are friends from University I trust with existence itself. Which may be called on if this all goes wrong.

"Captain present. All present and accounted for. Sealing the room."

The ensign seals the room from the outside. We all add our own seal. Not many could break through all that. All except Keki who has no idea what is going on.

Mouse goes up to him, +Keki, glad you are here. I saw your lecture at West Port when the saboteurs attacked.+

+Took us another solar to find them all.+

+Really. I heard it was your going out to them totally alone, listening to their concerns and convincing them to join the concern. Even inviting one of them to sit on the board making decisions.+ I smile, then look around for Cat. She is in the back corner sleeping as expected. Bet she listened in with TP to every word. She has had our back so many times, she has definitely earned a place. Sens fear her at first and then tend to ignore her because she sleeps so much. She is not asleep, but listening. I smile again. That was not a laugh Cat. Really. She snorts and rolls over.

Myra, Cat and Puu pop in disheveled.

"So much for security."

"Hey, it was not easy. Give us some credit. Took all thirty six Meeps

to figure it out." They make comfortable chairs for themselves at the back next to our Blue Bird. They do like a challenge.

I nod to Sweet Pea to begin. I wish Sami was here too, but he thought his own people needed him too. He is not a TK scientist and only half understood what all was going on. Still another set of eyes with brains behind them. We all have the right to make our own decisions. Well, most of the time. I never would have accepted all this had I known. Come to think of it, I doubt anyone here would have wanted all this to happen.

"We started on a routine mission to Hawaii to pick up Droop and then go to the far north where we picked up Sami. From there we went to the three scrubber silos and ran the Way Back device Myra and the Meeps came up with. It worked perfectly and we have a full final recording of their ship just before takeoff. Available in the library. All are encouraged to study it." She sits down and Droop gets up, back in Hu form because of size constraints.

"I did a look at it when the results first came up. It is definitely Farout design and very little changes have been made since our time there. It is like their culture was frozen. No challenges mean little advancement. They were totally caught unaware by the buddy swarm. We should run a census though to be sure none have been captured to study. Check especially the recent sixes. They might be embarrassed to report a loss."

He smiles, "Though I doubt the Farouts could make any sense from a dead one." They self destruct if captured. Oh, nothing explosive, just scramble their insides at the quantum level. Still a lose of life. He sits.

Mouse and Cat get up. I am amazed that Cat got up, but she sits properly next to Mouse though. This is new. Maybe she is finally accepting being part of us.

"This was very much a group effort. Pilot, ah, I mean Captain and Drup, ah Droop. I am sorry."

I come up, "Pilot is fine among our friends. Please continue."

"Yes. I am not used to being in front of so many of the elite at once, though of course I have been with everyone here at some point."

"And we were all young once too laddy." Everyone starts to laugh until they catch the expression from Cat and change their minds. We need to invite her to every meeting.

*And bore me to death?*

*Special meetings only then.*

*Maybe.*

"Right, Pilot and Droop did the transport, Sweet Pea and Sami helping them in a series of cultural organization methods so they can start small

and build up slowly. Cat and I helped with the plants and animals we brought in from the Tafa ark. That was a really good call by Silver and Turtle. They have saved the Tafa from extinction."

I get up again, "We did a Way Back at the site of the initial infection. We also did readings at the coast where the infection finally died out and some islands as controls. This is the main agenda item today, but first I wanted to make an observation. The Tafa are an old culture. A peaceful one. They abhor war and conflict. On the Farout station they were treated without respect and abused regularly by a Hu commander, who was their servant until recently."

"He died?"

"Oh, no, he now lives in Tafa form as a full citizen. Just TK2 to begin with, but he is no longer a servant."

"What happened? Why the change?"

"I was getting to that you impatient lot." Almost another laugh, but Cat is still in the front, now next to me and gives them a dirty look.

"There were once two other sen species on Tafa, the Aaaha and the Hggy. They all perished in the Terror as they refer to it. They were on the front lines so to speak, but were also blamed for spreading the plague and many were killed by Tafa themselves. All of them were exiled from the islands at the end for this reason. All died."

I take a few steps to pause.

"The high six viewed the recording as we did. They saw what happened. They saw the sacrifice of the 'servants' and behavior of their own kind. They all took a vow right there that this can never happen again. Before we left Tafa the commander was as he is now a full citizen of Tafa and happy for it. He also came to understand his actions were wrong. Unfortunately, the rest of Farout has not learned this lesson yet that we know of." I sit.

Marie gets up. She is tired and exhausted.

"Some five years ago I admitted a traveler to Alexandria. The form it was in put in stasis and it was given a new form, a small Hu fem. Now a she, she became a student of mine and made black belt. She also spent a large amount of time in the library studying as many sen cultures as she could. One in particular she was fascinated by, Cats. She asked to be posted there to do post-graduate work. I contacted Owa and Sylvy and they agreed after doing a TP scan of her. She was transported there and the two Cats took over. That was several months ago."

She adjusts position. I already know what she is going to say, because as it was under her watch, she insisted on being the one to present.

"There is good news and bad news. The good news is it cannot sporulate and we know how to defeat it, thanks to the sacrifices of the Aaaha and Hggy."

"It? I thought you said you made her a Hu fem?"

"I was getting to that. Owa and or Sylvy did the TP scan as I said. They noticed something that I missed. Upon arrival, they moved her back into its normal form. Now, before you get upset, it was not a complete making. We have proof of that. However, it can reproduce asexually. They divide into three when they do so. There are now twenty seven now. The Cats use them to weed out their weak ones. As you know, they have been having a population problem for some time. It turns out when they saw this opportunity, they took it. As far as we can determine no Cat has been able to defeat one in mortal combat. So far they have only gone after the weaker TK2s and below. This is all with permission of the royals."

"And you are worried they will eventually make it to Hu Land and test us too? The Cats final revenge. Surely we could take care of that easy enough."

"Tell that to the Tafa. Here is a holo of the Terror and the form I have in stasis." She projects the two images and everyone is silent.

"The Tafa were a high tech culture. They did not have star ships yet, but they have been to all of the planets in their system. Those outposts all died from lack of support from Tafa itself when it collapsed. We have found their remains on many colonies. As we know ourselves, it is very hard to make a small stable ecology. Cat and Mouse can fill you in on more details later."

"But they cannot sporulate?"

"Yes, during takeover, they asexually reproduce until all the organic material in range is consumed. But instead of dying like most species who have out grown their food supply, they sporulate, each of them dividing into millions of tiny spores. Spores that are hard to kill."

"Shit, so how do you kill them?"

"They can survive in the tropics and arctic, deserts and high mountains. But, they have two weaknesses which are not easy to apply. High salt, hence why they never reached the islands, even the spores are killed by the salt spray of their oceans. And fire. This was the most common method used on land until it did not matter any more. They destroyed their own crops, forests, culture, in an attempt to defeat the Terror."

She pauses for this to sink in.

"The islands after a millennium eventually took a chance and came back to the mainland. Only a few colonies did this and there was very lit-

tle life there when our six Tafa were brought home to help rebuild."

"Silver and Turtle. But how did they know? The Tafa were at the Farout station BEFORE they arrived. Remember, they were banished to Farout by the 'thn for being a perceived threat to their rule. They knew where they would be sent, they knew the Tafa world was going to be in trouble."

"Why the hell did they let it happen at all then?"

Drup stands up, "I can answer that. The 'thn were too powerful. Sure, they could have come right back after being sent there, but there were many 'thn, too many, to take on. We do not know what TK level they were, as some in this room are in the same situation. They have enough precog to help, so they did. It was a chance. Missed timing and they could easily have brought a Terror spore to Farout."

"But we have enough high TK here to take them out in a moment right?"

"Ah, remember I said she was studying all the sen in the library? DNA and other records are there as well. Otherwise it would be hard to raise up healers who could work with any sen.

It turns out they can incorporate this information into their own form. Even to the point of replacing their unique information with known sen information that achieves the same thing. If not for their shape, the ones currently in Cat Land would not show up on long range sensors as anything other than a Cat."

"Terror indeed." A general rustling in the room.

"They cannot sporulate and they cannot cross the ocean barrier as of yet."

"But, a lot of species sporulate like mosses, ferns, and fungi. They could get the idea from these and then game over."

"The spores cannot cross the sea either remember."

"Unless in their desperation the Cats send them to us." That is an evil thought that Marie voiced.

"Would they do that?" Everyone turns to Cat.

*They would if cornered. You know how much Owa hates Silver.*

"I have an idea. Provide the Cats a way out. I am thinking another earth froth they could port to."

"And we can set the ports to scan for Terrors and eliminate them during the transfer. We do that already for lots of things."

"And some get through anyway."

"Gee and I thought this was a party to get to look over the new ship." Nope.



# Ku Eden

My head hurts so much I should see a healer, except that I know it not physical. How did I end up here? A poor old birdie is now part of the command structure for this section of the froth. Worse, I am here on assignment and it has nothing to do with sewers or plumbing.

I walk to the nearest Blue Bird warehouse and walk in. This looks normal, rational, simple. I am not hungry yet, actually I need never be hungry again. Did not think I liked eating that much, but now I am coming to miss it. Everyone on the ship still ate though they did not need to either. I get behind a counter and help serve so the birdie there can do something more important. With my old ratty blue bandanna I am accepted without question.

I must have arrived just before rush. I am there quite awhile. I overhear someone cry that the sewer had backed up again. I pass my station off as we are cleaning up and the crowd is smaller. I go to where I hear the sound of distress.

+I know how to fix sewers. May I help?+

+Keki, is that you? Oh, so nice to hear your chirp again. I am sure we can handle it. A bird as important as you does not need to do dirty work any more.+

+I just served meals for over an eighth. I know I have been gone, but I was working sewers there as well.+ And on the ship too. Who designed such a horrible system? They should be ashamed.

+Well come on then. Follow us.+ We all go to the familiar location I spent many a day clearing out branches, old discarded possessions, and of course the expected. Good old Ku poo. Nothing like it. The carnivores on Alexandria were the worst. Mostly mammals I understand. That stunk.

It only takes a short time to clear the problem and get things running again. We all head for bird baths to clean up and trade for a new set of clothes.

+That bandanna is really seen some use. Please take a newer one. At least we can do that for you.+

I wash mine under the bath and wring it dry, +I have a sentimental attachment to this one.+ I put it back on. Still slightly damp, but that feels good too.

+I actually came here for a reason. I came to find the White Cloaks. Anyone know how to find them? I tried at the Freedom Garden, but no one was about.+

+Five solars must seem like forever. A lot has changed. We have no idea where they are. Some new bullies are in town.+

+Ah, what color are they now?+

She shows amusement with her top feathers, +Would you believe white bandannas? They tried to fake being good like the White Cloaks and Blue Birds by mimicking some of each. And they were good at first, helping in so many ways birdies came to them instead of the White Cloaks. Not so much into feeding the poor, so we were left alone.+

+They show up at feeding time, but do not eat. I think they come to intimidate birdies they are looking for.+

+Birdies that when found are never seen again. We think this is what happened to the White Cloaks.+

+Sounds like I am going to be cleaning up an even bigger sewer this time. Do you think the White Cloaks still exist, just in hiding, or have all of them been found and killed.+ Both of them look at me obviously not knowing. I doubt Flor and the other high TKs were killed. That would really mean trouble. And the idea of a new group that is helpful at first sounds very scary, as in Spikes kind of scary. Well, this was why I was sent here.

+I am going to do some pecking around to see what I can find. I have a message I need to get to them. Thank you for a good work.+

The first place to check is the old underground at the park. Might be some clues there. Once I am out of sight I DS to an open space I have scanned. Dark and dusty. Does not look like anyone has been here in some time. There are footprints, but no way of knowing how recent down here. I make my way to the service areas. Any food that was here is gone. Perches have not been cleaned and the guano has solidified. That gives me a clue it has been some time. Nothing here clearly.

I DS to a safe spot topside and begin a scan to find the White Bandannas. I have a sensor that was quickly put together. I get it out and hold it anxiously. I go closer to the center of town. It is not hard to find them. They appear to be on every street corner. Other birds are avoiding them. Have they turned already?

I go closer holding my sensor. I am within the prescribed range and nothing happens. Either it is not working or this is not a Spikes creature.

+Good Day Blue Bird. What brings you into the center of the city.+ We are not allowed here?

+Good day to you as well. I have been on a long pilgrimage and just gotten back. What happened to the White Cloaks? I remember seeing them occasionally a few solars ago.+

+You have been gone. We have taken over their role. They just disappeared without notice. Someone had to do the work. No one has any idea where or even if they still exist. Is there anything I can do for you? The nearest Blue Bird enclave is several kilometers that way.+ She points in the direction I came from. I get the hint, nod a quick thanks and proceed in that direction. Well that was interesting.

I check the sensor and run the diagnostics routine. Everything comes back fine. Of course they only had the stasis sample to work with. What the Cats created could be different, though the story is that Spikes came from here. The only way to Alexandria was through a portal run by the White Cloaks and apparently Flor signed off on it. I need to find her.

I scan the last known location of the portal. Nothing but rubble. No 'thn metal. Ah, 'thn metal. Of course. Dumb birdie. I head for the sewers.

I am back in my element. I know this system and it appears nothing has changed. Well, if it works, don't change it. I quickly take the path that should lead me to the 'thants. No one here. I scan. Nothing. Would even the 'thants abandon a froth world. I remember they had another nest in the west. I DS there.

At last, some 'thants! I am so happy to see them. They quickly surround me. I am an invader.

<sup>th</sup>I am a friend. I mean you no harm. <sup>th</sup>

Nothing. Have they never heard a Ku speak 'thant before?

<sup>th</sup>Is there a Librarian I can speak with? <sup>th</sup> That gets them moving. It really says that I know their social structure. I am motioned to follow one of them. I do so. The tunnel structure is similar to that under our area.

I recognize the smell of their library before we get there. I am starting to see other caste members too. We stop before a Librarian and the worker leaves.

<sup>th</sup>We do not get many Ku this far into our nest. May I be of service? <sup>th</sup>  
A few soldiers have gathered to watch.

<sup>th</sup>I used to work with the 'thant nest in a town near the capital. I was a sewer worker. Together we made the best sewer system on this world. I have met with the Librarian Edwin just recently. Of course he is on a different froth at the moment. Where, I am not at liberty to say. <sup>th</sup>

The Librarian waves an arm and the soldiers leave. Glad they were not warriors. Not that a warrior would fit in this space.

<sup>th</sup>We have had trouble recently with a new group calling themselves White Bandannas. In fact, you could say we are at war with them. <sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I am looking for the White Cloaks. <sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I would like to see them again too. They were true friends. <sup>th</sup>

'th As far as you know, they are no longer on Ku-Eden?'th

'th Who are you that you have such information? No Ku should know this much.'th

'th I learned a lot at the libraries on Alexandria.'th And elsewhere.

'th There are no White Clocks here. They all disappeared at once. Very strange.'th

'th I am going to go to West Port to check on the long range portal there.'th

'th We are not allowed there, but having our own portals, there is no need. I wish you good searching.'th It turns around and goes about it's business disappearing into the mass of other 'thants. Egg it. I pop out. They know about TK, no point in hiding it here.

'thants will answer your questions if they trust you, but only the question asked. They do not volunteer information. I could spend all day trying to get what I want. Faster to just look for it on my own. What could cause all of them to disappear at once? I have never heard of such a thing in my classes.

In a series of jumps I make my way to the port. The building is there, but no one is nearby. I pop up to it and scan. The interior is empty. I pop in. Dusty and abandoned. One of the doors is open even. Some carts abandoned outside. I look closer. One of the carts is cut in half! Right through the cargo. On a long term portal, they close the door before they jump. The one to Alexandria takes days. By sending a sealed box, there is enough air for norms to survive. I remember my first trip. But here the cart is cut. That could only happen if a portal shut down during a run. That would never happen if the operator was present. Could easily kill someone if they were only partway through.

I scan the walls. The box is gone. So the last long range got off alright. The walls are 'thn metal and are still intact. Not that any non TK could touch it. Seeing half a cart probably stopped anyone from using the space for anything else either. Outside there are plants growing at the edges and paths. Clearly happened some time ago.

I came this time via the froth ship. Coming from the hidden deep dimensions it was seen as safer. I had to jump off the ship myself. First time doing that from an orbit at the edge of my range. SCARY! I was shivering and shaking for an eighth afterwards. By the time I looked back up the ship was long gone of course. With the large portal out I would not have been able to get here any other way anyway. Also scary. I am not good at froth jumping even to nearby worlds yet. Not a lot of practice, seeing as how there were no nearby worlds to Alexandria. More theory

than practice, with field trips to dimension space. That was scary too, but at least I could 'see' something. Non TKs see nothing. They can't even breathe. Fine for short trips.

I go into town to get some food and think. It is as I remembered. I go to the sewer headquarters and birdies are surprised to see me. Lots of clucking and pats.

+Everything working? Or did you ruin my creation already?+ I tease.

+The first bird who did that would face flight school for sure. Everything is working. You built in redundancy and most is passive anyway. Yes, we do regular inspections as well.+

+Anyone know what happened to the White Cloaks. I was expecting to see some and have seen none.+ Everyone shakes their heads that they don't know.

+They were here one day and gone the next. Abandoned their spaces without warning. Food was still set out. We were lucky a fire did not get out of control.+

+I am going down if that is alright.+

+Of course. You are always welcome. Need someone with you or do you remember the way?+

I show amusement, +Oh, I remember. Burned into my brain the hard way.+ That gets clucks.

I am really doing it because I need a quiet space I am familiar with. This works. I am quickly down several levels. I am seeing fewer and fewer birds about. I am alone.

Think. We did field trips to other froth partners. Each sen loved showing off their own world. We only went to one of the original Earths, Earth Two, as Earth One was still off limits, though we saw that from orbit. We saw both Di worlds, the one where Droop was hatched and the one where Squeak came from. There are two Ba worlds. We get students from both of them. Only one Ceph world so far, but TKs are still looking. Myra said there is a new map in the library that shows how to get to all the froth earths covered by Qr'thn. I only got to meet her and her daughter once. That was sure an experience. She even let us touch her. She is solid, but did not feel like a solid. I was told that was because she only exists partly in our 4D space. The class went into DS space while she was present and we could then see her true form. Beautiful and amazing.

Only one Ku world. We branched off millions of years ago, you would think there would be more than one by now. I remember something about some of the worlds did not produce Ku. Maybe one was lost to a tech accident like what happened to the Hu Edens. A plague or war.

No point in going to an empty world.

The froth occurs approximately thirty one million years, plus or minus. Froth space is not 4D and events do not happen exactly as we would expect given our own experience. In fact Hu Eden was the last recorded known sen world in our association and that was over five thousand years ago.

Wait, the odds are against it, but what if Ku frothed in the last five years? The TKs could only exist on one of the two worlds. 'thn too. This was one of the reasons why after each froth wave, new 'thn needed to be born. Wave. I need to think of it as a wave. Okay, let's say Ku just doubled. The second world should be relatively close in DS space. Practically next door.

I don't want to end up in a wall, so I pop to a really barren area with absolutely no Ku activity for a long time. I enter DS space, just to look around. There is another world near by. I take a chance and pop into it.

It looks identical to where I started. Did I just get turned around and come back out where I started? I scan and see a town off in the distance with Ku in it. I look around. There are no foot prints where I walked around building up courage. This is a different Ku! Success. A new froth Ku. Myra will have to update her map! I am so relieved. I make my way back to my home town.

When I see my first White Cloak I nearly faint from relief. I walk up to her.

+Honored one. I am a poor Blue Birdie looking for the White Cloak Flor. Am I in the right place?+

She motions with her hand to follow her. I do so and we are quickly back under the Memory Garden where I expected to find them before. Everything looks well kept and functional here.

I am taken through a convoluted path. I have already scanned the entire area and know I am not being taken by the shortest path. Must throw off norms. Ga, I used the term norm. I still think of myself as one even though I am now a TK6. I am shown into an empty room with a desk and papers. I perch in the corner and wait.

Flor comes in disheveled. I have noticed most high TKs fit this look. With more gifts comes more responsibility. Good reason to stay where I am, not that I was ever given a choice. Afraid to take a nap now for that very reason.

+White Cloak Flor. We met once before some five years ago. I worked on the sewer system along with the 'thants. I was hoping to tell you something important I have been tasked with by the high TK council.

+

+You are late. We expected you days ago.+

+I was on Ku Eden days ago. Just not this Ku Eden.+

Her beak opens. Yeah. Then she gets it.

+A froth wave!+ I affirm.

+Excuse me. We need to get scientists on this right away. I never felt a thing. Was there another you on this Ku Eden?+

+I was not on Ku Eden when it happened, so another me was not made, and I am TK, so again I would not have been duplicated depending on exactly when it happened.+

+I have told the research group. You will need to tell me all about it. First, what is the information you brought. We have had no recent Cat Boxes saying anything important. Just the usual paperwork and reminders to turn in our annual reports.+

+A creature came to Alexandria some five years ago claiming to have come from Ku Eden with your approval. Here is an image of what it looked like at the time.+ I pull the image out of my satchel and hand it to her.

+That is certainly a strange one. I would have remembered if I approved anyone looking like this. Definitely not of the earth froth, at least nothing under Br'thn's care. We have only approved three candidates in that time for the University. Even the norms have trickled down to almost nothing. The adventurous ones are already there. Not all of them have had a good time. Word gets back of a rough world and that stops everything. We are not a very courageous sen.+ I nod.

The slang word for us is 'chickens'. Oh, we can fight if challenged, but we do not seek such activity. We prefer more subtle means and are more likely to peck another Ku over another sen. The Hu are the fighters and most likely to get into trouble. Hard to believe that most of the council are Hu. They must have been carefully chosen. In fact, I think I was the only Ku in the room with the Spikes problem was discussed.

+What is so important about this sen?+

+It is a plague creature. It feeds on sen cultures to produce more of its own kind. Entire worlds have likely been destroyed. It moves from world to world, seducing the occupants by being helpful and then when a critical mass is reached they destroy all life present. They can eat any organic material. Any.+

+What is their weakness? They do have one right? Please tell me they do.+

+Fire and seawater, 3% sodium water will do it. It kills them by dis-

solving them apparently. Fire does as expected. They have a low moisture content and readily burn. BUT, there is one more thing. When threatened in this way, they can fall apart into millions of spores. The spores do not carry memories like the asexual divisions do, but are still lethal.+

+Asexual as well?+

+Into threes. They maintain their TK status and memories this way. As I said, the spores do not. They rebuild memories as they grow and absorb species they encounter. This allows them to hide from TK scans.+

+You have been on both Ku Edens. Did you see any indication of such a creature?+

+No. In fact, these chambers were untouched since your departure or non duplication. A new group has taken over your roles and call themselves the White Bandannas. None have TK. Even the locals expect them to change into the equivalent of Black or Red Vests at some point, sooner rather than later.+

+Now that we know we can keep an eye on them. I never felt anything. Amazing.+

+Is the portal at West Port working? I will need to get back and make my own report. Feel free to send a Cat Box as well. I hope I do not get lost again, but better not to take any chances.+

+Now I remember, you were the mastermind behind their sewer rebuild. The lessons learned there are being used all over Ku, adapting to local circumstances of course. It is an honor to have met you again. Well done.+ That got my feathers ruffled. I am not used to this kind of attention or recognition.

+I am but a poor Blue Bird TK Flor. No one to make note of.+

+Wish more were like you then. It is hard finding candidates who are not just interested in the power it gives them. You will make a good Ku representative to the high council. I served for a time as well.+ She waves her hands over all the papers, +The downside is all the admin that needs to be done. Do your best to delegate as much as you can.+

+I will remember that. So far I only have a staff of one, me. Keeps it simpler.+ I had hundreds on the sewer project at West Port. That was scary. I bow and pop out.

Getting back to the University was a non event.



# Ba Eden

"Well Cat, here we are. Best get this over with." She rubs against me and I massage her head to purring. Everyone is looking at us of course. A Hu and a Ca walk down the street. Sigh.

"Ambassador's compound should be up ahead to the right."

*The only place with another Hu. Should be easy to find by the smell alone.*

"Right. Stinky monkeys. You know Cats stink too, just different. Especially the males. Why do they have to spray everything?" Hobbes was bad about that.

*So no fem would get near them except when they are in need.* She means in heat. I wonder why George has never gotten pregnant. She has certainly tried enough with Hobbes.

"Here we are. Might as well go in." The door is small of course. At least the structure is not at the top of a tree. Must be their way of insulting the ambassador.

We are met by two low level Ba males who are likely being punished for some reason. I give them a nod so as to indicate I am not low level. I hate their status obsession. They do a low bow to us as expected and let us pass. Very nervous about George of course. She licked her lips while staring at them and gets the expected reaction.

"Stop it George. Be nice."

Inside I sit and George plops down to the floor for a nap of course.

A Hu, a Ba and a Ceph come in. I stand and bow low. I know them from their files of course.

~I am assuming you are Mouse and the lazy one is George.~ I affirm in Ceph.

The Hu comes up to shake my hand, "I am Khéya and this is Ba Alessa, head admin to the Hu and personal friend of Nease the Ceph ambassador to Ba."

"I read your files. I hope you read mine." They nod.

I add, "You got the Cat Box?" They nod again.

I hold up our latest sensor, then give each of them one.

"These are the latest sensor for the Spikes life form. You are high enough TKs to study and duplicate them as needed. Even a non-TK can use them. Both tactile and visual results. Just press the button and any evidence of a Spikes form within a hundred meters will set it off. I have a fake disc to show you how it works. Go ahead and press your sensor and

notice the result."

"Now I will dissolve the disc and try again."

"Works as advertised."

~Looks easy enough to make more. Quantum, but not real complicated. I see it has a Spike piece inside itself to compare against. My understanding is that they can change their makeup rapidly, incorporating native DNA to hide behind.~

~That was the problem at first, but Cat and Puu figured it out and these are the improved version. In order for them to do what they do, it puts constraints on what they can use from others. We look for form, not coding.~

^Excellent. You could have sent these by Cat Box. Why come here?^

I sigh, ^George and I were housed in the Ba section at the University. We came to know the culture living among them. When given a choice for a vacation it made sense to come to the source.^

"What do you think of Ba ballads then?" I smile and say nothing.

^Diplomatic. I can't stand them either. I understand that you are good at leaf carving. You will need to visit our art museum where we have living carvers in residence. I would love to see some of your work. Maybe you can do some carvings while here.^

^I am good for a Hu, but hardly compare to a Ba artist. Remember, I was among young students. They do not have the best concentration skills.^

"True for every sen I suspect."

~Not a problem with the Ceph. Those who cannot concentrate are eaten.~ Yeah, that would solve the problem.

~As long as you keep them away from mag.~ Nease flashes laughter. That was true of Nease's world, but not of Rooi's I was told. Strange story. I am guessing a case of convergent evolution. Interesting that the languages are almost similar. Is that a limitation of the form?

^But your real skill is apparently with trees. Redwoods specifically. The trees at the University were dying in spite of the best Ba efforts and you figured out they had the wrong fungi species for Alexandria to properly interface with Ba redwoods. That was good work. You will need to visit our groves while here.^

^I would love to, especially to see the mushroom forms.^

"Let's all go out to eat. I know a place that has lake trout so George will want to come as well."

"You were friends of Sylvy weren't you Khéya. She is still napping in Cat Land on Earth Two as expected."

"I thought she was on Earth One?"

"They were at first, but once Earth Two got cleaned up, they wanted to be closer to the Hu so as not to be surprised by anything they did. Earth Two was severely under populated, so it was not hard to move the few remaining ones. The plagues and ash hit the Americas the hardest as well."

He laughs, "Keep your enemies closer. Poor kitties." George humphs and we all show amusement.

The meal was fantastic. Student cooks are no match to the pros. George had three huge raw lake trout. Others could not help but watch her eat. Not pretty. She over did the presentation of course just to annoy them. She again licked her lips while staring at them one at a time.

Of course they were equally amused by my obvious enjoyment of high Ba cuisine. I was even eating things in the proper manner that Khéya would not touch.

^You will be the talk of the circuit for eights of days after today. The students taught you well. I am surprised they knew this much.^

^There are Ba professors and of course the library. I would never trust young people to be authorities on anything, even if they think they know everything.^ Amusement all around.

"To the Art Museum. Then we will let you wander on your own."

^They may not let these two in. Concentration of the carvers is paramount. Just seeing them might upset that. You know how huffy they can get.^

^Is there a secure place to leave our current forms? We are both practiced in the Ba form.^

*What TK level are you? Your shielding is excellent.*

*A long time in the jungle taught both of us that need and skill. We are both TK7.*

*Shit, they allow a Cat to be that level? Khéya asks.*

*Owa and Sylvy are both nines. George has earned it. The lazy Cat is all an act. She rarely if ever actually sleeps, but sens think that because her eyes are closed she is harmless and not paying attention.*

George starts snoring for effect. We all smile.

We go back to the embassy. There are Ba spies and sensors all over the place of course. There are areas they cannot get to though. No doors and AuC shielded ('thant proof). We pop into one, several hundred meters below ground. Ba hate being below ground.

"This room must drive them nuts not being able to get to it."

^It does, it does. That is part of the fun. I could not maintain my status

here without secrets. It is expected. ^

George and I quickly change and put our normal forms into stasis.

^I hate being Batzie. ^

^I know, I know. ^ *Remember our assignment. No choice.*

^You will need some clothing. We do not normally go around naked. ^

We each make the necessary changes based on what we have seen is the current style up top. We need to blend in but not stand out.

~Being low status will prevent you from getting in some places, but the museums are open to all.~

I make a work case with tools and then scan around for the materials I need from the wild. Ah, perfect. No one local will have these leaves. I nod we are ready and we pop back to the room we came from and leave the embassy through a back door intended for servants. We add some road dust for effect and we head to the museum.

We are soon met by three other Ba who look to be equal status to us.

*They are with us.*

*I know. I recognized them too.*

*We could not miss out on all the fun could we? Alessa TPs.*

We split up at the museum entrance. The inside, though at ground level to accommodate everyone, looks like it is way up a grove of trees. Nice effect. George finds the leaf carvers and we head off in that direction. We pass the ceramics section as we do so.

*Ba do ceramics now too?*

*I had to bring something to the party. Limited of course.*

*You mean not having eight arms to work with.*

*Slows down the entire process considerably.*

*How do you handle the heat of the kiln?*

*Very carefully. Because it really needs to be room temperature when we open the kiln we can do more delicate work that would otherwise fracture.*

*How did Ceph even learn ceramics in the first place?*

*No one knows. Too long ago.*

Not the most popular section I am guessing from the numbers of Ba present.

I can smell the leaf cutting room before we get there. Wonderful smell of fresh cut leaves. We visit several masters. Different from what I was taught at the University. To be expected. This is the capital of Ba and most of the students came from out of the way locations. What they would not give to be here now.

Finally we reach the student section and I find a place to work. Even

in Ba form, George chooses to snooze instead. She is supposed to be my helper, being in the lower status fem form. Good luck with that. I set out my tools and finally pull out the leaves I will work with. I could have chose easy to cut leaves with an even texture. That would be no fun though. Leaves wilt fast, so I work with concentration.

When I become aware of my surroundings again I find we have a crowd around us. I look down at my own work, I have three leaves done and am working on a fourth. Why would a crowd form around a student? Granted you can get closer to a student than to a master, but my concentration ability allows me to shut out those around me when I know it is safe. George can do some work as long as she is here.

The crowd parts and a master, as indicated by the emblem on his vest, comes through.

^You did these?^ I nod. ^Please continue.^ I shrug, a Hu expression probably lost on the crowd, and get back to work. The first three were warm up to get me back into form. This one I really concentrate on. It is near dark when I finish. When I come out I find myself surrounded by masters and the others have all left.

^May we see your knife?^ I hand the one in my had to him. He looks at it and passes it around. The others take a keen interest.

^What is it made of?^ That is what sparked the interest.

^All of my knives are hand made from a rock called obsidian. You can find it near some volcanoes.^ I open my tool roll and show them the variety of sizes I use, from large to extremely small. I have scanned the others and know they also have such an array of tools. Most are ceramic, but a few use folded hardened steel.

I pull out a pouch around my belt and take an obsidian rock out to pass around. I take another out and place it on my knee over a thick piece of leather. Ba do not have very good knees. I pull out an antler from a native species of deer. I dare not use a larger Hu one. I carefully whack at the rock. Pieces fall off, which I collect. I pass these around too.

A master sits next to me and motions to let him try. I pass the leather, antler and piece of obsidian to him. He attempts a few whacks to much amusement of the others.

^Takes practice.^ I say simply.

He shows amusement, ^Most things do. Now let me see the last leaf you did.^ I carefully hand that to him bowing in the process. He delicately accepts it and holds it up to the others.

^These are strange animals depicted. May I ask where they come from? Certainly nothing I have seen before.^

^I spend a lot of time in the library. My real profession is tree root fungi. This is just for fun in my spare time.^

^So not from Ba.^ I affirm.

He makes a chirp and a young fem comes up with a box.

He hands me a box. The others all get up and leave as Alessa comes up to me in her formal attire. They all bow low to her, as do I.

^The museum closed some time ago. Gather your things.^

Not thinking I do so.

Outside Alessa says, ^You told me you were a beginner.^

^I am. I have only been doing this for five or so years. Something I could do in the back of the classroom during particularly boring lectures.^ She shows amusement and understanding.

We proceed to a place of eating, still in Ba form. When we come in all bow low. I am assuming this is for Alessa of course. They must be wondering why she is with low status Ba like us.

She asks, ^Does George like grubs?^

I show amusement, ^The bigger the better of course.^

A moment later a large plate with a huge moth larva is brought out and set before her.

Remember to use your hands. She closes her mouth, grumbles and proceeds to eat before anyone else is served naturally. Alessa almost laughed, but more food arrives. I thought lunch was grand, this is over the top as the Hu say.

"Have you looked in the box Mouse?" Strange that he would use Hu.

I reach into my pack and pull it out to set before us. I stare at it. Very intricate carvings all over it. Inlay with precious metals too. Must be important, but why give this to me? I resist the urge to scan it and ruin the fun.

^Go on, it won't bite.^ Nease says. She must really hate being in Ba form. So limiting.

I open the box and inside is a Masters medallion. I am confused and pick it up.

^Why was I given this? Did you have something to do with it?^ Looking at Alessa.

^They never knew I was there until I came to collect you. Can you read Ba script? The form is very old, so difficult for some. I can read it for you if you like.^ I go to hand it to her, but she refuses to touch it. I place it on the table between us.

Khéya is smiling. Nease looks solemn.

^Basically, as you guessed it is a Masters Medallion. It affords you all

the rights and privileges afforded such a rank. Very, very few doors will be closed to you.^

^I will need some new clothes. So much for being unseen.^

^For low ranking Masters this would be true, but for Grand Masters, you can wear anything you want. You are expected to be eccentric and mysterious.^

^No way. I am just a student. I should not have even been granted the lowest status.^

Khéya sighs, "You made your own tools from scratch. You used leaves not seen around here, meaning they were difficult to obtain, and your subjects are entirely new to them."

Nease hands me, ~And your technique was flawless. They value precision.~

^And unlike a student you worked entirely from your thoughts, not distracted by anything going on around you. You were totally one with your work. You may think you are nothing special, but you definitely earned your medallion. I doubt there has ever been a Ba to do such fine work.^

I smile, ^It helps that the leaves cannot be preserved. I left mine on the floor with all the others by the way.^

^Being ephemeral is part of the mystic. All that work to see it fade in a few hours forgotten to everyone but those who saw it however imperfectly. Oh, and the staff picked it up carefully, are making a mold of it. They will make a copy in gold for display along with an image of your medallion. Each is unique, but raising a master is high praise for the museum.^ She smiles, ^But not your name or image. A true master is unnamed.^

^But some semblance of the art itself is preserved for others to study.^ She nods. I put the medallion in a secret pocket and seal it with TK.

*You also left some broken blades behind too, which they gathered and likely will show with the piece.*

^Great. This means all would be masters are going to want obsidian blades and will copy the creatures.^

"Earth I surmise."

"Madscar. I was there for some twenty years alone. I usually carved gourds and such. Not much of a stretch to do leaves."

~You know the average lifetime of a Ba is only forty solars. You in a sense have spent most of your life learning your skills from their perspective. Even your current form shows age.~

I sigh, ^Listen everyone, I chose this form to blend in. No one notices

and old man and fem helper, both in rags. I was not trying to do anything like this. If I had known I would never have even visited the museum. ^

^Spoken as a true Master. ^ Alessa says. They all show amusement.

*Imagine what he will be able to do in a few thousand years.*

^Please stop. I did not use TK. Would have interfered actually. I should tell you why George and I are really here, since it is now going to be extremely difficult. ^

^We were wondering if you would tell us. No one comes to Ba for the food. ^ That word perks George's interest of course and we all show amusement. She snorts and curls up again to more amusement.

*Stupid not Cats.*

^What ever you do, do not laugh. The only thing worse that Hu laughter is the even higher pitched Ba laugh. She says it gives her a headache even. ^ Everyone nearly loses it and a lot of gasping for air. Bet Nease hates that feeling. Surprised she has not switched back actually.



# Regional Center

"It has been forever since we were here. How the hell did you find it?"

"Since the 'thn are mostly gone, there was no longer need for any privacy from the horrid Hu abomination."

"Roger be nice." She is smiling when she says it though. We have been the lost ones for so long.

*Welcome Hu. Where have you been? A multi-tentacled one is addressing us. I hope it is the one. Closest to us anyway.*

*Difficulty with the 'thn overlords. Did not like us being curious and sharing our tech.*

*Yeah, they did hate that. Well, everything is different now.*

*You don't miss them?*

*Miss them saying no to everything we try? We don't miss that. Oh, they were amusing. It was fun coming here all the time and pretending to be so important.*

*I smile. Yeah, there was that. I change the subject.*

*How do you feel about those who took the 'thn away?*

*I may not have liked the 'thn. No one likes their boss right? But they had no right. It has upset the entire power structure. Be careful about sharing now. It could get turned against you. Come to think of it, there is one more thing I miss. Do you remember that Di and Rap player game. There was an awful lot of life juices involved. It was great. Body parts being ripped off. Glorious.*

*Ah, we were not present for those. Unfortunately the Di and Rap are part of the group that took away the 'thn. They don't like us.*

*Too bad. You seem nice enough. Not all of the 'thn though. If you had a baby 'thn, you could petition them to get it woke back up. Didn't gain you much as even being gone you still have the TK boost. Guess some sen develop an attachment to the young ones.*

*We don't have any. They wanted nothing to do with us. Just as well. I certainly understand why they did it. We had no warning whatsoever. One second we were on our worlds and the next we were all at the extreme edge of existence.*

*How did you get back? Could be useful if we ever get sent there.*

*There are a few who are scary high TKs who gathered all of us and brought us back. Did not work out though and now we are enemies.*

*Sad. Happens though. Well, I got a party to go to. You can come if you want.*

*We want to spend some time getting our bearings. Hopefully we will see you later.*

*Sure. Have fun and be safe.*

"We need to find out how the others feel too. N of 1 is not useful."

"True, but we should also heed its advice and be cautious. Old West cautious. Assume everyone is trying to get something from you, even if they prove otherwise."

"Always keep one hand on your pocket." I smile and nod.

"I remember this place being crowded before. Hardly anyone here."

"Not much to gain from coming here is my guess. When the 'thn were running things they more or less made it necessary to play a part in order to benefit from their hand outs."

"Kiss ass and smile. I remember. Hated that. In a lot of ways it was better at Farout, even if none of the planets were exactly 'green' material."

"Really, you miss the bugs and other things trying to eat you one drop at a time? Not me. The nice clean sterile ship is great with me. Hated our time on Earth. Still can't believe they put that dopey dino in charge."

"From good for nothing lay about to king of the world. That was weird. And why keep it so low tech? They were practically stone-age."

"Randy, another lay about, said it was because Hu needed to be civilized before they could be trusted with the toys."

"Civilized? There was no command structure. Everything was in the state of chaos from what I could see. If we had not figured out how to neutralize the limiters we would still be stuck there as TK2s! It was awful. We earned our trust a long time ago. We earned our ranks. To be taken away without any kind of trial or explanation was criminal."

"They had an explanation. They did not trust us yet. Turned out to be true, but they did not know that."

"Until those two idiot Jiis fired on them. We should never have allowed them back there with us. Leave them on Farout for all I care. But no, Silver and Turtle had to collect everyone present."

"We would not be here now except for them. Limiters do not work on them and they were able to build almost three ships before they were found out."

"Four if you count the one in the belt the stupid rebels did not find. First place I would have looked."

"Good for us anyway. I voted for the ships by the way. No more grounder crap for me." I nod approval.

"It was nearly unanimous. Been too long in the cans to know any different. Oh, the food! Horrible stuff. Give me sap chow any time. Food is

only necessary for the below decks group who can't exist without it. Nobody wants to go through that mess again."

"Taking a dump felt good." She teases me.

"That's another thing. The smells. Felt like I was in a garbage scowl. All of earth smelled the same. Too many volatiles."

"It did stink. Seemed like every chore involved something even stinkier too." I nod agreement.

"Cutting wood by hand. How barbaric. The wood itself was bad enough. Lots of bugs and things. And the sticky plant juices. Yuck!"

"Hey doing laundry was way worse. They must have cleaned themselves only once a year. Never thought Hu could stink so bad. No wonder the Cats called us stinky monkeys."

"There are a bunch of ones we have not com'd with. Lets check them out."

As soon as we get close they start in on us though.

*'thn killers! You should leave while you still can. Not wanted here.*

*Scat!*

*We aren't the ones you hate. We had nothing to do with their being put to sleep.*

*Sleep, you call this sleep?! It drops a 'thn on the floor. Looks dead to me. I feel no glimmer of TK coming from it.*

*Does not matter. We had nothing to do with it.*

*You are from the 'earth fucking froth' are you not. Okay, was not expecting that to come across in TP so well.*

*We are from Farout. Have you heard of it? We do not exactly like the 'thn for putting us there, but we have no interest in getting back to the earth fucking froth either. We hate them as much as you do in fact. They killed two of our group and are suspected of abducting eight others.*

*Don't believe you. Wake up the 'thn and we might let you live.*

*We are only TK8s. You would not pick on someone weaker than yourself.*

*Well I am certainly not going to pick on someone stronger now am I.*

*Let it go Roger. These will be no help on our attack on them.*

*Attack? Did you attack them? We just might be interested in that.*

*What do you know about their defenses?*

*They took out a star ship that was already firing on them and survived while standing in frozen water on land. No ships, no missiles, laser, etc. They have these things they made called companions. Some sort of sen quantum construct similar to 'thn, but using gold carbon instead of 'thn metal. We have never actually held one to examine.*

*Roger, you forgot the buddies.* She continues.

Hers comes out of her pouch and floats in the air. They are about the same size as a baby 'thn and this gets their interest.

*This is the stupid version. They cannot be used to attack anything. More or less just a servant. Scan it if you want. We suspect the more dangerous ones are based on the same tech.*

*Well there fucking earth frothers, you just might have our attention. Give it to us and we might just let you live.*

*This one is keyed to me. I am the only one who can use it. You kill us and it dies too, scrambled inside even. We used to each have one, but we experimented on Roger's and killed it. They built them this way so no one else could make them.*

*We have some good techies that might be able to figure it out.*

Another one adds, *And some nice new tech to boost their war abilities. We come from war cultures. We live for war, we are war.*

I add, *We have our war culture as well. Together we might succeed. This will require time, smarts and cunning. We need misdirection, lies, spies and all the good stuff.*

*This sounds perfect. Welcome to the Kill Earth League.* I am assuming that their expressions are smiles. Hard to tell with sen you have not met before.

*You know they will try and kill us too once they get what they want.*

*Of course Roger. We will try the same. Need someone to try the new weapons on after all.*

*Perfect. We have succeeded beyond our dreams.*

Now it is just a question of how patient they will be. This is long term. No rush to failure again. Not this time. I am willing to wait a million years if that is what it takes. The earthers are just the first step. I want to rule the galaxy and maybe even beyond. I am appreciative that the earthers did remove the 'thn overlords. They definitely would not approve. Not at all.

# Di Eden

I am torn between my loyalty to my home world and Alexandria. I hope I can use what I learned there to help here.

Where to start. I have been gone too long clearly. I like White, but he is not management. His idea of running things is let it go and see what happens. Pick up the pieces afterwards. He would be the first one 'disappeared' from a pack. Weakest member and all. But, he is my superior. It is not called Rap Eden after all.

I am currently in the outer ways, dressed as a peasant. There is a growing resentment among Rap workers to being assigned primarily to the menial tasks and occupations. I agree with them. It should not be this way. We are just as talented and able as any Di. Only they are bigger and stronger one on one, so they are careful, get us alone, and do what they have to do to get us to behave. Even if a few are lost. We breed like rats anyway. Any pack could take down a Di bully, but everyone is too afraid to try it. We have lost our 'mojo' as the Hu say.

If I had known it had gotten this bad I would have returned much sooner. We passed laws, we have the vote. We even outnumber them, but somehow they got a resolution passed that votes are counted based on mass, not number. Starve us to be sure we stay in the minority. There were also some mysterious diseases that only seemed to affect Raps, or at least lethally. The Dis got it, but survived. We got it, spread it to everyone else in cramped quarters with no health care and everyone dies.

I have read the journals. I know Hu history. This is exactly what happened to some of the Hu. It was easy to tell them apart, so it was easy to set them apart. Same with us.

My companions are anxious to get out. I dare not here. Someone would notice and my cover story would be worthless.

<sup>R</sup>Okay you two, you can leave, but DS some distance away. Let me know what is up ahead. Try not to be seen please. Stealth mode.<sup>R</sup> I whisper and let them go. I don't really need them for this, on the other hand I cannot concentrate on more than five things at a time. Having two extras looking at things could make a difference.

I reach my destination close to dark. I wanted to be seen by the watchers as having walked in from at least some distance away. I could of course have DSd to a hidden location and 'appeared' out of no where. But everyone is known here. Better to have been seen coming here by a known means. This is not the capital. Very few know of TK or anything

else like that. Just stories told to hatchlings to get them to behave.

There are guards at the gate, two young Di. Full of vinegar and stupid as rocks. They definitely do not want to be here.

!Look at what we have here, a Rap outside after curfew.! Most entertainment they have had all day.

The other points to the setting sun, !Not quite. Don't be stupid. We don't know why this one's here. You want to get demoted even further? I hate this duty.! He waves me on staring at the other to defy him. Maybe they are not all stupid. I place a hidden tag on this one.

There is another guard at the Master's house.

!Papers.! I hand them over. She looks at them carefully and hands them back, then whistles. An old Rap comes up hobbling and looking down.

!Take this one to Block House 8.! It starts to walk away and I follow. Once out of sight the hobble stops and she walks normally. I need no explanation. A cripple will not usually be beat as hard as long as they are still useful being an example to the rest of what happens if you don't do what they say.

I really never thought this would happen to us. White and I were the ones responsible for Rap getting equal rights and status. Well mostly White. I was gone at the time. Cat and I just started it. Long story. At first it was a clear win-win. Both sides benefited from collaboration. What happened?

It is clearly dark now and most will be sleeping. I slowly open the door to Block 8 and see light inside. An oil lamp in a glass housing is the only light. Enough to get to and from the outhouse. There is some snoring as expected. We are near the equinox. What happens in the middle of winter? Neither of us does well in the cold, though we are exothermic. Puu insisted I use the proper terms. The old fem leads me down the clear area in the center and points to a straw pad on the floor. There are shelves above it where someone else could sleep. We are piled three deep. I nod and she leaves. The back door is next to me. It is locked. This is against regulations. This place would burn in a minute and few would get out in time. In fact that oil lamp is already on an unsteady table. I notice one is sort of awake nearby. Someone on watch, sort of?

I sit on my straw and take the time to scan carefully around me. Most are malnourished as expected. Everyone is so exhausted I doubt they will rise before dawn. None have any possessions other than their limited clothing and a single pouch. I am feeling guilty now as mine is clearly larger. I accepted a job offer and have what I need. I was told not to ex-

pect anything at the site.

The Di quarters are much better. They even have heaters for winter and electricity. Their walls do not have gaps. Their back door and several side doors, are not locked. And of course, their area is behind a tall fence even a healthy Rap would have a hard time climbing.

Further out are the grain fields. The garden closer to the Di has their favorite melons and squash. Di are omnivores. Rap are largely carnivores. They do not need to protect these areas, but they do. Interesting. I guess a Rap who is hungry enough might try. A good case of diarrhea though.

What is this? This makes no sense. An area with stone walls that extend many meters below ground and a tight mesh above. Rats. The Rap food supply of course. There are areas where the grain is placed, some water, but it looks like they take care of themselves. A few partially eaten rats. Probably from fights. They are severely overcrowded. Below ground are nests with lots of pups. I almost drool remember my first hunts. A few Di approach the pen. They net a handful of rats and place them in a sack. I follow them with my mind.

They take the rats to some sort of kitchen and throw them into boiling water. The screaming is momentary, but loud. I can hear it from here. Some of the others around me respond to the sound and get up, go out the door to form a line at the only outhouse. The Di bring the pots of stewed rats to the Rap block houses. We are #8, so it will be awhile. More rats are captured and tortured to start new pots.

While it is still dark inside I make a second pouch and fill it with sap chow. I am the last to come out. Sun is just peaking over the horizon. I set the open pouch on the ground and take one biscuit out and proceed to eat it. Others come up questioningly. I indicate to help themselves. Soon the entire block house has had some. Fortunately it is gone before the Di comes to us with the pots. Everyone lines up even though they have had sap chow.

One nudges me, <sup>R</sup>Thanks for the treat, but if we don't eat now, they won't bring any tomorrow. Besides, I need the extra calories. <sup>R</sup> She knows what a calorie is. Not illiterate then. This would indicate what I am seeing is recent, not generational. I feel only slightly better. If this had been going on for a hundred years and I had not noticed before now I really should have had my status removed.

*Mistress, the entire area has Raps in camps like this one. There are only a few Raps allowed free in the small towns, all doing menial tasks. Servants and grunt helpers.*

The cities are slightly better, but you would never see a Rap as the

leader of any organization. Always subordinate. At least their housing and food were better though.

*There are also separate eating places.*

We do not eat the same kinds of food, is this not expected? I wonder.

Several official looking Di appear and we all stand ready to receive orders. One comes up to me.

!FreeRap Electrician?! I bob yes. One of the other Di sniggers FreeRat. The one in front of me ignores him. He signals and a bunch of Rap haul in a cart with supplies on it. Wire, connectors, sockets, etc.

!We need you to wire Block 8 with electric lights.! In a louder voice he says, !We do not need a repeat of Block 5 do we?! That is the newest building so I do not understand. Ah, it has electric lights. And char underneath, bones too. They just built right on top of all the Raps who died. We normally bury our dead and mourn them.

!Everyone else will assist. Do a good job or suffer the same fate. You may think you are getting something special. You are not. Electricians can cause a fire as well.!

!May I ask where the hookups are located?! He turns to look at me like I have just committed murder, but as I am not reacting, he huffs and waves his hand in a vague direction. He turns and leaves. The supplies are just dumped without concern some may be damaged. We are alone. I make a show of examining the materials. All low quality.

<sup>R</sup>Gather around. We will work as a team on this. I will be right beside you. I doubt they will give me more than one day, but I still want it done right.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>First, I need a trench about a half meter deep and ten centimeters wide from the hookup to the backdoor. Five should do it. The ground is hard from no rain, but there is sufficient amount of sand to make it somewhat easy to break up. Save the removed soil to pack it in after we place the wire.<sup>R</sup>

Without assigning anyone, five take off and begin. Good. Used to working as a pack.

I hand a young fem a tool, <sup>R</sup>I want the lock removed from the back door. Remove the hasp and latch as well. It is against regs and we don't want anyone getting into any trouble should there be an inspection.<sup>R</sup> She nods with a smile and takes off. Should not take her long. Bet everyone wants to see that gone.

<sup>R</sup>I need some rocks about so big.<sup>R</sup> I indicate with my hands. Several take off to find rocks.

<sup>R</sup>Now the fun job. This roll of wire has to go from this front door all



the way to the hookup by going through the back door. Stop for a moment when you get to the backdoor. You, I'm sorry I do not know your names, drill a hole in the wall on the hinge side of the backdoor at the top. We will be passing the wire through this hole eventually. There should be some wire leftover upon reaching the hookup. We need to mount this on the center rafter, so we will need the apparent extra.<sup>R</sup> The roll is heavy and hard to handle. Most of the pack works on that. They spread out once they are unrolling it to about one per two meters.

I check the ratings values on the sockets and lights. Filament lights. They are not up to LED or TK glow lamps yet. There are two remaining watching me intently.

<sup>R</sup>Finally I need you two to space these out evenly from the backdoor to the front door. One should go outside of each door.<sup>R</sup>

I follow the diggers and see them spaced out to the hookup. I examine the hookup with a line drawn in the dirt. There is an empty space in the box clearly indicating Block 8 thankfully. Unfortunately there is only one circuit breaker for all of the Rap quarters and of course one each for the Di areas. I shake my head. There is space for more breaker in the panel, but none provided in our supplies. It is daylight so I will need to take down all of the Rap areas to make the hookup safely. Of course this is not a problem for me, but I want to teach safe methods to anyone watching.

I go in the back door just as the wire is about to reach it. I indicate it needs to go through hole drilled and then down to the trench.

The hole driller is watching me.

<sup>R</sup>Any possibility of some wood to build a rain cover for the exit to the ground?<sup>R</sup> She nods and runs off.

The trench and the wire pulling take the most time of course and once others are done with their tasks they help out.

I ask one, <sup>R</sup>What would you normally be doing?<sup>R</sup> She points to the fields.

<sup>R</sup>The harvest is in, so this is a quiet time for us. I was looking at the box. Only a few blocks have been hooked up. How come we are digging a trench. The others are all on poles or the ground.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Poles fall down in wind and rain. On the ground is a trip hazard.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>None of the rest put lights outside their doors either.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>How well can you see in the dark? Do you really want to wait to use the outhouse? If you space everyone out, then you can go and then get some more sleep. Rotate so no one feels left to the bad times.<sup>R</sup> She nods with a Rap smile.

<sup>R</sup>It would be a really good idea to get at least those already on the

ground buried, at least ten centimeters. There appears to be enough slack for that.<sup>R</sup>

The stone collectors have been piling the stones near the back door. Good.

The wire reaches the box. I strip the insulation off, flip the breaker and quickly attach our wires. Then remove them and flip the breaker back on. Wanted to be sure it would all work.

I call out. <sup>R</sup>I need about ten of those rocks over here. <sup>R</sup> They bring them over and I carefully place them in the trench over the wire. This will help secure the wire from pulling.

<sup>R</sup>Okay, you can fill the trench now. Place a layer of stone on the top, but not sticking up. I want it easy to find this trench again years from now, but not create a trip hazard.<sup>R</sup>

I go to the back door. Then I go to the supplies and find a light fixture. They are all the same and all of them look waterproof. Guess it was easier that way. I have six of them. I pick one up and attach it above the door outside and hook the wire up. I leave the cover off for the moment. I then back my way to the front adding fixtures and wiring them in. When I reach the front door, there is barely a meter left over. I am glad there was not a meter less.

I go back to the one above the back door and insert the bulb. All good. Next I go to the power box, shut it off, attach our wires and switch it on. Nothing happens.

The fem who had been watching me suggests, <sup>R</sup>Maybe they do not come on until it is dark?<sup>R</sup>

I shake my head. I bow to her causing her to be embarrassed. I was being so stupid. I look and find the light sensor. Sure enough it is above the box. I cover it with my work pouch and a moment later the light comes on. I close the box. She is watching the whole time. She experiments as I am walking back. The light goes off and then back on. She comes running after me.

We get the rest inserted and all of the fixtures closed up tight. Done.

I ask my helper, <sup>R</sup>Go back to the box and cover the sensor. We need to make sure all of the bulbs and wiring are working. <sup>R</sup> She runs off.

One of the lights is not working. I trade it with another fixture and it still is not working, but the one I traded it with does. So, not the fixture, bad bulb. I look closely and sure enough the filament is broken.

I gather everyone around and show them how to change the bulbs.

Who knows how long it will take to get a new one, if ever. You need to decide as a group which lights are the most important. The outside

ones for sure. In fact you may not even want to have the inside ones on all night. They get hot, real hot, so decide BEFORE they are due to come on that night.

Someone from block #5 comes over.

<sup>R</sup>Hello! Are you messing with the lights?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Sorry about that. All done.<sup>R</sup> He looks over what we have done and runs back to his block.

<sup>R</sup>Wheel the spool inside. It will make a nice table. And those boxes the fixtures and lights came in will make chairs.<sup>R</sup>

I take my leave, work being done. I don't bother with the Master's house and go out the front gate after showing my papers yet again. My two companions come back once I am out of sight of the others.

I decide to enjoy the night while I walk back. It is very dark and no one bothers us. Suddenly the sky lights up to the north and a moment later I hear a large boom. Something has exploded. I scan and there is a building in a small down burning with Di running out of it on fire. What the?

I pop us closer and run the rest of the way to see if I can help. I change my clothes to something more presentable for town living at the same time.

When I reach the building there are Di and Rap all over helping the victims and attempting to put out the fire. I join the bucket line and help move water to the ruins. Di prefer stone for construction, but roofs are hard to do that way and often these end up being wood. Wood burns nicely. If the building is several levels, this compounds the destruction as in this case. It is dawn before we get most of the fire out. The injured have all been taken away. There are corpses inside the building unfortunately. Not everyone made it out.

I have already determined this was not an accident, but deliberate. I ask around to determine who is in charge.

A very large Di fem is ordering others about. I go up to her.

!I have some experience with fires and could not help but notice that there are indications this one was deliberate.!

A second comes up to me and demands my papers. I hand the better ones over.

!I have not seen you before, granted all rats look alike. Arrest this Rat.!

 He shouts.

!On what charge?! He waves at the ruins.

!I came to help, not harm. I have been on the bucket line all night when I could have been sleeping and now you want to arrest me while the

real fire starters are getting away?! I cannot believe the level of distrust for Rap kind. The Di high council is going to get an earful.

I am taken away and thrown into a caged area with other Raps. No Di, only Raps. Of course they took away my pouch, which I emptied before they grabbed it. My companions are watching from a distance. It is dawn and the ones present are just waking up to the noise of my arrival.

The walls are too high to jump and have barbed wire at the top anyway. They try to ignore me at first, but I can tell from sideways glances they are curious. To them I am just an old lady, which I play up by stooping some. The point is to look as nonthreatening as possible. I watch the interactions and quickly identify the alpha, a particularly large fem, well at least for a Rap. Compared to the Di she would be meat in a contest of one on one.

One finally comes up to me, a low rank, and asks, <sup>R</sup>What are you in for?<sup>R</sup>

I replay, <sup>R</sup>Helping to put out a fire.<sup>R</sup>

He goes over to another and repeats what I said. She comes over.

<sup>R</sup>Last night, the fire at the Di business on 7th?<sup>R</sup> I nod.

<sup>R</sup>Same here. Another one was caught up in the same sweep. That makes three total out of the dozen here now.<sup>R</sup>

I ask, <sup>R</sup>You know what happened? I came in during cleanup. I was helping with the water buckets.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Rumor has it that a Rap arsonist did the work. Not accidental, intentional.<sup>R</sup> Of course I cannot say I know it was intentional because of flammable materials used.

She continues, <sup>R</sup>I have not seen you before, just come into town?<sup>R</sup>

I nod, <sup>R</sup>Just came in from an electrician job at a work camp.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>A FreeRap, well you are not one any more. Guilty or not, you are now a SlaveRat. They do regular sweeps when they lose too many workers and need to replenish the supply. No one breeds in a camp. No one lives long enough.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I noticed. One of the reasons I put a good distance between me and them when I left.<sup>R</sup> More than any Rap could do in so short of time, but they don't need to know that.

I sigh, <sup>R</sup>Tell me about the alpha. I assume she fights dirty.<sup>R</sup>

She looks me over and shows amusement, <sup>R</sup>Little old lady, you do not have a chance. She gets a hold of you and she just starts breaking things for fun. Everyone here is afraid of her. We all give her half our rations and stay out of arms length. You will too believe me.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>There is more to fighting than strength. It is actually a handicap as

you can come to depend on it too much.<sup>R</sup> She backs away shaking her head like I am now certifiably insane. Good, that works too. I see her talking to others. She does not need to point me out, that much is obvious. Little old lady in formerly nice clothes. Finally someone, a Yesan want-to-be, tells the alpha. She looks over at me, snorts and ignores the non threat.

!Breakfast. Some nice cold rat soup.! A large kettle is thrust through a special gate. I am the first in line. No one else comes near me. This confuses them.

The alpha comes slowly up like she is going to tear my head off. I am sure she is used to being first. I do not have a bowl, so I just stick my head in and slurp away with as much noise as possible. I finish just as alpha gets near me.

<sup>R</sup>You want to be second, be my guest. Particularly good today I think you will find. Better than the work camps anyway.<sup>R</sup> I wipe my mouth on my sleeve and make room, bowing to her.

<sup>R</sup>I go first. Always.<sup>R</sup> She growls at me even. Cute. I smile.

<sup>R</sup>Sorry fatso, I am new here and don't know the rules. However fatso, it appears to me you could lose a few pounds. Bad for your heart you know.<sup>R</sup> A mad Rap is a stupid Rap.

I take her bowl away from her before she can react. I pretend to be dipping it into the kettle but purposely let it fall to the ground where I 'accidentally' step on it and break it. <sup>R</sup>Sorry, just trying to help.<sup>R</sup>

She is fuming of course and takes her first swipe at me. I am around to her other side before she can finish her swing. The others were expecting blood, mine specifically, but are now curious and a little amused.

<sup>R</sup>It really is good.<sup>R</sup> I splash some of the soup to the back of her head. Pieces of rat are sticking to her top feathers.

<sup>R</sup>You are rat meat!<sup>R</sup> She bellows. Some of the Di guards are watching from above now.

She really is way too slow. I am running between her legs, tripping her, all the time keeping up a banter of apology. Anger and exertion equals worn out bully. It does not take long before she is slowing down and my playful attacks are getting more daring. She turns to find me tapping her nose and running between her legs again to gently bite her tail. When she whips around, I bat her on the nose again, between her legs, bite the tail harder this time. No blood yet, especially not mine.

I am getting cheers from the Di every time I score a hit. The other Raps are just horrified.

<sup>R</sup>Gee I am getting tired. You are wearing me out with all this fun. I

just might need to take a nap. Hmm, could use some bedding material though.<sup>R</sup> I whip off her cloak and wad it up for a pillow. Find a nice place out of the sun and rub it into the dirt a good amount. She is naked, not that it means much to any of us, but she is humiliated and that is what is getting her.

She comes charging towards me and I whip the cloak into the air as she passes. I yell, <sup>R</sup>Oh lay my fine bully.<sup>R</sup> She turns and makes another charge to the same effect. Each time the guards go wild.

Finally she is totally exhausted and is down in the dust panting. I place my foot on her head and yell, <sup>R</sup>And the new champion and alpha of this troop, me!<sup>R</sup> The crowd goes wild.

<sup>R</sup>When she wakes up, she will kill you by any means possible.<sup>R</sup>

I smile, <sup>R</sup>Not a chance. I was just playing, I can also kill. With my bare hands. Easily. Remember that. I am the new alpha. Gather the troop, you are now my second. If you are brave enough.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Can you teach me?<sup>R</sup> I nod. She straightens up and goes to get the others. I am very thankful now for all the training I received from Marie, Puu and Cat.

After everyone has eaten, with none left for the former bully, I put them through exercises and team building routines. We need to be a pack again. This goes on for a few days. The others are my eyes and the bully dares not try anything. We even start to include her, carefully. Never the leader, but strength has its uses too.

<sup>R</sup>They will break us up and ship us out soon. I can feel it.<sup>R</sup> My second says one day. I am actually surprised it has not already happened, but I am guessing they want to see what we do. I am sure I am being targeted for assassination. It is what I would do in their sandals. Stupid Hu cliché.

I did not have long to wait. The next day instead of our kettle of rat vomit, a Di emerges from the tunnel instead. In full battle gear with weapons. The rest of the Di are watching from above as usual.

Now the real fun begins. I am ready. We are ready.

It tries for the weakest one first. Never got close. The others weave in and out to confuse him. Wear him down team. But be careful. Raps could die this time.

I walk up, remove a weapon and wack him with it broadside. That sends him into a rage and now all the attention is on me. Safest for the others. I still have the weapon though. Always a problem when you go into a fight with too many to keep track of. He has knives hidden among the leather armor which I quickly remove and pass to others. Now all he has is his battle ax. They are not cheering up above any more. Nearly the

entire pack is armed now. Granted some of the knives are tiny, only meant to hurt not kill.

<sup>R</sup>You know, this fight is just not fair.<sup>R</sup> I turn to the Rap with the smallest knife and trade weapons. Littlest Rap can barely lift the one he has now. Or so it appears. Never trust the little ones. They are sneaky.

<sup>R</sup>That's better. Now you have at least a small, very tiny, chance of getting me.<sup>R</sup> Nervous laughter from the stands. No one moves. Long way up the stands. Long way to fall. I am predicting a lot of broken legs soon.

He roars towards me weapon raised. I dodge him easily and strike his right eye with the knife. He turns to face me and another Rap gets him in the other eye. Still dangerous even blind. But we are faster and aware. Funny how in battle your senses go into hyper drive. Too many get addicted to the feeling and then get careless.

On cue one grabs the key. Who was the stupid Di who let him come in here with the key? It gets passed around out of sight so no one knows who has it. I bait the bully so he is on the opposite side of the 'arena' from the kettle tunnel. The smallest one has ducked into the tunnel in the confusion. The ones above are loosening stones and throwing them down at us. A few of us are grazed. Will take care of that later. One of their own is in trouble now. Took them long enough to wake up. Too late though. He will barely fit through the tunnel. Blind will be even harder.

At the signal we all dart through the tunnel to the outside and split up, toppling the ladders used to get to the rim. They are then brought to the tunnel entrance and stacked up so as to interlock. We then scatter in all directions.

We meet up later in the woods. They will search here soon I am sure. Even our bully is with us. She seemed to actually enjoy our little team work.

<sup>R</sup>We have to think fast. They will be here soon. You can stick together or split up and take your chances. You don't want to end up in a camp. Better to head into the wild and take your chances there. You know what a team can do now. Remember this and teach others. It is our Rap strength, the pack. They took it away from us, time to take it back.<sup>R</sup>

#2 comes up to me, <sup>R</sup>It was not a Rap who torched that building. It was one of their own. They moved out all the important Di the day before. Only weak ones and Rap servants left when it went.<sup>R</sup> I nod.

Someone else comes in with, <sup>R</sup>Scattered we will be harder to find. Let's set up a meeting a year from now and report back on progress on operation take back our freedom.<sup>R</sup> The others agree and everyone scatters.

I wait until White comes out of the trees and sits next to me.

*I had no idea it had gotten that bad.*

*White, even in the cities, Raps all have the lower positions, always.*

*There are so many rules about association it is near impossible to form a pack. That is our strength. We should be using it instead of hiding it, forgetting it. Out here in the rural areas, you can see it is a lot worse. There is no fundamental reason why Raps should associate with Di any more. Eating rats in the wild and free is better than starving in a cage as a slave.*

*I am sorry. I have not been paying attention. I spend most of my time at the University now, depending on others to do the admin stuff. It was a mistake.*

*Clearly. But I have also been out saving the universe instead of helping here like I agreed to. We have both failed our people. So much progress was being made when we were working together. Now all of that has fallen apart. They are still using filament light bulbs. We should have been past that ages ago. What are all the TKs you have been training doing? Studying how many Meeps can dance on the head of a pin?*

*Actually, that was a topic for a dissertation a while back. I growl at him.*

*Come back to the council. Let's fix this.*

*Not as your second. Only as your equal.*

*Well, technically, you are now my superior, being higher TK and all.*

*I will settle for equal. Our people need to see it that way.*

*Agreed.*



# Earth Two - Frog Harbor

We have completely redone Frog Harbor, except for the name. We are now the monastery for the Church of Ecos. All of the entrances have huge gates with solid iron doors and a smaller one built into the larger one. A pull string to ring a bell inside.

The walls, and inside are huge stone structures representing residences, meeting halls and work areas. Someone added intricate carvings of living things, plants, animals, etc. to the outside of everything thing, including the iron doors. We all wear simple off white robes with a simple coiled plant emblem. We all know each other and need no command structure. Anyone here is free to leave at any time. Sometimes just to blow off steam or get some quiet. Most of us are introverted, so quite time is essential. Funny how nearly every TK I have met is an introvert. I wish we had more non-Hu, but most who come here adopt a Hu form to blend in.

We have free range gardens that cover a rather large area, but this means everyone, including local non-Hu benefit from our choices. Many of these have become so accustomed to us they share our entire town. Meetings will regularly have a gecko or two curious if we have any bugs about. Rats and squirrels are around, but the fox, badgers and others keep them in check so we are never overrun. Ecology does not work if any one species becomes too numerous, even Hu. Thus we have limited ourselves as well, forty nine Hu, three Cat with two kits by Princess, no dogs, but the fox have become so tame they might as well be dogs. Of the forty nine, two, one Ba and one Ku were not born Hu. I am really hoping for a Ceph. They would love all the crabs, frogs and such we have about. The racket the frogs put up during breeding season is maddening. Especially at night.

I find Mouse and ask him, "How come George never had kits?"

He shrugs and says, "Never wanted them I guess. They are not as squeamish about ending things as we are, especially at the early stages."

"Hey, I am happy not to participate. Hard on anyone else who wonders in though. 'What do you mean no sex?' as they eye you with a lear."

*Harder when we com with TP and they have no idea what we are talking about.*

*That too. I smile.*

The bell rings twice, meaning two are near the gate. The tone tells us it is the north gate. Fortunately no one ever approaches from the west

gate. Someone thought it would be funny if it was out of tune and it sounds like death. For some reason we all seem to have a bit of dark humor about us. I guess most being at least fives and essentially immortal baring an accident does that. The few fours are offered free health care of course.

Scamper, the male kit, pops in next to us and Mouse gives him a nice head rub and then goes for his shoulders too before he gets bored and pops out again.

"Just marking his territory," Mouse says.

"Given that the Queen has marked everyone else, it is only fair." He laughs at my statement, but also nods in agreement. Queen has learned how to milk attention and affection out of anyone. Well except Hobbes. That will change when she gets older I am sure. Scamper would prefer to hunt Cat tails until he gets bopped. Males are stupid.

Max and Lisa walk past us towards the gate. Gently walking. Everything is done slowly and mindfully here. Drives the norms absolutely nuts. I smile at the thought, but both of us are watching the gate to see what happens. The bell at the gate rings.

The small gate opens with Max on one side and Lisa on the other. Two figures in dark robes come in. We have already scanned them for weapons of any kind, including vials of poisons. None on these two.

Two companions come out from between their robes and fly off to meet with our companions. They have their own social network.

The hoods fall and it is Drup and Pilot. They were very well shielded. Of course the companions told us they were high TKs, but still.

I bow and Mouse follows to acknowledge their feat. They smile and bow in return.

As they are about to close the gate, Calvin and Hobbes sneak in at the last second.

"Sorry we are late. Hobbes found a tree he just had to sniff and mark." Calvin rolls his eyes for effect. Our two do that too, though the male urine is much more pungent. For that reason they are all forbidden to mark inside the compound. I mean, what good does it do to bury your business and advertise your presence with scent?

Pilot nudges Drup, who looks confused at first and then remembers. He creates a portal and pulls out an array of flowers in a ceramic vase.

"For the dinner table. Never had them on the Black Wind. I like the smell." They do smell good.

"Anyone else coming?" I ask.

"Sam and Tia will be a little late. They will speak for Alexandria. How

come the warning signs about plague are still up outside of town?" Calvin asks.

"Keeps out the curious." I say. He shrugs and lets it go.

"What's the number now," one of our fours ask.

"That will be discussed at the meeting, but last count was near two thousand." Not good. I thought it would be much higher, but apparently, some of the Cat have figured out how to kill them and so far no spores thank goodness. Bet those Cat have high status now, at least high bragging rights. Bet they don't try again either.

We are all assembled in the meeting room when Tia and Sam pop straight in. They are wearing their Hopi peasant costumes. Must have just gotten off work. Tewk is with them. I am surprised. It has not bothered to assume Hu form.

I bow in the Yesan method to it and it bows back.

*Welcome Tewk. Our mouths cannot speak their language.*

*I am honored to have been allowed to attend.*

*The Spikes would eat you just as easily as one of us. This is your concern as well. Forbid the thought they ever show up on Yesan.*

*Agreed.*

Tewk has been the exception to the rule, preferring other sen to its own.

"Shit, was not expecting Tewk." I remove everything copper from the room. There are some figures on the wall, but before I can remove or change them, they are converted to gold.

*Recent upgrade. Does make life easier.* I smile. I bet it does. Of course it also means copper will no longer be a deterrent. Not that it was much of one. Ah, the university test rooms we all had to figure out how to bypass. For Hu it was a sort of giant puzzle box. You had to push panels in just the right way and order to get to the prize, which of course was a big disappointment. A bar of chocolate. We can get that free any time we want, but I guess it is the thought that you beat the box that counts.

Tewk stays next to Tia and Sam I notice. Not that comfortable with us yet. Their culture is one of everyone looking the same and working together as interchangeable parts. To them we are pure chaos. No wonder it elected to stay in the desert outpost. Simple and controllable.

I stand and ring a bell I have just made. Everyone here can hear sound at least. Things quiet down and they give me their attention.

"Time to get to work everyone. It is indeed my great honor to introduce someone who has just glided in from Ba Eden, who just achieved Grand Master Leaf Cutter status, while in Ba form, with a handmade rock

blade while sitting in the beginner's section out of humility. Our own Earth Two born Mouse!" Applause. Even Tewk catches in and attempts to participate. It's arms are not really set up for that, but two come together if not very loudly. No idea why I am so concerned.

Mouse gets up holding his medallion, "And you can get your very own copy in the gift shop for only two hours of grunt labor." Boos from the audience. Several hold up ones they have just duplicated themselves just to make fun of it.

"Now, to be serious. The ones after me are likely to be much worse. I was sent to Ba Eden to get an outsiders point of view of how they are doing. Of course I have an introvert Hu's point of view, but I did stay with a small colony of Ba students at the University, so not without some experience."

"You tell em Grand Master!" Someone yells to get a laugh.

"Wait until they find out you are really a stinky monkey." Another set of laughs. Mouse shakes his head and puts the medallion away using a DS portal.

"I really was not expecting anything but maybe some tips on how to improve my technique. Really. Now if I may get to the main point of this gathering. Ba Eden has a very rigid hierarchical structure. To their credit, Alessa and Nease made good attempt to subdue this tendency. But even as high TKs they are only two out of tens of millions. Culture hysteresis is very strong. The changes they started did not happen overnight and the fall has not either.

Currently Ba Eden is experiencing a decline in the status of fem nearly as bad as when our two started their work. It is worse in the rural areas, but exists in the cities as well. The poor are much worse off especially in the cities, the rich are even richer in all locations. Too many of our cultures have followed this path and we know where it leads. Not there yet, but anger is growing and it will happen if not defused soon." Mouse calls to Randy.

"Droop should be here instead of me, but the report is easy enough. As most of you know we have been watching the Spikes infestation in Cat Land. There are over two thousand individuals now. This is much slower than we initially expected. They should have gone exponential by now. Two apparent reasons. The Cats have learned how to work together to defeat them. Yeah, I know, Cats working together. Go figure. The second is that the Spikes have not figured out how to spore yet. Once that happens it will be game over in one solar. We have mapped the escape world Owa and Sylvy have found and started to set up. It will be really hard to avoid

not getting any spores into this world if it goes that direction. It will give them some time however."

"They need an intermediate water world to 'cleanse' themselves before migrating to the new world."

"Their new Cat Eden as it is called, does have seas with high enough salt content."

"What happens to Earth Two?"

"That is our biggest concern of course. We are ready to sterilize the current Cat Land if need be. We can't do that until Owa and Sylvy leave of course. We do have a right to protect ourselves as well. It is likely a lot of the life will survive a brief dunking followed by a nice fresh water rinse."

"You are going to give the Cats a bath? Oh the horrors!"

*I like baths.* George says. Princess licks her ear, so I am guessing she has no problems with it either. Hobbes on the other hand has his hackles up and hisses. The ship Cats score one.

Randy calls on Calvin. Hobbes perks up too. Over his mad fast enough.

"Sorry, I, ah, we are new to this world management stuff." A few laughs as Hobbes gives him a dirty look.

"Earth Two is in trouble. Unlike Ba Eden, it has already happened here. We are down to a fraction of our population. It happened really quickly. Most of the towns are burned. Crops have been destroyed or burned. There are no ships on the mainland. Hu have scattered into the forbidden zone and are eating the place bare. Hunger can cause you to overcome a lot of fear. Plagues are expected, but will likely burn out quickly because the population is so scattered it will be hard to propagate. We are starting over folks. On the other hand the planetary defense system is up and tested. All that effort to guard a dead rock if it continues on the current course." He sits.

*I call on Squeak.* Hobbes tells us.

Squeak rises, "My report is on my birth world, Di Eden. White could not make it as he has started the repair process. I went there in the guise of a poor FreeRap. The alternative was a SlaveRat as they are called. The Rap are basically slaves of the Di. They are kept apart and mixed constantly to prevent teams from forming. They are being starved and overworked to death. Nothing short of genocide.

A short time ago, Rap were seen as equals. They held positions of decision making, learning, coordination. The combined culture of Di and Rap was vastly superior to either alone. Tech rose quickly. We have trains

and the beginning of aircraft. Cities had gotten larger, farms more efficient.

What happened? A lot of the Di resented having a smaller species, a more efficient, quicker thinking species, in so many positions that they saw as above themselves. They had stories of the old days when they hunted and killed Rap, not bowed to them. In reality, Rap were still in a minority of such positions. More and more laws were enacted that appeared on the surface to be only slightly off, but when implemented resulted more and more oppression of the Raps.

The Raps are starting to escape and organize. Destruction of Di compounds has started. It will be an all out war that will not benefit either side. But the Rap have nothing more to lose at this point. I do not condone it, but I understand why it is happening."

"What is White doing?"

"We had a long meeting about this and went together to the Di high council, of which there were no longer any Rap present. We laid down the law."

"You kicked butt!"

Squeak shakes her head, "We told them to shape up or be removed. There are a lot of worlds out there. We have located several with sufficient food species to start our own Rap world. We believe we are better together, but will no longer tolerate this state of affairs. No culture who have grown accustomed to it can stand without their slaves. We are not prey!"

Everyone stands and repeats, "We are not prey!" Puu and Cat would be proud. Their little Squeak has grown up and taken up the mantel.

"I call on one of our newest member, Ku Keki." Squeak sits to everyone pounding their seats in unison. White needed to see this, Droop needed to see this. Not good that both of our Di are missing.

Keki stands up and settles his blue bandanna and a few feathers. Nervous.

"I was at the University for five years. Sometime within that time Ku frothed. The portals we have all been using go to the original Ku Eden as they always have. The White Cloaks are on this Ku Eden. Unfortunately, I came home on the Ship not a portal. I was dropped off at the new Ku Eden."

That gets a murmur even though we had already heard. Different to hear it from the one who experienced it though.

"I arrived to a world with no White Cloaks and a new non-TK group called White Bandannas who were trying to fill in the gap. As you might

guess, I blend in easily." That gets some laughs.

"I even met some Ku who remembered me. And yes, I have met them on the old Ku Eden since this experience. Very weird to have met the same person split by a few years time." That gets everyone's attention and lots of murmuring occurs.

"Were they different?"

"Yes and no. The differences were subtle. The White Bandannas are not the same. They are norms and in no way could replace the White Cloaks. Fortunately Flor knows now and is recruiting and setting up White Cloaks on the new Ku Eden now as well. Still, Ku made different decisions in each location as the situations were different. Needless to say the University is all over this. Never has a froth occurred within a norm lifespan of our noticing it."

"Silver and Turtle might say different."

"Ah, but they were only two at the time and even they did not have their abilities at first, having received them after the froth event. I asked Turtle and she had never met someone from both froths as I have and now others."

"That has to be confusing as hell. How do you keep track of what you have said and done with each?"

"We are going slowly and carefully. But otherwise not enough change has happened to upset the culture itself. We were lucky and might have avoided some of the problems others are experiencing."

I stand again.

"Unfortunately Rooi could not make this meeting. A plague has hit Ceph Eden. Not the Ceph themselves, but their major food supply, the crabs. Not species specific and most of the crustaceans are affected. This has put a severe pressure on the Ceph culture. They are trying to adapt by eating other food types, but they require live food that moves and is protein rich. We are taking donations from all our worlds, as all have crabs to spare. We are sterilizing everything before porting to prevent an invasive species situation. But there are a lot of Ceph and they have huge appetites. A more permanent solution needs to be found. Anyone interested in helping is more than welcome. Though it appears from the report today, everyone is justifiably busy."

"So sap chow will not do. Too bad, we have tons of that stuff around, sigh." That gets a nervous laugh. Not really a laughing situation, but I as I said, a dark humor streak in the TK. I am sorry to admit I like it. Sap chow that is.

"I should add that the Ceph normally go through this every thousand

years or so. Part of their natural ecology. Ceph can breed to the point of nearly wiping out their food. These plagues actually help the prey species survive by reducing the population of their major predator." That should give them something to think about. We are not prey indeed. Guess it depends on your point of view.

All of our worlds are having trouble to a greater or lesser degree. Should be interesting. Not going to be easy here on Earth Two, that is for sure. We are gathering non-violent refugees and relocating them to safe areas we have cleared out ahead of time. No idea if it will be enough. Inbreeding will be a problem unless we figure out a way to mix them again at intervals.

Of course there are TK methods. Put in portals between safe havens and problem solved. Until an invading army figures that out and does a sneak attack.



# Tridon - Sauron

I was so pissed at first. How dare they? I brought them up from rats. Rats! They should be thanking me these worthless smiggles. Instead they send me to this backwater hell.

Of course I was pissed at the stupid asteroid hitting just as I was getting things going. Never mind that the smiggle told me it was going to happen. Good riddance. He is long buried. Smiggles are good for giving me weapons of war that norms can handle. Everything else is just a side attraction and annoyance. Make the Cretaceous great again! Mammals just don't cut it. I tried and this is my reward.

I got over it, granted it took a few million years. Everything is speeded up now. A thousand years is the same as a million before.

I am in this new for me life form. Very strange. Three arms, no eyes. Sniffers on the end of each arm/foot. Mouth in the middle. We eat this jelly like plant thing that are abundant and tasteless, but does satisfy hunger. No voices and we can only 'hear' loud vibrations through our skins. We com through a strange radio frequency antennae on top. We can also image of sorts with a microwave organ on the underside. This helps us along with the sniffer feet to find the food and water we need.

It has taken me some time to learn their language. Not like anything the other earth sen came up with. But then none of them used radio either. Much more efficient actually. Entire books worth of information can be sent and received in moments. We have phenomenal memories to match fortunately. I was treated as a juvenile until recently.

We have three genders and all three are needed to produce young. We mate by linking arms together. Forms a hexagon with one arm each left over to stand on. Sort of a larger version of ourselves. Sex, if that is what you want to call it takes days. I can't even say it is pleasurable. It is just something we do when the mood tells us it is time. Each individual grows a smaller version of our species that in a few years becomes independent. I have only raised one so far. It died. As did the ones I mated with. I suspect the meddling smiggles did this to me on purpose. Can't have little Saurons running around can we. Now I avoid mating contact and the others understand fortunately. I am still allowed in the extensive discussions.

What does everyone 'talk' about? Philosophy, life and ultimately, The Question. I was surprised at this. Apparently we have a 'thn assigned to us, Aa'thn, but no one here is TK even if they know about it. It would appear no one is interested. They are obsessed with The Question instead. I

have yet to meet this 'thn. There is an irrational hope that she would restore me to my former form and abilities. IF, Aa'thn was not one of the ones put to sleep by the scardie cats. They are such wusses. A little blood and they faint straight away. It likely that it will take a few hundred years before I can meaningfully contribute to the discussion. I am set with the beginners for now.

Time to eat. I make my way down to where I know there is a small stream and a good supply of jellies. I will be here for a few days before I can return and join the discussion again. Did I mention the weather here? It is miserable. Humid, hot, cloudy. I don't think I have felt, as we cannot see, the sun the entire time I have been here. Not once. Never thought about it before. Took the sun for granted. Others have told me that feeling the sun is rare and painful. We were not built for direct sunlight and it causes massive blisters and much pain. Tasteless food and no sun. Sex is not fun either. I am in hell.

*Good afternoon Sauron. How are you feeling today?*

My day just got a thousand times worse. Those two are here again.

Must be time for my yearly checkup.

<sup>Tr</sup>Just leave me alone to die in peace.<sup>Tr</sup>

*Why, you never let anyone else 'die in peace'.*

<sup>Tr</sup>Why here? Even an empty green world would have been better than this.<sup>Tr</sup>

*Here you can do no harm of course. Besides, you might actually contribute to The Question.*

<sup>Tr</sup>You knew? These things are insane. Who spends so much time on such a silly task. Just kill me please! There are no predators here I can enlist. There are no cliffs I can fall off of. I can't even drown myself. The skin will breathe enough to keep me alive, barely. There are no poisonous plants. Nothing!<sup>Tr</sup>

*Well maybe this will cheer you us. We have a task for you to think on.*

<sup>Tr</sup>Anything would be better than this eternal boredom.<sup>Tr</sup>

*You remember the Di Edens?*

<sup>Tr</sup>Two of them if I remember. Never visited them myself. It was not until you brought one to see me that I even knew they existed.<sup>Tr</sup>

*Di One had three sen, the Dio, Dia and Diu. The Dia died out, last colony was on Ba Eden where they were exterminated.*

<sup>Tr</sup>The weak die. Nothing new there.<sup>Tr</sup>

*The Dia were some of the best healers and thinkers ever.*

<sup>Tr</sup>Smiggles. Continue.<sup>Tr</sup>

*The Diu are shy and keep to their own large island continent. They do*

*not abide outsiders and will defend their isolation to the death.*

*The Dio are similar to your former form. They fight each other all the time. I think the closest analogy would be the Native Americans on Earth before it frothed. Sustainable if for no other reason the fighting keeps their populations down.*

<sup>Tr</sup>Again, not very interesting. No potential there. I hated that time with the Hu. Longest period of frustration I ever endured. They were so dense. I could never get across even the most simple concepts of world domination. The Europeans finally gave me a chance. Granted the Chinese appeared to have some good traits until their culture crystallized and they refused to change in the ways needed.<sup>Tr</sup>

*Di Two. There are two sen, the Di and the Rap.*

<sup>Tr</sup>Rap? As in velociraptors? Hideous things. Good killing machines though. There is potential there, but a little like herding cats. Probably a waste of time. The Di, maybe. A little dense, slow on the pickup. Like to crush things. But they eat melons. Who eats melons?<sup>Tr</sup>

*They have changed since you first met them. Because of an incident that we need not go into now, the Di and Rap decided to work together for the good of all.*

<sup>Tr</sup>Ah, with the larger Di in charge. Yeah, that could work.<sup>Tr</sup>

*Actually they formed an equal society. They rose to the level of early twentieth century tech. Trains, cars, airplanes, beginnings of real health-care, sports, arts, everything you would expect.*

<sup>Tr</sup>What a waste. I could not get you monkeys off that shit either. Still it gave something to keep the smiggles occupied with when I did not need them to invent a new war machines.<sup>Tr</sup>

*I told you Silver this was a waste of time. Maybe in few more hundred years of oming with the rest he will understand. That must be Turtle. Never trusted her. She is the sneaky one.*

<sup>Tr</sup>Just tell me what happened? I am assuming something went wrong or you would not be telling me all this.<sup>Tr</sup>

*Right. The Di made slaves of the Rap, split them up so they could not form teams or packs and removed them from all academic and ruling positions. You were a Di, how do we get them to work together again.*

<sup>Tr</sup>Why? Sounds perfect to me. Carrot or stick. Either, both are useful. The Di were afraid of the little guys taking over when they thought because of their size they should lead. Classic. That is why I had the smiggles invent war machines. Gives the little ones a chance and makes the big ones stronger for it.<sup>Tr</sup>

*We don't want them at war. We want them working together again.*

I wish I could sigh, they are so stupid.

<sup>Tr</sup>Give them an enemy that would require both of them to overcome.

Warning. The allegiance will only last as long as the enemy does. Make it a good one. Does not have to be big either. Even a wee one can take down an entire civilization. The Black Death was one of my best inventions don't you think?<sup>Tr</sup> I think so anyway.

*You are not being helpful. Of course we thought of those. I lived most the Earth Two recent history after all.*

<sup>Tr</sup>You arrogant smiggle. I lived MILLIONS of years to your puny existence. How dare you question me!<sup>Tr</sup>

Turtle comments, *Yeah, how is that working for you now? If you don't like the current form I am sure we can find something more to your liking, say a nice juicy worm.*

<sup>Tr</sup>The 'thn will get you. They are reforming. They are not gone forever. They will free me and I will have my revenge.<sup>Tr</sup>

*Aren't you forgetting the incarnations. We have been having this 'discussion' for countless incarnations. You always lose. Always.*

<sup>Tr</sup>The 'incarnations' are a myth. But maybe you are more like me than you admit. I made you after all. Coming to poke sticks at your enemy is beginners work, but maybe in a few million years you will learn. There is hope for you.<sup>Tr</sup>

I can no longer smell them. They must have gone. Good. I believe I was enjoying my algae jelly. Yummy.

# Ku Edens

+I believe the Hu have an expression, Pandora's Box? A box contains all the worries of existence.+

+It certainly feels like this.+ I sigh. Horrible Hu expression. I spent too much time around them.

We are currently in the ruins of our order on Ku2. We think this happened three and a half solars ago, but it is hard to know. How much changes in that time? The only thing we know is we were not here.

+I always thought of our order as in the background, subtle, not overt. But so much has changed.+

+Birds knew of us and noticed when we were gone. Not that subtle. All sorts of myths and stories surrounded our order. The cage was opened when we left. They felt free to do whatever they wanted. A few eights after they were sure, total chaos broke out. Looting, murder, and rape were common. Chicks were born, eggs were smashed as a result of that time.+

+It is like some one took our world and shook it hard. Nothing is where it should be. How could so much change so fast? These ruins and Keki's Blue Birds seem to be the only stable locations.+

A TK3 comes in, +We are ready for the experiment Flor.+ I nod my understanding.

+Best we go I guess. Hope this one has a better outcome.+

We go down the hall to the chamber.

+We have been getting more requests from the other sen to conduct research on the froth event.+

+Keep them away for now. It is our world. We know it best. Others are doing to mess up what little we have to work with. I want the first look. What a mess. And we never knew. Totally unfelt. Amazing.+

+Several of the lower TKs reported a queasy feeling. Possibly because they were closer to being cloned during the event.+

+Maybe. We know the froth front passes faster than the speed of light. The only 'natural' phenomenon that does. Nothing natural about any of this to me. Would have happened too fast for anyone to notice.+

+Still, it was the best way to pin down when it happened. We had TKs training all over the world. By scanning journals they are all required to keep we have a day and time close to the time of day at least.+

+Yeah, to within a fraction of an eighth. I know. The journals of everyone will be a good indication of Ku One history time line.+

+Every attempt to compare indicates the separations occurred very

quickly because of the aforementioned events.+ I wave her off. I know.  
We have been over that part hundreds of times.

+Director is present. You may proceed. Meeting test #106.+

We watch behind one way glass. As TKs we are also watching heart rate, breathing, temperature and a host of endocrine levels. Each researcher present has assigned values to observe and record. In front of us are two nearly identical Ku separated by an opaque barrier. No air is exchanged. No sound.

+Degree of difference?+ I ask.

+0.0153 Director.+

+Clear the partition.+

The wall becomes transparent. I timed it at a time they were both looking at the wall. We had placed a target symbol for them to look at that corresponds to seeing the other when it goes transparent.

Nothing happens at first. There is a look of shock on their faces and eyes. Feathers rise. Arms raise. Common that they think they are seeing a reflection, even though they are clearly wearing different articles of adornment.

These are fem. When we try the males they peck at the glass to try and reach the other as if they are a rival or threat. These two look confused.

+Heart rates only slightly elevated. Same as for any novel experience.

+

The one who had not suffered a scar during the chaos time raises an arm to her face to feel where it should be. Of course it is not there. The other does the same and feels her scar. They compare articles. One is poorer than the others. Immediately after the Chaos was a period of deprivation as social order was restored. Not everyone came back up to their previous level. We chose these two for their differences.

+So far so good. Let them hear each other.+ We borrowed some Hu tech. Still no air exchange. Sounds go through copper wires and gadgets I can see with TK but do not understand. I may have to spend some time at the University myself when this is done.

+Hello. Can you hear me?+

+It is like I am seeing and talking to myself. Who are you? Are we identical twins?+ Almost never happens with birds. They cannot reach hatching with both in the single egg.

+Heart rates normal. They are confused and do not believe what they are seeing.+

+Conjecture. Keep to facts.+ The bird nods.

They start comparing life histories. They have the same parents, went

to the same schools. Everything tracks until the Chaos. One never experienced it, the other did. They talk about that, though painful for the second.

The original looks to my glass, +Please let us meet each other.+

I use the squawk box. I hate this thing.

+Not safe until we understand what has happened. Maybe later. We will bring each of you food and waste disposal boxes. You can continue to catch up and compare.+

Disappointed. I can read with TP that easy enough. They start comparing the world around them. They come to the realization they are not from the same world. All the landmarks are there, or were there, but nothing is the same any longer. Of course neither knows what world they are on currently. The magic of portals. Totally invisible to non TKs unless activated in front of them.

We already did the obvious things. Time is the same, date is the same. We know from other froth pairs that these slip a bit depending on how far back the split occurred. Another clue is finding the same sen pairs. More than a generation pairs are simply not found. Oh, you might find sen who are similar but only first generation pairs are truly similar with identical DNA and skin prints. Second gen will be similar, but not identical. Sperm egg pairs are too random. Finger prints on identical Hu twins, which are much more common and easier to study, are not the same, even if their DNA is.

None of the non-twin worlds have the same time and date. The Di Hu split occurred sixty five million years ago. One was struck by an asteroid. The other was not. Day length and thus time of day are very different. Ocean currents are different, so weather is too. The Di Edens did not have a true ice age. They cooled, but never had the huge ice sheets covering the northern continents.

Ku Eden is the first time it has occurred after we all got together as a TK complex social structure. At least in this incarnation. Will have to ask Silver and Turtle if they remember this happening in previous ones. I guess given an infinite number of course it has. How would I feel meeting my TK able pair? I like to think better than our luck here.

+Number 106 has gone well so far. The longest so far.+

+Statistically it has been getting longer as we get further from the event. We predict ten solars from now there will no longer be any adverse reactions. Or at least they will be rare.+

+So the idea is that the more changes in a birds life the more accepting they will be in accepting an identical pair.+

+That is the current thinking. In this case we also have dramatically different experiences. The rich birds with less differences are more susceptible.+

+I do not feel bad for them. Still we do not need to upset more of either culture than necessary. How many actual deaths so far?+ I hate that that has happened. The first time nearly shut down the problem. Hence the separation box and gradually introducing the pairs.

+Five deaths and fifteen pairs ended up in care facilities. Many others recovered in a few days. Unknown yet if they will ever get out. We have separated the pairs on opposite sides of the world such that they are unlikely to ever meet again. In extreme cases we can remove memories of the event.+

+I hope you are reluctant to do that. Only as a last resort please.+

+Understood. We are being careful.+

+Director they are asking to be able to meet each other again.+

+How long has it been?+

+Nearly an eighth.+

+Tell me Hyta, how would you feel in their situation?+

He thinks about it, +Mostly just curious. How many of us would even like ourselves is a better question. These two seem to be getting along fine. I don't think I could do that. Seeing yourself as others see you is scary.+

+Indeed and that may be the origin of the problems. Good work Hyta. Good work.+ He looks shocked not realizing what he has said.

+Gather around everyone.+

I wait until everyone in the room is paying attention.

+Cancel all other pairings trials. New rule. We can open trade between the two, especially for TKs of course. That might be a good idea. Any new norm arrivals need TKs present. Keep an eye on them to be sure they are stable. I also want anyone who wants to come to the other world to spend time in a different location on each of their own worlds and not arrive in a location on the new world they have lived on in their home world.+

Everyone is looking confused.

+They need to build up enough differences in their own lives. Living in different places, different jobs or careers even. Once they have a good background differences, then we can have them meet if they want to. There are good odds some are going to be looking for loved ones who left them or died recently on their respective worlds. That can't be allowed. Each world has a right to live their own lives. We need to respect that.+



+Other than the novelty, why would anyone want to? I mean they are essentially the same world. Especially after we get the damaged areas repaired again.+

+Good question, but then stupid birdies have never made any sense to me.+ That gets a good laugh.

+I will take these two out myself in one eighth. I know, first time. Have Keki meet me at the exit. I think we will start with Ku Two. She knows what she lost and can explain it better to new self than I can. Taking her to Ku One is likely to make her very jealous or feel pecked on at the very least.+

I have a lot of paperwork sitting on my desk. The highest TK on this world, or rather two worlds now, and I do mostly paperwork. Does not seem right.

My aid comes in too soon to remind it is time to go. I am not upset to do so.

Keki does a formal bow to me when I enter. I have tried to break that habit. He says he is just being polite and showing me how much he appreciates being included. It needs to stop. I certainly do not want any others doing it too. Fortunately it is just him and the two.

+This is very embarrassing, but I never learned your names.+

The look at me, then each other.

+We decided it would be easier if we had different names from now on and to be fair we both have new names. I am Ra.+ The better groomed one.

+I am Ba.+

+You might want a different name dear. Fine on Ku, but as you will soon learn there is another sen species who use the honorific of Ba. They are sort of bat like sen that can glide pretty well, but not actually fly and with no genetic link to actual bats.+

+Bu?+ I nod.

+Since we look so much alike. I will dye my top feathers red.+

+And mine will be blue.+ I smile and do it for them.

Bu points to Ra with her beak open and Ra returns the look.

+Do you two like each other? Not everyone can get along with themselves.+

+Oh yes.+ The both say at the same time and then show amusement. Going to be a long day.

+I am Flor.+

+I am Keki.+

Bu says, +I have heard the name Flor before. Same as the top perch of

the White Cloaks. They are all gone now of course. How did you get the same name?+

Keki looks nervous, but I answer.

+I am the same Flor.+ They both show surprise and immediately bow. Not another set. I will never win this one.

+Keki, being shy, is also the Blue Bird equivalent. We are working together now.+ He looks at me surprised, but says nothing.

+But how can you be here. Are you the only two here?+ Bu asks. They have by now figured out there are two different worlds. Too many coincidences to be otherwise.

+The fact that you two have met is your answer is it not?+

+I am such a dumb birdie.+

+I did not get it either sister. We are here to learn I suspect. Still a bit of a shock in spite of all the alone time they have given us.+ Thanks for rubbing that in Ra.

+First things first. Bu, you came in with soiled garments, a broken and partially healed left arm, malnutrition and a host of minor ailments. Ra, you appear to be fine more or less for your station in life and easier path.  
+

+That sounds correct.+ Ra confirms her side.

+That is no longer the case, Bu you are healed and cleaned up.+ She even stands a little taller now. Ra watched the outside transformation of course and her beak is open. I motion for her to close it and she slowly does.

+Just so you do not get any ideas, either one of us could have done what just happened. It is a gift for what we have put you two through as part of our trying to understand the effects of what happened.+

+You say effects, but not why. I assume this means you know why.+ I affirm. I motion Keki to explain. He has to be part of this too.

He waves his arm around, +We all grew up with the expectation that this, what we see around us, is our world, and the ONLY world. It is not. There are in fact countless others related to Ku and even many times more if you include the entire universe.+

+You mean the stars we see at night.+ They are holding hands and have some sort of code worked out as to who will answer. They must think so much alike they can nearly read each other's minds.

+Yes, exactly. Well the universe started with only one set. Then soon after that a group of beings called The Old Ones and the 'thn. Don't ask me why, that is just what they call themselves, started a process call the 'froth'. The froth is sort of like a wave. It takes approximately thirty one

million years for each wave to pass.+

+And when it passes, the worlds and stars in the path double. Only they can't normally see each other. There are not suddenly two Ku worlds orbiting our sun. The entire solar system is duplicated. If they were in the same space, they would of course collide and it is unlikely much left by now nearly fourteen billion years after the first one.+

+Correct. There are many more dimensions than we can normally perceive. Norm as we call those without special and rare gifts cannot see these other worlds much less move between them.+

+But you two can.+

+And you can take someone with you if you need to.+

+What world are we on now?+ They say in unison. So much for their hand code.

+You will see for yourselves in a moment. Be patient.+ Keki shows amusement which is fortunately contagious. He needs to be careful or he will end up starting his own flock. I should have foreseen that possibility. They are vulnerable right now.

+I know from your files that you are both, obviously both, fifteen years old. Legally adults, with adult responsibilities. I am over seventy now.+

That elicits a shocked look.

+Remember how Bu was healed? We can do that to ourselves as well. In fact we can assume any age we want for the situation we find ourselves in. Often being older is better at hiding in plain sight.+ He raises a few feathers for effect.

They look at me trying to guess my age. Keki shows amusement.

+Are you done having fun Keki? I guess you will find out from someone sooner or later. Let's just say I am somewhere over the age of a thousand.+ Keki shows amusement and they notice. Guano. Stop it. I hate being the center of attention. Okay, closer to four, but who is counting.

+You are just going to let us go, knowing what we do? We look identical and twins are very rare and even rarer that they live to adults still looking identical. Life changes birds.+ Keki nods.

+Think of this as an experiment. Depending on what happens here and now we will need to decide how to proceed.+ Good cautious answer. I really don't want to go the erase route. That feels too much like rape to me. I remember back to the Black Vests of my time. Please do not let us become them.

+Is anyone hungry?+ Good thought. We all raise our hands and laugh simultaneously. Keki motions to follow him and we do so, with me in the

rear. The path is confusing, for a reason. Nearly impossible for a norm to find their way. At least not fast enough to get into trouble before someone found them.

+Wow someone is certainly paranoid, this is insane. Glad we are not in a hurry. How are you doing Bu?+

+Hungry.+ Expected. Keki DSs all of us to another nameless corridor without anyone but myself noticing. Considerably closer to the exit.

We come out into a small home complete with the usual items found in a poor birds living situation. We even put birds here as cover, whom are out at the moment. We exit to the crowded street with food stalls and such.

Ra's eyes go wide, +I know this place, but I don't. Near the Freedom Garden. This must be Bu's world.+ There are buildings under repair and lots of noise from such. Fortunately there are the usual food stalls.

Bu comes up to me and whispers, +I do not have any money.+ That would bring shame to her under these conditions.

I whisper back, +My treat.+ She relaxes and runs back to Ra.

We find enough food to feed an army I think. The two of them seem to be having no trouble getting it down though. I usually do not bother with food, taking care of it with TK instead. This is a treat for me too. I do not eat as much, but sample a lot of different dishes. Kind of fun. I need to get out more often.

Others have been here to examine the differences before us, but this is the first time myself. My eyes must be as wide as Ra's. Keki would be comfortable where ever he is. Sewer or desert makes no difference.

Keki and I have been TPing back and forth though all this, being essentially linked. More or less making it up as we go along and see how they react to things.

I nod to Keki and he hands each of them a device in no possible way could anyone on either Ku figure out.

+Don't loose these. They will show you the way back to us if you ever need help.+

+Or lessons maybe?+ That is easy to understand.

+You have no idea what you are asking. It is a long difficult path. I would not recommend it knowing what I know now. At the same time I also accept my life as well.+ Way to confuse them Keki. I doubt they heard a single word other than maybe, likely yes. Sigh.

*I feel good about them too, but are they the norm or the special exception. Not all the pairs will do as well I am sure.*

*Definitely the exception. I wish it had gone as easy for me. These two*

*are infectious in their attitude.*

+Ra and I have an idea. There are going to be more pairs right? Neither of us liked our world before today and have no ties or problems leaving it.+ A likely reason for their easy transition.

+What Bu is saying is how about we run a halfway house for new arrivals.+

Keki and I look at each other and then come out together, +Excellent idea!+ Their beaks are going to fall off if they try to smile any wider. Beaks are not the best for smiling. Only another Ku would even notice we were smiling, but the two in front of us do and are hopping up and down holding hands.

+Well, we best get to the new halfway house then shouldn't we.+

+That fast? You made an entire house with backstory and everything just like that?+

+No of course not. We are not time travelers. But, there are some advantages to being the boss and we purposely have empty spaces ready and available for needs that arise.+

*We will need furniture, etc. I think the hutch on Second and Soaring will work nicely.*

*We set these up with identical hutches on Ku One. Makes going back and forth easier. In one door and out to another world. Were going to use them ourselves, but this works too. There are other hutches too.*

Keki DSs out in front of them. Their tongues are hanging out.

+Let's go to your new hutch and jobs.+

+Can you teach us how to do that too?+

+Patience my dear chicks. Patience.+ The young are so cute. Even if they can also be a pain in the tail feathers.

## Earth Two - Cat Land

*This is another fine mess you have gotten us into.*

*Oh, like exploding beer was not a mess?*

*That happened ages ago.*

*Still counts. Besides, didn't you want to see our old haunts.*

*But walking thousands of kilometers in Cat form? I am going to die.*

*Well you have the gestalt down pat. Not my fault the 'thant portal was in California, former that is.*

*Nothing but Cat poo there now. At least there is nothing for them to eat out here.*

*And you don't think that makes us just a tad bit obvious?*

*Well we could not just pop right in without the TWO noticing and attacking us as per treaty.*

*Oh, like they never sent spies to our side? What about Sour Puss?*

*And all those 'Cat' helpers that have teamed with the new TKs. I have always been suspicious of those. Seem to be working out alright though.*

*Still looks like Mars and we grew up here.*

*Yeah, thousands of years ago. I have not seen any Cat tracks in ages. Should be alone anyway. Does not seem like a good way to find and catch one though.*

*It was an experiment okay. I sent Spikes here in Hu form. Should not have been possible to reverse engineer its native form. That is back on Alexandria. No way Owa and Sylvy could find it. So many layers of protection you would not believe. And yes, I did check. Still all in place.*

*Puu said that the life form is amazingly flexible in terms of how it survives. More of a life force than a form.*

*You may have something there. Hungry? Still lots of sap chow left.*

*I could do with a cold one about now. I make a couple of icy cold beers and TK one to Marie.*

*Yeah, like Cats drinking beer in the middle of a desert is not strange at all.*

*Do you want one or not. I'm happy drinking both of them.*

*She takes one. We are sitting in a shady spot under a large rock. It is only 40C instead of 50 in the sun is my guess. Still too damned hot.*

*Does look a little greener than I remember.*

*Reversing climate change did that. Ash makes a good fertilizer too. Our ancestors were actually able to live here before you-know-who arrived and ruined everything.*

*Oh yeah corn, squash and beans. Yummy.  
The three sisters were not that bad. The boys did a real good cowboy  
chili.*

*Long gone now. Elephants. Makes sense actually. I could see them as  
a pair of elephants. They used to play as if they were ones when they  
were little.*

*Not Indians and Cowboys? We always played where we were the win-  
ners. I smile.*

*Hard to smile as a Cat. Looks more like a snarl. Maybe all those  
times we thought Owa was snarling at us, she was laughing at us instead.*

*Most definitely.*

*When we thought she was snarling, she was actually smiling.*

*The hissing and growling were not a give away?*

*I suppose we should get to work.*

*Secret Cave is the most likely place.*

*Agreed. Are you sure the TWO are still down south?*

*Scardy Cat?*

*Yes. We may all be the same TK level, but Owa is thousands of years  
older and has done a lot of sparing with Silver.*

*And she is totally out of shape, not having anything to do but eat and  
sleep most of that time.*

*True. Maybe I should be a Cat next time. Clearly the superior life  
form. We both laugh, snarl. Damn that is hard.*

*The Secret Cave is only a few kilometers away and it is dusk, so al-  
ready cooled down a lot.*

*It does seem greener. Do you think it is because there are no sheep left  
to mow everything down?*

*You were the expert there. I only beat up little girls I was trying to  
toughen up.*

*And look what we ended up with. Next time don't do that.*

*Agreed.*

*The beer was good though.*

*The beer was good.*

*The Secret Cave was a place where tribal ceremonies could be done  
without the prying eyes of all those damn tourists. All they wanted was  
feathers, whoops and fry bread. Fry bread was long march chow, not nor-  
mal for any Native. We did not even have wheat to make it with until it  
showed up in our rations. We did the best we could trying to get some  
calories into us so we did not starve, but definitely not anything remotely  
normal. No one would ask for it unless they were literally starving.*

*Hmm, just noticed the similarity between fry bread and sap chow. Fry bread tastes better. Covered in bacon grease and jam. Yum. Stop it, you know we can't eat that stuff in this form. Nothing worse than a Cat with the shits. Another set of smiles.*

We get closer. Not hidden any more. I do a snap scan.

*There is water inside. Explains all the life around the entrance anyway.*

*Lots of Cat prints too. This is a watering hole for sure.*

*But what are they eating? I have not seen even a mouse in days.*

*Oh my God, there is a rabbit! I spring on it as fast as I can. Must be the form I am in. But, another Cat comes out of nowhere and pounces first. We both miss colliding into each other.*

Marie catches the rabbit as it tries to get away.

*That was my dinner. Who are you two? This is my territory! A lot of snarls and hisses to go with it.*

*You can have the rabbit. We just like the chase. That gets a strange expression.*

*We all like the chase. It is life. Everyone knows that. You two are weird. Thanks Marie. Getting outed in our very first encounter.*

He is really small and scrawny. Likely hides in the cave most of the time and only comes out when he sees something close to the entrance.

We let him finish his meal which does not take very long. Was not a fat rabbit either. Plenty for it to eat. Strange. Not really a fan of raw, still warm bloody meat either. Just as glad we did not have to eat some in front of him to prove we were genuine Cats.

*You two still here? Get lost now! A low growl. He DSs to the other side of us. TK2, standard Cat issue. Tries to bat Marie. Huge mistake. He is flat on his back so fast I could not even follow it and I was expecting it.*

*You still want us gone? I wonder what fresh Cat tastes like. Not much to eat hereabouts. Might just have to start eating the scrawny ones to lower the competition.*

*PLEASE don't eat me!* He is actually shaking. Marie lets him go, but continues to give him the STARE. He is not going to stop shaking until we are gone for days.

*I think you may have ruined him for life, ah, Snaggle Tooth. Hey, we need Cat sounding names too. Mike and Marie are not going to cut it around these parts.*

*You could be right Pot Belly. Hey, that is not what we agreed on. She looks at me like I am going to be next. I did okay in the classes, but I am no black belt in Cat form.*



*Pot Belly is just fine.* I back way from her carefully. Our guest starts to calm down seeing me get the attention now.

*Mates. Can't live with them. Best give them a lot of distance.* I nod forgetting that is a Hu gesture. Does not seem to notice though.

Marie turns to look at him again and he crouches down submissively.

*We are here for bigger game. We are looking for a Terror.* Got that much scanning others on our way here. She continues, *Heard there was a single one about here.*

He looks around madly, *Really? Where? You two going to take one on? You are nuts. I saw one take down five young healthy fem at once. No way just you and Pot Belly can take one on. Believe me, if I knew there was one around here, I would not be here.* Hey, stop using the name Pot Belly. I turn around to look at myself. Then lick to pretend that was what I really intended. Cat hair is disgusting! And they lick their end too. Yuck!

*Ha, ha, made you look.*

*You know you do have part of a tooth missing?*

*Had to make it look real. What's your excuse? The closest one is a few hundred kilometers away.*

*Is it alone? I scan also and find it.*

*We need a Spikes box.*

*Really. Are you really afraid of a single one?*

*And if it goes all spores on you then what?* Okay, now you have my attention.

Might need another beer before all this goes down. I make three and pour one into a bowl I have just made and set it in front of the Scrawny. Have to call him something. He sniffs it carefully and takes a taste and gives me the most disgusting look.

*It is not a lemon. You get used to it.* He tips it over into the sand.

*We are going to bring a Terror here in a moment. You want to watch or get lost?* Scrawny's eyes go wide. He disappears so fast I would swear he was a high level TK. Nope just hopping his way deeper into the caves. They go back some ways. Never really explored as a kid. There were some things you REALLY did not want to get caught at by an elder. This was one.

*There are some Hu skulls and bones in there.* Marie shrugs.

A 'thn metal box appears. The inside become covered with a AuC quantum limiter. A sphere appears inside. The kill pill. Good safety tip.

*Isn't that overkill?*

*Being a black belt does not mean being stupid Pot Belly.* I suck my

gut in. Hard in the Cat shape. Aren't the males supposed to look this way? I sigh and let it go.

I ask, *You want me to bring it in while you spot me?* She nods she is ready. *Recorders are on.* I announce.

I do the deed. It is NOT happy. They have some DS ability, about TK2 that we know of from watching them work from a distance. Still it takes Cats working as an ordered pack to bring one down. Not their natural state. Cats that is.

At least it can't get out of the box, yet. I am not convinced it will stay there though. I watch with TK and it is fucking fast!

*We need to be in quick time to work with this thing. It is fast!*

It is knocking the one meter ball all around without fear. Does not know what is inside at least. The limiter appears to be working.

*We are getting good recordings. Quantum, so it does not matter how fast it moves, we will see it.*

*We have enough memory for that?*

*Mike, the box itself is the memory.* Oh, yeah, I knew that.

*Time to begin I guess.* I hate torturing anything, especially a sen.

*A sen whose sole purpose it to destroy all life on this planet and any others it can get to.*

*How is it sen then?*

*Sen does not mean nice. It takes a lot of smarts to overcome so many cultures.*

*I can imagine.*

*First test commencing. Vibration starting.*

*I think it likes it. Turning up the frequency.* I am guessing it will take a very high frequency given its activity level. The frequency is becoming so high my ears are killing me.

*Structural integrity will be compromised. Ending vibration study.*

*Thank goodness.* Too bad though. Vibration would have been less destructive to other forms and can be targeted.

*Temperature rising.* We already know it hates fire, so something under combustion level.

*It is slowing down.*

*Maybe it knows any spark will ignite and kill it.*

*Maybe. We are past ignition point for its moisture level and flammability. Ending heat test.*

*I suppose we can get another and another.*

*We already know heat and seawater kill it. That is not the purpose of these test. I may be a black belt, but I don't like torturing and killing any-*

*thing.*

*Sap chow and beer are good enough for us.* I try to smile. Really does not work.

There are a lot of things we can use which will likely kill it, but we are not actually trying to kill it. Most of those things would kill everything else around it too. Not the ideal solution.

*Starting leak test.*

I guess we have to. I have run out of ideas given our time constraints. I certainly do not want to be found by the TWO.

It does not like that at all. It has even managed to wedge itself against the walls to avoid the seawater. *What concentration are you using.*

She looks at me like I am blind. I scan and it is normal seawater. She shakes her head.

*Hey, I am just a simple sheep farmer. Ah yuck. Something is happening!*

*It is dissolving!*

Only part of it though. It forms a layer over the seawater that seals it from the rest. The rest reforms as if nothing has happened.

*It does have a defense against it. Wonder how it would handle being immersed though?*

*I am not taking a chance using straight DS.*

An identical box appears, complete with limiters, etc. Only this one is full of seawater.

*Ready when you are.* I nod and do a complete body DS of its form. Or rather a negative one. Where there was air it is now seawater. It is completely immersed.

It immediately rolls up into a tight sphere. All of the spikes have been absorbed into the main mass. Ah, a protective layer. Good strategy actually.

*It does not like seawater, but seawater does not kill it on contact either. Takes time. Now it is a matter of can it hold out long enough. Let's give it the time it will take then.*

*Too bad, just giving them a simple bath would have been much easier. Having to keep them under the entire time will be a pain. We would need to find everyone and DS it to the bottom of the sea. Close to the top and they would likely float. Need to get below the buoyancy limit.*

*We have never seen this form before. Could be centuries before it is truly dead. This could be trouble for the Tafa if true.*

*This is not the original, only a Cat copy. Who knows, but it is the one we will have to worry about.*

*Yeah, these suckers adapt. I want to try something. Going back to air and removing all traces of seawater.*

Nothing. Just sits there at the bottom of the box.

*Maybe a rinse? Marie converts some of the air to distilled water, rinses it and converts it back to air.*

I feel heavy breathing on the back of my neck. I become aware and jump two feet in the air. I immediately assume the submissive position. And pee myself. Marie growls. Is she insane?

*Nice to see you too Owa.*

*I am under no illusion that you just happened to 'find' this double box with a ball of Terror inside.*

The box suddenly goes opaque. I scan. No not opaque. It is full of tiny spheres, each about a millimeter in size.

*SPORES!* I shout in TP.

The box pair disappears. They are on their way to the center of the sun. We are taking no chances with them in this state. Others in our group will insure it gets there. We were the 'volunteers' for this mission.

I pretend nothing has happened. *Oh hello Owa. I have to compliment you on your choice of form. There are a lot of advantages. I am through being a stupid monkey.*

Owa just states at me like I am her next meal.

*You have just taught me how to remove all Hu from this world.*

*No, we have taught you how to remove all living things from this world. They eat anything in the spore form. No intelligence or TK until they get bigger. No memory of the past either. Totally fresh. A sort of reset mode when all else fails. Their MOST dangerous form.*

I add when it becomes obvious I am not already on the dinner menu, *Besides, you could already remove all living things from this world. Any of us can do that. The tricky part is accomplishing the removal of the Terror without deleting everything else.*

Marie adds, *There are over a quarter million of them now. You were supposed to keep Spikes in Hu form. 'She' was a grad student learning about your superior methods, not a weapon of mass destruction.*

*My bad. I do not trust any Hu 'gifts'.*

*I get that. Good to remember.*

*Mike you are making it worse. Just shut up. Males!*

*We agree on one thing.*

*Hey, I resent that remark.* They both turn towards me and growl. Shit. Owa disappears. I convert back to Hu form. I am very self conscious of this form now. Marie converts too.

"Well, we learned what we came to learn."

"It is a nightmare. How are we going to deal with them now? Seawater will not work. Fire works, but would destroy everything else too. Scanning for them, we already know, if a pain as they are very good at mimicking earth normal life forms, down to the DNA level. We can't go up to everything with a Spikes sensor and wait for a result. It will just DS to somewhere else."

"Owa and Sylvy have activated the gate."

"A select few of the Cats make it out alive and leave us with the mess. Again. Great. I am getting tired of cleaning up."

"Could always go back to being a norm."

"No way." I make two beers and hand one to Marie.

"Shit, shit. shit! They are putting Spikes into vats of seawater all over the American continents. Once the rains start those vats will become spores!"

"Thus sterilizing the land. Cute. We taught them how to do it."

"I would not feel too bad, there was always good odds they would do something like that. Owa HATES losing to Silver."

"Failure is not an option. And we are the stupid monkeys? Call back our companions. We will need help on this one. Birds could carry them to the rest of Earth Two! Shit. RED ALERT!"

# Ceph Eden

~Shipments of crabs are coming in from the other froth worlds. No one will go hungry, but no one is going to get fat either.~  
~At least we have that. How are the farms coming?~  
~We have never done it before, so we are going slow, but everyone knows the need it great. We are getting seed stock from the other froths.~  
~They should be resistant to the latest plague at least.~  
~Or susceptible to something our stocks are not concerned with.~  
~We need to mate the stocks quickly to breed in hybrid vigor.~  
~Anything off world needs to be quarantined too. None of us is alone and could bring in others that end up being a worse problem.~  
~The alternative is for a lot of us to starve to death. Of course this is normal and happens every few hundred years, but it will set back all the progress we have made.~  
~Ask the Hu, ecology is never easy. Stay aware Troy.~  
~Stay aware Rooi.~ She leaves to work on the situation.

Our entire culture is at stake. All the progress we have made of disposing of Mother dictators would be undone. All the efficiencies we have implemented would be undone. All the fairness in offspring selection would be undone. We would go back thousands of years in our progress. We would survive and the others would help where they could, but it would be catastrophic to our culture. Likely we would find ourselves isolated from the new worlds again.

The select, the TKs would survive, but likely have to go into hiding. Superstition would return. We would become the equivalent of the Hu witches and be hunted and forbidden to participate. I do not like being visible. I would prefer to be hidden, helping in the shadows and depths, not out in the open. It was a mistake to have been found by Turtle.

But, here we are, this is our situation, we need to work it out. We are smart enough, we are strong enough. It is not just the cost of failure, but the cost to our reputation as a TK culture. I liked being invited to see the other worlds. I like being in the shape of other forms, even if they were all inferior. It gave me a new perspective and appreciation for our form.

I look around at my room. I am no longer in the one room apartment shared with others. I have instruments and designs from all the froth worlds. I love seeing how others have solved their problems. I could hide everything here of course and would, but so much would be lost. Why did the expected crab plagues have to hit just now? I understand why they

happen. When predation pressure becomes too high, the food becomes stressed and more susceptible to virus and bacterial infections. If only we had foreseen this and been better prepared. Would even a TK9 have seen this likelihood?

The two Companions I gained at TK7 and my original Buddy are still with me and I appreciate their help immensely. I call them my pearls. I could leave all the toys around me behind, but not these three. They have become my most trusted friends and companions.

*Mistress you have an appointment at the ceramics studio.*

*Thank you Buddy. I am going now.*

I put on my shoe. Strictly speaking I do not need it of course, but I do not want any more attention than absolutely necessary. My shoe is an old wear worn friend. I refuse to be carried about like a dinner bowl. I refuse to add jewels or even weapons to mine. I am just plain old Rooi. A student of ceramics who accidentally is also the leader on my world.

~Over here Rooi.~ I am beckoned to one side of the warehouse.

~What have you figured out Kale?~

~Follow me.~ She leads me outside.

~Too big to keep under shelter any longer. Others were bound to notice or be shown about it sooner or later.~

What Kale has worked out is a method, using TK unfortunately, that will allow us rapid production of new crab pools. With so many coming in from other worlds there are many concerns. Keeping them separate yet still all receive fresh seawater and food. Fortunately, unlike us, crabs prefer their food dead. Huge advantage. With us, if it is not moving it is garbage. I have eaten sap chow. You get used to it. The down side is crabs are messy as hell. They never clean up anything, leaving bits of food and excrement everywhere. Most of our workforce is spent in cleaning the tanks. We keep the teams separate and isolated. It would be too easy to transmit some new infection from one to another or worse to our native stock.

Currently we are keeping the stocks separated by distance. If something bad happens we can shut down that facility and use portals to still supply them with live stock. Of course, TKs on the other worlds have been feeding the stock they ship us sterile food and use sterile water to bath them in. At least the crabs like sap chow. Horrible tasteless stuff.

Kale brings back my attention, ~The walls are made from chitin. The same thing the crabs make their shells from. It will eventually degrade without any waste.~

~You are making enough to hold larvae from local stock too I hope.~

~Of course. The portal yard is nearly finished. We will be shipping out tanks to every Ceph colony location. They will decide locally how to allocate.~

~Instructions included I hope. Not all localities have TK individuals yet. We are spread pretty thin.~

~Done and tested. We have shipped samples to several remote locations without any help from one of us. We observe to see if they understand. We have learned a lot. Each iteration is better than the previous.~

~Great. Anything else I should know about?~

She hands me tube.

~Taste it.~ I am reluctant. We have tried so many times. It is our standard squeeze tube whose design a Hu showed us. Again, the structure is natural product. We will not make the Hu mistake of using artificial supports. They are still finding areas contaminated by the geo derived polymers. Bacteria will eventually degrade it, but it could take thousands of years.

I remove the top and squeeze the tube. I taste the goo coming out.

~Not too bad.~ I squeeze more out and eat a larger portion.

~Granted I would not want dead food unless I was starving, but not bad at all. What is the secret?~

~Sterile. I know, we normally like natural, but we needed to remove all living things, even the small helpers, and keep air out. Once we figured that out, the stuff keeps for a few eight days without a noticeable difference in taste. Longer if nutrition is your only concern.~

~How about if frozen?~ A portal to the ice fields is very useful.

~Years if frozen. We are stockpiling now. Any TK6 or above can make the stuff.~ Meaning a nine like myself can make a thousand times more at a time. There are only three of us at that level so far. Of course we can call in non-Ceph help if needed.

~Distribution is still a concern, but we have the stock problems solved on slate anyway.~ Meaning it is not really solved yet, just looking good at the moment.

~Scale up as fast as you can. Let me know when I am needed to put in eighths as well. I serve.~

~I serve as well.~ Comes the response. It is a reminder of why we are TKs and not norms. Nothing is done to our own advantage, only to help others.

A fem Ceph appears with her shoe on improperly. Arms are waving all over in frustration.

*How the hell do you make eight arms work at the same time. This is*



*insane. I show amusement.*

*Just use your native form. I promise not to be frightened.*

The mess of arms resolved into Hu shape. Fem. Clothes appear. Silly notion but to each their own ways.

~Welcome Pilot.~ I show amusement.

*Ha-ha. I will get it eventually. If I can handle 13D space I should be able to get this.*

~We have schools for yearlings you are welcome to attend.~

*And be shown up by them. No thank you. They would too.*

*Earth Two has been put on lock down quarantine. The Spikes situation has gotten way worse. Even the Hu areas cannot be guaranteed to be safe now. No portal traffic in or out. Only select high TKs assigned to assist are allowed in.*

*So they spored?*

*Theoretically. Owa and Sylvy and a host of Cat have left for their alternative world. Should have been there in the first place, but they claimed Earth was just as much theirs as Silver and Turtles. We think they just wanted to keep an eye on the Hu.*

*But they have not spored yet right?*

*Right. Only Marie and Mike tried an experiment inside Cat Land with a captured Spikes. They were able to get it to spore by placing it in a sea-water bath for a time and then rinsing it and exposing it to sunlight and air again. They did it in a 'thn-AuC box with all the safeguards. And they destroyed the experiment afterwards. Unknown to them Owa and Sylvy were watching the entire sequence. Just before they left, they set up Spikes time bombs all over Cat Land. As the Spikes are hard to detect unless you are within a hundred meters of them, they could be anywhere.*

*And all it takes is one in the new form to forget all the learning about our types and revert back to the most primitive and lethal subtype.*

*Correct.*

*The other downside, is Earth Two will not be sending any food to Ceph. Earth One is unaffected, but there are only two TKs there at any given time and no portals. It will all have to be done by hand.*

*And the others?*

*Still on board, at least until the infection spreads there as well. The spores are about 1mm in size.*

*And mask themselves as local lifeforms, at least at the gross DNA level.*

*Correct.*

*We will take whatever you can send of course. We can fall back on*

*Ceph Chow, our own variation on sap chow. Horrible stuff, but better than starving.*

*That is debatable. Ah, humor. I still do not always understand Hu humor.*

*Where did the Spikes come from? When I was on Alexandria it was said she came from or through Ku Eden.*

*Keki went home to Ku Eden and checked in with Flor. She knew nothing about it even though she was the reference the Spikes used to get to Alexandria. The registration forms state that Spikes came from some sen associated with the Regional Center. That could be anyone.*

*That is even more disturbing. Security has been broken.*

*Yeah, bad news. No more students until we sort this out and all the ones current on Alexandria are being scrutinized. We know some at the Center were not happy about the decision to put the 'thn asleep. It was not so much that they liked the 'thn, but they did help keep order and everyone had gotten used to them.*

*We do not like change either. We are having all kinds of problems with the lack of Queens being in charge. Everyone hated the Queens, but we were used to working under them as well.*

*People would rather have the devil they know than a saint they don't know. We have the same problem. Personally, as much as I have had to adapt to an enormous amount of change, I would not trade it for stability. Who would have thought starting out as a navigator on a sailing ship I would be piloting an intergalactic, interfroth star ship?*

*Most sen are not offered such. Small changes can sometimes be more difficult than a total change. Just enough to make one unsure but not enough to just push through.*

*You could be right. Well, best I get on. Ba Eden next.*

*She does a Ceph bow and DSs out. I can sense the froth ship above for a moment before it too disappears. Not exactly ready for that myself. I have enough to keep me occupied here for now.*

*The old are set in their ways and will have a hard time adapting to Ceph chow. It is important for the young to learn how to catch and eat our normal food, though they would adapted more easily to made food. I really just want to go back to the studio and do ceramics.*

# Earth Two - North Med

*I found something.*

I make my way over to Hobbes. He is scratching at the ground next to some bones. More Hu bones. Narrow hips suggests a young male warrior. Spear point, parts of a sling and some evenly sized pebbles.

*It's cold here.*

*Put some fur on stupid monkey.*

*Ha-ha.* But I noticed Hobbes's fur is much thicker. I sigh and add some layers. No one out here to see us. In fact, there does not appear to be anything living within kilometers of here. All burned. Not lightning, has not been a storm in months. This was deliberate.

Hobbes is still sniffing the ground.

*Well, I know you can DS whatever it is to the surface.*

Instead he digs it up. Sigh, he can DS to the other side of the planet, but he will not use DS to move a simple book. Yes, I scanned to see what was so interesting. He grabs it in his teeth moves it a meter to drop at my feet.

*Are you in another sulk?* He yawns, curls up and is out. Tough day sniffing a single corpse in a burnt field. Of what I presume was once a village.

I sit and open the book. It appears to be a journal, similar to the ones we all keep, well at least the Hu. Cats of course refuse. They feel that their pet monkey can do that for them. Right. That's what we are here for right? Just a servant for the master. I did know that when I signed up. Sigh....

My name is Ali. No last name, we are all peasants here after all. Not that I ever signed up to be one. Well, best begin. I am currently alone. I once had a family. They were all killed in a raid. First my Pa and then on the last one my brother and Ma. I was raped then as well. First and last time I swore.

I am a thin one. Thin ones do not survive being with child, so they have no bother raping our kind. The big ones they rape too, but then kill afterwards to be sure no child is made. The odds are low of course, but they don't take chances. They somehow believe a child who has never met them and has no chance of knowing who they are will come back to avenge their ma's death.

I am still ahead of myself. I really should start with the meet-

ing of my special friend. That is when this really started. I have always been alone. I like being alone. I prefer being alone. When others could not wait to join a group effort I ran off to the woods. I of course did not earn my keep digging the ground. I hunt. What a girl hunter? Thing is I don't look like a girl nor dress as one. I would have been killed looking like this of course, had I been there on the first raid. All the males were killed. Who ever thought only men could fight. Silly males.

We are beyond the prescribed zone for Hu. The constant raids, at first for just supplies and all our hard won food, then for more when it became hard even for the raiders. We came out here to be away from the raiders. Of course they simply followed. I told everyone that, but being only fourteen at the time I had no standing, never mind I could out track and out hunt anyone else in the village.

They never even knew how many times I killed a big cat or other predator that would have loved to eat the nice plump pigs, goats and sheep they kept. They never knew who brought in the wild boars the men in all their male stupidity preferred as some sort of more male form of meat. I even brought in a buffalo once. They were surprised as I watched them from a distance, but they did take it in and eat it. During the party I snuck in and got a few things I needed that are not easy to make on my own. I cannot make ceramic knives without a kiln and the proper skill, not to mention the time.

The friend. I keep getting distracted. It was only about a year ago when we met. I was sleeping out the hot day sun in the shade when I heard a voice. It asked if it could have some of the kill I had roasted for myself. Of course I woke right up ready to fight whomever was there. I saw no one. I called out, I looked all about. Just when I was settling down again, the voice asked again. This time I set a portion out in front of me and called out for them to help themselves.

It was not a Hu as expected. About ten cents in diameter, all black, lots of spines. Surprisingly fast. It grasped the meat and backed up out of reach. Now I am curious about all forms of life, specifically if it can hurt me, can I eat it, and how do I hurt it if necessary. I asked if it could hear me. It responded that of course it could. Only it was not a voice, but the words sounded inside my mind.

Would you like some more? I asked. It responded that it would. I placed this piece much closer. It crept up and started to consume this piece as well. I asked if I could touch it. It responded it did not mind. It was very sharp and drew blood. I of course pulled my hand back.

Now I know you before all others and will serve you till the end. Please touch me again. I am safe now that I know you. I did so and it was soft. Of course I had never encountered something like this before.

Shit Hobbes, these bones are fem and she found a Spikes. Hobbes snorts and rolls over. I continue.

At first I carried Fluffy around with me. I told it everything about my life and about the people I had known. Fluffy insisted that it had to remain a secret and that I was not to tell anyone else about it. They do not have gender as we know it. Since I rarely went into the village during the day this was not really a concern. That is until Fluffy grew. It was only a matter of a few months before Fluffy clearly out weighed even me.

It taught me a lot of fighting skills. We would practice for countless eighths. I became quite good. It could change its shape and extend a spike to pretend to be a Hu with a sword. I got so good I would go up to large cats during the day and challenge them. At first they saw me as a snack, but by whatever means they use to tell the others, they soon learned to avoid me. This allowed the village to expand and claim more area for farming and grazing.

Fluffy needed to be fed of course. Any stray animal would do and the village became very nervous about letting any animal out at night. Even the dogs and cats stayed inside against their desire to explore at dusk and dawn. Fluffy never bothered any animal inside a corral and the village adapted. We had to go further afield to find food though. This would keep us away for up to an eight day at a time. That was when it happened.

I came in to check on things and found the entire village gone. All the buildings were empty, all the animals gone. Not a scrap of ceram, metal or food. Even the cloth and leather was gone. I called in Fluffy and it found evidence of death. The people had been killed or carried away as slaves. They used to just

kill everyone. Guess they realized that working people who knew how to make food to death were more useful to them.

I asked Fluffy if we could find them. Yes, but I would not like what I found. I did not. Took us two eights to find their camp. They must have been ranging further and further afield as well. It was a large operation with several hundred Hu, most slaves, beaten by whips by overseers. I recognized a few of the people from the village. This was after my Ma and brother were already dead. I no longer had much allegiance to these people other than the moral thoughts that this was not right.

We can avenge their loss if you wish Ali, Fluffy told me. I asked how and a plan was made. The only problem was the village people would see Fluffy for what it was. There was no way to avoid this unless we killed them as well. I did not want to do this of course. The alternative was to move afterwards some distance away. And probably keep moving as word spread. I could live with that easier than killing the innocent.

Then a further complication. It seems Fluffy, though without gender does make more itself, but splitting into three. The weird thing was all three thought they were Fluffy and remembered all the interactions the original had had with me. Of course, they were now one third the size the original had become, and hungry, very hungry.

When we went in to attack the compound, we were four total. All trained warriors. The compound Hu had never seen a Fluffy before and how no idea how to fight it. That was definitely to our advantage. It did not take long before the roles were reversed and the slavers were now the enslaved. We told the former slaves to leave and never come back. They did not ask, but left at a run.

Once we were sure they were gone and no one was watching, the slavers were eaten by the now three Fluffies. I did not complain. They had killed my village, my entire family and raped me. They took my life away. I watched each one as it was slowly and painfully eaten one at a time. They could see what was coming and could do nothing about it. If someone tried to resist or escape it was my job to wound them so they could not leave, but not reduce the quality of the fresh meat. I was happy to do so.

Of course there were complaints about it not being right. I told them they had no right to drive us off the coastal towns to follow us and do what they did. There was a price to pay and we

were here to extract that price and ensure it would never happen to another village or people. Once everyone was gone I set fire to the compound and set the remaining animals free. Most would be eaten by wildlife, not that different than being eaten by Hu really. I did not care.

A day later the Fluffies were now nine. Once they finished off the remaining slavers they were twenty seven. I was now an army. An unstoppable army. We took it upon ourselves to be the enforcers that the sheriffs were supposed to be, but who were also forbidden to leave the coast. They had obeyed. It was us who kicked them out of our villages and this is what happened. So be it. There was a new sheriff in town.

We began by telling any villagers we found to return to the coast. Hu were not allowed this far inland. We hunted down and ate the slavers, killer, thieves and robbers.

The slavers after many, many loses figured out there was a weakness. Fluffies were extremely flammable. Toss a jar with lit alcohol at one and it went up like a torch. I will bury this journal once I write this last bit. Hopefully someone will find it and take up the fight to stop the slavers.

*Wow Hobbes. I guess we know now that the Spikes made it here, but at the same time it is hard to see them as the evil ones either.*

*The Cats did not make Spikes bombs just on their own space, but placed them throughout Hu space as well. It is what I would do to stop an enemy if I could.*

Nice thought.

## Earth Two - Frog Harbor

"Order, order please! Welcome back Calvin, and ah, Hobbes." He purrs and rubs against my leg. He just wants a treat.

*I know you can make your own treats you big baby. Sorry kitten.*

*Not the same.*

*There is no atomic level difference.*

*Not thing, thought. Stupid monkey.*

Sigh . . . I make him a treat.

They finally settle down.

"Okay, Lizat, report." I sigh, "And Princess too." They never contribute, but if you do not acknowledge them they growl. I make her a treat and toss it to her. Done in one.

Lizat stands, Princess lays down, more of a plop actually. A map of Hu space appears.

"These are the locations we have found Spikes so far." Shit, there must be fifty places. So far.

"None of these appear to be from spores. All of the centers came from single individuals. Who, then ate, divided, etc. We have informed sheriffs worldwide and they are fire bombing any they find. This infection appears to be under control, not gone, just under control. At least until more awaken." Lizat sits.

"Or the spores emerge." Puu says. Always the optimist.

"Or that of course. We have another incident with the Spikes that the rest of you need to know about. This could change everything. Calvin and Hobbes."

Calvin gets up, Hobbes does not move. *What no more treats?*

*Last one was stale. Poor kitty.*

"Did you know all the Hu up there have a horribly pale complexion? It is like walking among ghosts." That gets of chuckle. We are all different shades of course, even a few 'ghosts' are present. Oh no. Everyone in the room goes pale.

"Ha-ha," Calvin says. Everyone turns back to their preferred shade for this week.

"This is going to sound strange, but I think we are making a mistake. At least we should check it out." He holds up a battered dirty book of some sort.

"This is a journal. Written by a young fem Hu who befriended a Spikes, whom she called Fluffy." That gets a surprise. Spikes are not



fluffy at all.

"I found her burnt corpse and Hobbes found the journal buried by her before she died. It appears that she and the Fluffies, there was eighty one at the end, saved her people and countless others from roving bands of slavers. Her people were out of bounds, but really had no choice. The raiders who became the slavers, forced them off the coast to survive.

She found a single juvenile Spikes in her late teens. She was already a loner, a hunter, a resourceful Hu. She would have made an excellent TK actually." That gets some interest.

"It appears a Spikes can bond with a sen through a drop of blood. After that they are soft and fluffy to the one they are bonded with." I don't think the audience believes this at all.

"Once bonded they communicate with the sen using TP. Similar to a Cat actually. They only divide if given enough food to grow to a required size to divide. The three remember their bond and knowledge. This was how she was able to raise an army of eighty one at the end. They raided and set free all the slaves from seven slave compounds. That represents several hundred women and children. Unfortunately slavers tend to kill off the men immediately or soon thereafter through beatings and hard labor. This I learned by interviewing former slaves, now returned to the coast."

"But they eat Hu. We have witnesses that have seen them."

"Cats will eat a dead Hu too, if they have to."

*Taste like pigs, yummy.*

"You are not helping Hobbes. In this case they only ate the slavers. I am not saying it was nice, or even right, but she had no jails or guards. They could not go free either. They killed her family and most of her village and other villages earlier. We were not there to help her. She was totally on her own. As I said, she is dead and buried now. Whatever justice you think she deserves has been done. I personally think she was a hero."

"What exactly are you saying Calvin? Spikes are our friends?"

"The Cats treated the Spikes as prey, albeit a very dangerous prey, but never as a possible friend or even sen. I am saying they are sen and they can become friends. At least the young ones." Shock runs through the group. I smile. Good job Calvin. Would not have thought you would get it, but I am glad someone has.

Puu comments, "We still don't know where they came from even or who compromised our security and snuck one in. Whoever they

were certainly knew enough about them to see them as dangerous at least." Oh Puu, always look on the dark side. I think you spend too much time with Cat dear.

"Wait, you said young ones. As in not adult or even recently divided. That means they did spore, at least once. Do we know how far a single spore event can spread. Look at the map. Is this the result of a single event? Is this what we have to look forward to when the rest go off?"

Cat comments, "Each adult that spores could potentially release millions of spores. Most die right away, but even if only one percent make it to a surface they can eat that is still way more than fifty."

"Possible there are creatures who can eat them we do not know about. We live in a creature eat creature world. Even if they do not actually succeed in consuming one, if they just kill it, that might be enough to reduce the population another 99%. That actually could bring us to the required fifty who were able to 'grow up' so to speak."

"Okay, let's assume this is the result of a single spore event. It is cold up where this happened, at least in the winter. That could also help explain part of it. If they are exotherms they would be easy prey for an endotherm during the winter months. They are organic at least."

"And adapted to Cat DNA and local food sources. So Earth Two adapted. Should be edible if they did not learn about toxins."

I stand, "Please, Calvin is not done. Let's let him finish." Calvin looks at me like he has no idea what I am talking about. I look at his pack.

He sighs, "You may want to stand back. I would put limiters on everyone here if I thought it would mean anything as most of you know ways around them. Still, please stand back and do not freak out. It is okay."

I sigh, "I think you have sufficiently freaked everyone out Calvin. Get to it."

"Right. Remember, we are still on Earth Two, in a safe place, with a lot of high TKs present. Please do not kill it before I present my new friend."

"You can come out now Survivor." Interesting name.

The bag he is holding rustles and slowly a small Spikes comes out to rest on top of the bag. I was right.

"The fact none of you sensed it means just what you think, their ability to hide is really good."

"Where did you find it?"

"Survivor, it's name is Survivor."

"Where did you find Survivor?"

He goes up to the map and makes a new mark at the edge of where the others were found. He adds in a different color five more marks.

"Survivor is red. The others are in blue. Yeah, you missed some. You still won't find them either. They are good. Because I am bonded to Survivor and Survivor is to me, it gives me extra abilities no one else in this room has." Pause, excellent, let that sink in. To rub it in, he pets Survivor. It certainly appears to be soft. Not that I am going to try and I am the friendly one.

One of the Meeps goes up to it, then phases through it. It does not react. That is good, it means it cannot DS yet or it would know. The rest of the room looks like they will jump through the roof any second. The Meep comes back to me.

"Everyone can relax. It is safe. I want five volunteers right now."

Lizat and Mouse step forward. Of course. Sweet Pea steps forward. Keki does as well. The whole team is on board supporting their own. Wish we had more than one non-Hu sen.

"Mouse, would you mind sitting this one out. I would like to try an experiment too." One of my Meeps comes forward.

"Okay Calvin, bring them in." He can DS from this distance. Sure enough the five appear.

"These five have not bonded. They will only bond with one and only one sen. Let them come up to you. It would help if you sat on the floor as they do not fly. Remember, they need to taste your blood. Do not over react please. They can get freaked out as well." That gets a nervous chuckle. No one wants to see one of us freaked out.

The four 3D life forms bond quickly, but try as it does, the Meep cannot illicit an interest. Instead it makes its way slowly through the others. Some hands even go out to offer an alternative. None accepted. It stops in front of sleepy George. George opens an eye and sniffs it, then extends a paw. Bonding complete. George does not even flinch. Good, we have three sen forms at least. It would have been interesting to see a Meep Spikes combination, but they do not have blood or DNA for that matter. Probably did not recognize it as sen. Many make that mistake.

Puu comes up to me, "I hope this works. Someone sent these to us to cause pain. I really hope this works."

"Poetic justice."

"Turn an enemy into a friend."

"They will try again. Somewhere we have a leak. They are watching us somehow."

"Yeah, but at what level? Certainly no one here. I am guessing Alexandria or Earth Two." I nod agreement. If Spikes got through, others have likely as well. This will be a pain, a real pain.

"You five, I want someone else with you at all times, even you George. If something goes wrong . . ."

"Mine is hungry," Sweet Pea says and the rest concur. George has already DSD a rat from outside and her Spikes is feasting. Great a Spikes with Cat logic and attitude. Hopefully it will sleep most of the time too.

The room is nearly empty, Cat comes in.

"Strange seeing you here Cat. When did you get in?"

"I was just outside in case something went wrong. Maybe no one else knew they were here. I did." She hands me a new Spikes sensor.

"This one works for now at least. Range is up to ten kilometers. We are slowly improving."

"Keep a lookout on them. Only, make this a secret. A secret backup."

"Someone, who they, the Spikes, don't know about." I nod. She leaves. I have a sensor in my hand. I press it and it goes red. They are still around.

Finally, the room is empty.

Then Silver walks in, gray robe and all. There is an embroidered silver owl over his heart. Nice touch. He sits.

"I assume you are here for a reason."

He sighs, "I have information. There is a secret project that Turtle and I have been working on. Pilot knows some of it as we needed transport for a large amount of life forms in stasis. So do some of the others."

"Go on."

"They are called the Tafa. I brought them to Farout before we were banished there ourselves. Six of them. The minimum for them to survive." Why am I not surprised they knew about Farout and how to get there and back even before the 'thn sent them there never to return. Stupid 'thn.

"When it was safe we rescued the Tafa from Farout and brought them to their home again. Pilot delivered the life forms and we

helped set them up again. They are hex life forms. Rare. We could not just let them die."

"You knew before the collapse it would happen and were ready to reseed their world." He nods.

"What caused the collapse?" I can guess.

"Spikes. They had developed space travel, the Spikes. At first everything went well. They helped and gave the Tafa tech it would have taken centuries for them to develop."

"Then?"

"There was a war on the Spikes home world. Bio-warfare was used."

"Refuges came to Tafa to escape the plagues." He nods.

"It morphed them. The Spikes. They brought it with them of course. The last ship was unloaded before anyone knew what had happened. The Spikes as we know them are the morphed form. They lost everything. Their home world is back to pre-tech and not likely to return. I would even classify it as brown now. We did not get there in time to save them, but we could save the Tafa."

"What do we have then, our Spikes I mean?"

"They change and adapt to the life forms they come in contact with. The more contacts the more they learn. Unfortunately the Cats were not the best choice, but they begged us for a better 'prey' as their kits were getting lazy. Spikes did well in Kung Fu training, so Marie suggest it. It was a fem Hu at the time. The original form in stasis and still is."

I raise an eyebrow, "Just the kits are lazy?" He smiles.

I have to ask, "Did you bring the Spikes to Alexandria?"

He looks sad, "No, I wish I did, then we would know, but no, we did not bring it to Alexandria. We do not know who did. Clearly not Flor or the Ku."

"And ideas"

"The rest of the Farout crowd treated the Tafa as servants. Never allowed them above TK6 to keep them in line. For four thousand years."

"They probably were not happy when you removed them from Farout, when you and Turtle escaped without helping them." He nods.

"They are not nice people. It changed them and not in a good way. They became what the 'thn wanted them to be."

"High tech bullies." He nods.

"And I brought them back. That was a huge mistake, but we felt we owed them another chance."

"Then the attack at the scrubbers proved you were right all along. Where are they now?"

"The Cets are still on the world we found for them and are likely to stay. It is a good fit for them. All the other sen are gone. We know two went to the Regional Center. We don't know why."

"The same Regional Center that is pissed about what we did to the 'thn." He sighs and nods.

"Keeps getting better. You think they sent the Spikes to us?"

He shrugs, "Maybe. No evidence of course. There won't be any. Some of them have been sen for millions of years. We may seem impressive. We do things no one should be able to do. That builds resentment too."

"We did not share our knowledge. Who gave us the right?"

"Precisely."

"Between a lion and a bear." He smiles.

"We say between a rock and a hard place, but the meaning is the same. I am afraid so. You did good today, but not surprising."

"I could make friends with a stone."

"Why did you not volunteer?"

"They don't like or at least do not see the Meeps. I suspected this. I am largely Meep now myself. A lot of advantages, but I cannot pretend to be Hu any longer either."

"I'm glad you didn't."

"You need me to watch the watchers."

"There are always side effects." I sigh and nod agreement.

"One final thing. We need a kill switch, just in case." I nod. Even I can see the logic in that.

"I have a question. How loyal are they to their bond mate?"

"All the way. I mean ALL the way. I would not recommend threatening any of them from this point forward."

"Someone will at some point, even as just a joke. I will pass the word to stop the usual high jinks when they are present. Do you think it was wise for George to be one of the five?"

"I do not understand why it never happened in Cat Land actually. George and Killer are well bonded."

"The Cats with us have learned the value of cooperative behavior. Not something normal or instinctual for most Cats, but that is why they were chosen was it not?"

"Indeed. They were not going to make it in Cat Land."

I laugh, "I imagine not. I can hear the insults now, 'are you part dog or something' " Silver smiles.

"I just remembered, the sporophytes can live in seawater forever. It is only when they are cleaned of the salt and dried that they burst and send the spores out. Tafa could still be in trouble."

"It has been nearly four thousand years Myra. And yes, we did scan for them as well. No evidence there are any more on Tafa."

"Would you mind if the Meeps and I checked to be sure."

"Here are the coordinates. Please do. Long suspected you could see them better than the others."

"No idea of how to make a tech out of it though. Cat has done the best she can with what I can show her, but it is not the same as actually being Meep based."

"Got it." He pops out. Now I am alone, but for how long. Looks like we are going on a trip kids. They gather around me. They love field trips.

# Field Trip

"In orbit around Tafa. The Six have been told we are here. Waiting for approval to come to the surface."

"Only fair, they were not expecting us. Brief me on their social protocols so I don't embarrass myself completely." Pilot smiles. With thirty six Meeps I do tend to stand out.

Pilot makes the necessary extra arms. I confer with the Meeps and we come up with a novel arrangement.

"Shouldn't we be six?" Pilot smiles and four of the crew, all different sen forms step up, extra arms ready. This was a set up.

"Good to know you did your pre-trip study."

"Am I going to be having 'fun' like this the entire trip?"

"You are the new one here, a certain amount of teasing is customary."

"You do realize I could have come here without a ship in far less time?"

"Of course, but where would be the fun in that? Besides best to come in prepared." Okay, I stand chastised.

She continues, "We cannot be sure you would not be alone. This entire situation stinks bad."

"I agree. Best not to come to conclusions too quickly. Things are not as they always appear."

It is nearly an eighth before we are invited down. We DS to the appointed location. It is a carefully cultured garden that appears random, but underneath is a hex pattern. True to form then. Most Hu space is based on four corners, matching our four appendages I guess. They have done well. We sit and admire their work as any true polite sen should. I really did read the library material Edwin had accumulated on them. Wish he was here too, but maybe too much for the Tafa as they have never seen a 'thant before. I wonder why not? I thought the 'thants were on all sen worlds.

Pilot nudges me. They are arriving. We stand and do a proper Tafa bow at the right time. They return the bow. We sit. Food it brought out by one. An engine room Ku is served first. There was no Ku last time. He is all black and has gotten the Hu nickname of Crow for obvious reasons. He seems to like it, so he is stuck with it. I am sure the Tafa are curious, but too polite to ask. I wonder what his story is though to be served first. I am served last, then the server also sits



next to a plain bowl. *They figured out I am leading this mission.*

*Come on, with thirty six rainbow Meeps forming your arms it was not obvious?* Pilot of course. She is definitely having fun. I may have to spend more time with her.

Formalities over I am allowed to present my story. I explain the Meeps and their part in furthering our knowledge. How it was through them that the Way Back device was conceived. They bow to us in appreciation.

&We came to inform you that there may still be viable Terror here on Tafa. We have found they can form a sporophyte that is resistant to seawater. If this sporophyte is rinsed in freshwater, from say a storm, and allowed to dry, it will break apart and release millions of one millimeter spores. Most of the spores will die or be eaten by local life forms, but enough can survive to reinfect the land.&

&Apologies for your hard work, but we know of this and have removed them some time ago. We appreciate your concern for us and willingness to come all this way to inform us.&

&Excellent news. We should have consulted you earlier. A world important to us has been infected. Fortunately we are watching it and hope to have it under control soon.& I do not tell them about the 'friend' bonds we are experimenting with. I want more knowledge before presenting that to a sen that suffered so much.&

&Much can be gained from shared knowledge.& Ouch, yeah, stupid monkeys.

Pilot indicates she wishes to speak.

&Do you know where your space port was located? We would like to visit this location.&

&We would be happy to show you. We are developing it again and hope to be visiting our neighbors soon.& I hope they did not destroy all the evidence we need to see.

We are all loaded onto TK powered carts. Three of us and three of them in each cart. Pilot and I take separate carts, as does their #1 and #2. I am with their #2. S/he is fascinated by the Meeps as expected, but tries not to appear rude.

&Would you like to meet one?& I ask.

&Is that possible?&

&Of course, there are enough for all three of you to each meet one. They are very friendly and definitely sen.&

&Please.& A bit rude for a Tafa, but I smile and three Meeps PS over the nervous system of the three. I am sure they are just as curi-

ous about the Tafa. They are there for only a moment before returning to me.

*Most interesting. We will relate what we learned later.* Meeps are learning to be polite too. Oh, the first couple of years were intense in that regard. They got into everything and everyone. They were particularly fascinated by sex, which their kind do not have, to the embarrassment of the participants unfortunately. At least these Tafa were all TK6 and had some experience in DS space. I remember my first time with the Meep mother, though that term does not really work. I have never looked back.

We reach the new space port. A lot of activity. We pass through and continue on to an area with almost no one present. Here we find ruins of sorts. Good, they did not destroy and build in top of the old like Hu usually do. In the center is a garden, which we enter after leaving the carts. In the center of this are statues of creatures I recognize as the Aaaha and Hggy from the reports brought back.

We pause and offer respect.

We proceed on 'foot' further in and come to a ship of some sort, or rather what is left of one.

&This is all that is left of the remaining planetary ship we found some distance away. Though there was a port here, all of the materials have been repurposed of course.&

#2 adds, &Normally a ship of this design is not brought to the surface. Our best guess is the occupants brought it down after the Terror hit and we could no longer supply them with food and other materials.& Makes sense. We would have likely done the same.

All six of us are scanning it like crazy.

&May I do a Way Back recording of this ship?&

&Please do, we would be equally curious as to its fate.&

I do not need the small spheres they saw us use last time. The Meeps themselves assume position around the ship and a moment later come back to me.

&This recording is of just the ship and none of its surroundings. This gets around the problem of it not always having been in this location. We do not need to go to the ship this time either. Please make a space as large as the ship for the projection to occur.&

There is enough space near the ship, which makes it easier. The Meeps set themselves up again. We watch as the ship is made, take first flight, does a variety missions to nearby worlds. We slow it down at the end so we can see the last moments. The crew contains

all three sen when it lands for the last time. It has clearly seen some wear in its long life. Parts have been replaced, scratches on the surface, burn marks from who knows what. I will need to replay the recording slower later.

The crew slowly emerge. We cannot see what they see, but it is clearly disturbing from their reactions. Some even have weapons of some sort. The Aaaha and Hggy crew also come out. Almost immediately they collapse in obvious pain and suffer enormous contortions. This upsets the Tafa crew of course, but there is no obvious cause and it does not appear to affect them. It scares them enough that they quickly leave their servants suffering to save themselves and are quickly out of the field of view.

&Please stop the playback, this is deeply shameful to us. Until the six were brought back to Tafa we had no idea how badly we had treated fellow sen. It is very disturbing to witness this behavior.& I save the rest for our own viewing aboard the Mother Ship.

&We share in your shame. Two of our own rescued the six and kept them out of harms way while your world was destroyed. They did not arrive in time to rescue the Aaaha and Hggy home worlds though.&

&You are mistaken. This is their home world. This is where they came to be.&

I bow deeply, &Our misunderstanding. Would it be possible to learn of your history to correct our errors?& This should be interesting as I already know it is they who are mistaken. Ah myths and legends.

*There were star charts on board the ship. We need to examine them. Pilot of course.*

*Later, right now we need to be polite and listen. Be quiet, but feel free to scan the wreck for any clues remaining as well.*

It takes eight of their days to relate all that they know. Of course things get fuzzier and less believable the further back in time you go. It is amazing that they were able to piece this much back together from the memories of the six and digs in the ruins of learning centers and memorials. The important point is they believe the Aaaha and Hggy were always here and evolved along side them. That is interesting in and of itself as these two sen are nothing like anything else in our catalogs of Tafa life. How do they explain that? They have given us only a mystic explanation that does not satisfy.

There was an entire Tafa day on just the Terror alone. They cer-

tainly suffered a lot. They also glossed over the treatment of the Aaaha and Hggy which we already know they were ashamed of. Hu have done the same so many times themselves. I cannot judge them for this oversight. One thing we did learn was that the Terror seemed to preferentially attack the Aaaha and Hggy and only after they were all gone did they go after the Tafa, who without their servants, were more or less helpless. Many just starved for the same reason.

It always amuses me how 'masters' think they know everything and the 'slaves' are only their for convenience and not necessity. I guess they have to justify their crimes to themselves first.

We finally make it back to the ship after lengthy good bye ceremonies and such. We promised to come back and praised them on their obvious progress. They voiced the desire to be space fairing again soon. We agreed to take six space students, all TK6, on for training, with conditions they agreed to.

The six of us, who went planet side, sit at a table with other interested ship crew watching on from the side or on coms. There are no secrets on the ship I am glad to see. There is no one below a TK6 either. Seemed only fair. I applaud Pilot's decision to make that happen.

"The six Tafa are getting oriented. They do not have voice boxes of any kind so we imprinted Ceph on them which a third of the crew know at least. We added a Ceph line to the bottom of vids so they are not left out. Their biggest problem is going to be absolute total culture shock. Ships are different even than 'civilized' areas. Polite is not part of any vocabulary. They will need to get over being offended at every encounter. I do not envy them, even for the adventure. And yes, they are watching this." Humor spreads in the room.

I stand, "Be nice people. We want to keep them as friends. Last thing we need is more enemies." Mummers of agreement. That should have been obvious, but ship crews are another breed and need to be reminded.

"Pilot, if you please." Ostensibly I am lead on this mission, but I know she knows more than I do about how it all works. It is the ship's crew we are addressing, not just the scientists.

"This is all preliminary of course. Subject to change and all that."

A Way Back projection comes up in the center of the table, scaled to fit of course.

"This is the section we did not show on Tafa. Are our Tafa visitors watching?" Crow nods.

"Proceed." The AuC projector starts with the Aaaha and Hggy

coming out of the ship. The Tafa run ahead of them when they see them in distress. Moans from those present.

The projection stops, "We do not know the backstory. Please reserve judgment until the facts are in. We should know soon enough. Proceed."

The Tafa are gone and the Aaaha and Hggy are rolling on the ground, and morphing. It is like they are being turned inside out. The shape is forming.

"They became the Terror! No wonder the Tafa were running from them!" Someone shouts. Of course I had already seen the entire thing. I do not like surprises.

"We believe they turned every Aaaha and Hggy on the planet to Terror creatures. This is why they were able to spread so quickly and have intimate knowledge of their surroundings. May we have the engineers report." Pilot sits and the Ku engineer Crow stands.

"From the Way Back recording and a careful examination of the ship ruins we now know a few things. The ship was not made on Tafa. Repeat, this was not a Tafa ship. The Tafa who disembarked from the ship were refugees being returned to their home world. The crew were Aaaha and Hggy, not Tafa. It was their ship, their design, their factories that made it. DO NOT take this out on our Tafa visitors. None of the Tafa were aware of this. They are as shocked as we are." He sits. Especially when it gets back to Tafa. The Aaaha and Hggy were not Tafa slaves, the Tafa were their pets. Let that sink in.

I stand, "First, this means the Tafa were not the intended target, but collateral damage. If that refugee ship had not landed, everyone on Tafa would have been fine. Second, we were able to decipher the star charts on the wreck and in the Way Back recording. A star on the charts matches what we were given as the home world for the Aaaha and Hggy by Silver. Third, the Aaaha and Hggy are not related. They did not come from the same home world. The DNA fragments we found prove this."

A Ba stands, "You know me as the moral officer. I hereby appoint all of you as deputies. The Tafa are in a state of shock and are presently in their stress reducing link state. They will be fine. Linking allows them to adapt to new information. This will take some time. DO NOT disturb them in anyway. Let them come out when they are ready. They are very flexible, they will adapt. Give them space to do so. You can help by answering any questions they have, truthfully. Do not tease, do not deceive, even for fun. They are not like any of

us."

Ku Crow stands, "Without giving away any tech secrets just yet. They know TK, but are new to TK tech, at least our tech. All of our sen have had accidents with same. We don't want to kill off our Tafa friends on their first field trip. All will be revealed when they are ready and have the understanding to back it up. This also means do not share library access with them. They have access, but to the safe areas to start. This is not a shame to them or their culture. I have labeled a file call TK mistakes on the server. If they bug you for too much for information, give them that file. That should sober them up." He waves his arm around, "We are sitting on a bomb here that could take out an entire sector. I for one want to survive this trip." He gets applause.

Pilot stands, "We are taking this nice and slow. It will give us time to go over what we have again and do long range scans via the Meeps as to what to expect when we arrive. NO ONE fluidic will be going to the surface. The infection is likely still rampant down there. Our companions, buddies, Meeps and special protector probes will be going, linked to us at all times, including the Tafa. There was a high tech culture down there. Some of the designs we can probably use ourselves. But, the main reason is to determine what happened. All that comes back to the ship will be quarantined and heat processed. No chance it gets on board. Or worse, back to our home worlds. Get some rest, prepare. Countdown clock will be displayed on your coms. Dismissed."

I come up to Pilot, "The Tafa should be issued buddies at least. They have a right to see what is down there too. It is different direct- ing observations and not just watching on a screen."

"If they come out of link in time. I have heard of this taking eight days or more in extreme cases."

"I suspect it will be sooner. They were chosen for their flexibility. The Tafa are not stupid. They can link thousands together to solve problems. I am sure these are the best of the best."

"And they do not want to be caught short ever again. I suspect that means they are willing to steal tech or ideas from others if that satisfies their need. A desperate culture does desperate things."

"That is why we are including them on all command meetings like this one and they are recorded. They learn what we learn, when we learn it. Once they understand we are not keeping secrets about the Terror they will come to trust us in time. You participated in link ses-

sions, what was it like?"

"Sort of like the Meeps, mind expanding. I likely gave away more than I intended in those sessions. Another reason we need to watch them carefully, but not obviously. The Terror made them paranoid for good reason."

"I agree. The Meeps are already in place. We should be there in a few eighths."

"Hey, it is my job to know when we get there." She is smiling though.

"There is something else you should know. One of the six was at Farout. I linked with them during the revival trip. They all look alike on the outside, but I recognize one."

"Good to know and it makes sense they would send someone who knows Standard and more about us. We also need a name for our destination. And, no not some random number. I agree this is likely not their home world. I would really like to find their home world if we can. Maybe, just maybe, they would be willing to restart their conversation with the Tafa. Having one of the six with us could actually help. Who else could likely be able to com with them?"

"That would be grand. You really think far ahead." "

"I try to. Overly optimistic is what I would call it. We still don't know who set the Terror on them in the first place. I just hope it was this only outpost of theirs and not their home worlds too. This is clearly genocide at the world level. I don't care if it was a territory dispute or an offended ego. There is never a justification for this."

"Unless they be 'thn."

"They are still alive. There are several of us who can awaken them instantly if we have to. That is actually likely from my point of view. Many did not approve of what we did. If we wake them up, that shows were are not killers."

"More of a pause button." I nod agreement. I just hope it will be seen that way. I suspect there is a lot more to this story though. Puu and Cat gave me my initial training, but I am likely to trust Silver and Turtle who have way more experience.

# Stepping Stone

"The Meeps return. I have heard their report. There is no functioning tech and almost no living things on land or sea. Silver told me it was functionally a brown world. The Meeps have confirmed this diagnosis. We still can't take the chance of going down there as fluidics. Only solidics are allowed and they will be decontaminated on return. Let's get ready. Are the Tafa out?"

"Yes and they each have a buddy, except for their leader. I issued her a companion. Ta knows we know now. No secrets. I welcomed Ta again and assured Ta of information exchange."

"Pilot this is your show now." I nod to her. She starts issuing commands and everyone moves. I review again what the Meeps have brought back. At least there should be no surprises. There was no TK activity, active or passive, found. The Meeps are going to have to go elsewhere for their parasite meal. It won't starve them, just slow down their growth.

We arrive in orbit. Show time. The Tafa are with us this time at least. They are mixed in with everyone else. A very good sign. The Tafa have recording devices and excited about their new friends and I think for being accepted as part of the team, not just watchers. The weird thing is when they bonded with their five buddies and one companion, they bonded with each other too. Now the twelve are linked together even when they are not in physical contact. This sent the Tafa over the moon with excitement. I am afraid we will be making a lot more buddies when we return. Hope we do not create a world intelligence. They could eclipse us all in a generation.

"Solidics away. Telemetry coming in." The Meeps have gone back down as well, even though they really do not need to. I think they like being around the solidics. They are more rational."

A few eighths later.

"Okay, this is a summary of what we know. Initial reports from Silver, Turtle and recently the Meeps are confirmed. We have a brown world. Simple algae at sea and lichens, mosses and fungi on land. Nothing more complex. This also tells us they were not plantimals. As only one in fifty earth froths are plantimal, it may be the same for them."

I stand, "Excuse me, I have a weird idea. We know they had DS capability, at least the Tafa do, so likely they did as well. I would like



the send the Meeps up and down stream from this froth world."

"Excellent, make it so. We certainly have made use of that strategy, they may have also." I send the Meeps off. They will be alone for a bit, but it won't take them long. Who knows, they may even find some food. I am under no illusion that the Tafa, Aaaha and Hggy are of the same froth though. This world is a hundred and forty eight light years from the Tafa world.

"There are ruins. Stone, concrete like matrix and some metal that has not corroded in 4K earth froth years. Here is one of the most interesting." A view of a desolate area appears and them zooms in. Buildings that have fallen down. We enter some of them to see how they were structured.

"Definitely not Tafa. These are all quad, not hex. Tafa please feel free to comment. Have you seen structures like this before?"

They respond in Ceph so more can follow.

~We concur. We had some of these structures on Tafa before the Terror for the Aaaha and Hggy to live in. They are not functional for Tafa.~

"Building entrances are all circular, not rectangular as with Hu and Ku, more like the Ba in this regard. But they seem to reach the ground, though it is hard to tell with erosion and movement of soil that has likely occurred. We have found no Tafa structures. This would suggest that if the Tafa visited here, it was temporary. At least over most of the world."

"We have found the main space port and their appears to be only one. We have found 'thn portals set up there, but they have all been destroyed. This may have been an attempt to slow the Terror. Clearly did not stop it."

The Meeps come back and report. I stand.

"The Meeps tell me that for five froths either side of this world they look just like this one minus any evidence of ruins or other advanced structures. Just lichen, mosses and fungi. This world was not part of an evolutionary tree like our froth. Interestingly, the Tafa world is similar. Best guess is both the Tafa world and this one were what the Hu call terraformed. Take a world that can be brought up to a livable condition and move in."

~You are saying we are not native to Tafa? We did not evolve there?~

"That is likely the case. Obviously this needs much more study. You have an old culture, way older than most of us. We may never

find your home world."

~But our ecology is so perfect.~

"Much better than any of our worlds. We will be hiring you to assist us when this is over, count on it. If you can take a brown world and do what you did, you are geniuses." That gets some laughs. Can Tafa get fat head syndrome?

It is interesting seeing the Tafa scrip on the base of the monitors. It is a simplified version of their shown language. Logical.

"Settle down. Engineer Crow."

"There are a lot more of the ships like we found on Tafa of varying sizes. There are also some still in orbit and a few on their tiny moon. There is one on their moon where the inhabitants did not turn to Terror, but it appears they ran out of supplies and died. We all know a TK6 can survive practically forever and even get away without a ship, so this was surprising to us. DNA from these much better preserved remains confirms the Aaaha and Hggy are from two different worlds. I will let our biologist Lena tell us more in a moment."

He ruffles his feathers and continues, "The ships on the world have shown the weathering and damage one might expect. The ones in orbit and the moon could be flown today if we could figure out their controls. There we are completely frozen. There is a small one that is completely empty. I propose we take it back after decom to study. That is our best chance to understand their tech."

I stand, "Just a crazy idea, but based on what you just said, is there any possibility the Aaaha and Hggy did not have TK, at least not above say three or four and depended on the Tafa for this work?"

"I will let Lena provide a guess on that. We have found intact star charts." The monitor changes.

"This is Tafa and this is our current world which we are now calling Stepping Stone and here are the other worlds on their chart." Several hundred come up. You can hear the air being sucked out of the room.

"Our Tafa friends have helped us translate their markings. Understand, they are all in the same froth. No DS required. Needless to say this makes understanding their tech a priority. They had FTL without DS. We know of no one, even at the Regional Galactic Center who were capable of this."

&What is the total distance from the farthest to the closest?&  
Good question. I get no sense of scale on this chart, even in 3D.

Crow watches the screen for the translation, then answers.

"We do not know how you measure large distances. In our froth the map covers about thirty parsecs or one hundred light years. From Tafa to the earth froths is about ten thousand light years, give or take."

&How long did it take for you to get to Tafa?&

Pilot stands, "We went slow this time to give time for training and system checkouts, but a few days in our unit of time. You have experienced our time on this ship in our day night cycles."

&How fast could you achieve this trip?&

Pilot asks me to stand.

"I could bring you to my earth in the time it took for you to take a breath." I pause, "Without a ship." Let that sink in. Actually much faster, they breathe rather slow.

*I think you froze the Tafa Myra. Quit showing off.*

*They had a right to know who we are.*

I continued, "We however do not know the tech that you and your friends used and hope to learn from it. There are very few of us who can travel this quickly. It would not be safe even to teach more sen. The tech below could be of benefit to your world and many others. It is good work and worthy of praise." I do a Tafa bow. They instinctively return the bow.

The Meeps have brought the ship on board. In the second sealed hull. Limiter safeguards are in place. No fluidic can enter.

Lena rises, using TK. Ceph are a bit short for a room designed for other sen.

~I am Lena as you might have guessed. The Tafa, Aaaha and Hggy are of three different worlds. DNA is radically different and there is no way they evolved on the same world or even the same froth.~ Everyone is excited about that. We are all of the same froth and similar DNA.

~It is DNA, but with six bases, not our usual four. Similar to the Tridons, but not the same. Tafa Ta, were you able to eat the same food as your friends?~

Ta rises high enough to be seen, ~With some exceptions, more likely because of nutrition and taste preferences, yes, we were able to eat the same food. You were as well. I do not understand the implications.~

~Most unexpected. We will be studying that relationship as well. IF we find a living Aaaha and or Hggy world we will of course be able to learn more. Understanding how this was done could help us

invite others from our area of the Galaxy to participate, though because of treaty we could not visit them in terms of permanent settlement. To be honest we are taking a risk here now, but we are trying to return the Tafa to a functional state, to correct a wrong that was done to them. The ones who shared food with you were all high TK and could process liquid fire if you fed them that.~ A few laughs and offers of fire soup went around. Ha-ha. I can see the teasing going on for some time now.

"Thanks, I think I will be making my own food from now on."

More laughs. Ta hands me, ~I don't understand?~

*Our cultures like to tease each other. This habit can ultimately be traced to a fear of death. Even though that is less likely with those present here, it is still possible and culturally goes back a very long time.*

~Thank you. We also tease each other, but in a different way. We will need to com to compare methods of teasing.~ Oh shit, what box have I opened.

Pilot stands again, "As much as I would like to hang out here forever, I know how restless sailors get. Do we have a likely location for a living world?"

I rise, "One more thing. The Meese ran a Way Back on the main space port. We need to see this."

"Proceed of course."

The Meese arrange themselves and the projection begins.

"We have pinpointed the time of the initial infection. It happens quick. One pass and we will play it back more slowly. This begins in normal temporal framework."

We see the space port as it was on a normal day. There are ships leaving and landing. Lots of sen moving about. We see three Tafa walking towards a ship, presumably to be passengers. Hggy are escorting them. There are other Tafa about, but do not appear to be involved in any transport. They likely had an embassy here if they did that sort of thing.

~Stop please. We recognize the three as the three that appeared on the projection played on Tafa.~

I sign, ~Excellent. Helps a lot in our understanding. Now watch closely. I will slow the time replay slowed down eight fold.~

I am handed, ~You know Ceph?~

I hand back, &And Tafa as well.& There is a slight shudder. Right, we know what you share visually, but obviously not during a

link or with a buddy.

We watch the Tafa slowly approach the waiting ship. Not in a hurry, this is a routine flight. When they are nearly inside there is a flash of something small that explodes with a white light. Not compressive, something else. Nothing moves as a result. The door to the ship closes. It is likely no one even noticed or dismissed it quickly seeing no effect.

Then all hell breaks loose. In an expanding circle all of those present with the exception of the Tafa morph into Terror creatures. The ship containing the Tafa takes off and is out of frame.

~Please slow down more.~ Lena is watching closely.

I do so. There are really no limits to how slow I can do this. But I lose integrity as things get what I call grainier. It is not an exact copy as you can guess.

An ellipse with sharp ends comes into view and then dissolves. The entire structure is gone.

Crow stands, "This needs to go back to our ruling council ASAP. Can the Meeps do this? I want no chance it is stolen or destroyed before they see it. That was a Farout missile from its design." It does appear to match the one launched at Earth Two when it was destroyed along with the ship itself.

"This would certainly explain why the 'thn banished the Farout sen to well, Farout. This is genocide."

I rise, "That could explain it. However, in Hu culture we have a long history of pretending to be someone else when we attack an enemy. This could easily have been faked by a Regional Culture, millions of years older and more skilled than us, made to appear to be of Earth Froth origin. Missiles by design limitations are going to be similar. There are many possible motives for such an act. Jealousy of the rising influence of the Earth Froth upstarts would have been enough. To the best of our records no Earth Froth individual has ever been to the two worlds we just visited before the time of the attack and therefore have no reason for an attack."

"What about Silver and Turtle? They were here at the time."

"They arrived after this attack and could not prevent it. They got to Tafa in time to rescue the six, one of whom is with us, but even we cannot be in two places at once." Well actually with Meep help, but that would be a distraction at the moment.

Crow turns to Ta, ~What was your role on Tafa before you were taken to Farout?~ Good question.

~We were what you would call ecologists. Leaders in keeping our world ecology functional. This might explain why the six of us were chosen to be saved as well.~ Certainly does.

I continue, "Don't forget New Hope. There was only one innocent TK present at the time and no reason to destroy that world other than a hate of us. I am afraid there are dark forces about."

&You did not do this.&

*No, I swear no Earth Froth TK played any part in this cowardly attack.*

&How do you know for sure. Even we can hide information from each other in a link. You should also know that though we feel we were not treated well by the Hu commander, no one upon arriving at Farout seemed to know what we were. An enemy most certainly would.&

I stand, "Ta just told me that none of the Farout arrivals knew what a Tafa was. Why strike an enemy you do not know? I assure you, this will not fall away. We will investigate till the end of time to find who did this. You all know we have the means. If it was somehow the Farout group, we will avenge their misdeed. This time there will be no escape from where we send them." A cheer goes up. I explain what has happened, that the entire ship is behind what I have said. What have I gotten us into?

I look at the map of stars we can visit next. A lot of them.

Pilot comes up to me seeing me looking at the chart, "A lot of choices. I see two possibilities. They started from more or less the center and expanded more or less evenly outwards from there. Or, they followed a vein of gold, jumping from one good world to the next. It is likely only the outer ones needed to be terraformed as they got desperate for space."

"That could even mean their home world is already brown from mistakes made. Almost happened to us several times and in many incarnations."

"Do we need to find their home world or just one with living sen on it."

"The later. Living sen can tell the tale better than even countless runs of the Way Back machine. If they remember it correctly."

Pilot smiles, "Hu are not very good at that either. Look at all the creation myths and gods we invented."

"You have been reading the journals, yeah, Hu are really just stupid monkeys."

"Apes actually, but I doubt the Cats know or care about the difference."

I pick one half way from here to the center, "How about here?"

Pilot shrugs and leaves for the bridge. One is as good as another I guess.

## Next Step

"Nice and slow nav. Nice and slow. No surprises. We are not heavily armed and I would rather not end up as someone's dinner."

"Long range scans please." Myra tells her Meeps out loud. That is for our benefit of course. They pop out.

"What are our own inadequate sensors saying"

Crow answers, "Lots of EM activity on a wide spectral range. We have a tech culture. Definitely not natural by any known source." I love his accent. Reminds me of the old pirate stories I grew up with. Of course he played the parrot's part. Always thought the parrots were way smarter than the Hu. So predictable. "Arrrgh, walk the plank."

"Shields up. Let's not make an easy target at least."

The Meeps return and give Myra their report.

"Crow is right. Thousands of ships of all sizes. We have a live one for sure. Life forms on the ships match the Hggy only. No Aaaha present it would appear. Shall I send them planet side. Looks like most of the activity is centered around the fourth planet from their sun. White dwarf star, long lived, they are planning on being here a long time. Two other planets and several larger moons appear to be terraformed. Lots of artificial moons around everything. They are maxing out their time here for sure."

"Tafa?"

"Surprisingly, no Tafa have been found yet. At least these Hggy are alive. The Terror has not reached here, yet."

"This means they are not likely to be welcoming to unknown visitors of any kind. Froth report please."

Myra concentrates and then says, "Nothing on froths five out in any direction. Most unusual. The worlds are intact and low green. Perfect for colonization. Why are they over crowded here and nothing there?"

Crow speculates, "I have a theory. Their tech is impressive and I am curious as a soaring yaka bird to get into it. You said there were no Tafa present. Ta, what TK level are the Hggy or even the Aaaha as long as I brought this up."

~None are above TK3. They get all three levels at ah, maturity, I think you call it. The levels are molecular, atomic and quantum. Most unusual.~



~And the Tafa?~ Myra asks.

~This is privileged information of an intimate nature. I was TK 5 when I arrived at Farout and the gifts did not include any of the ones mentioned for the Hggy. This was a severe disadvantage for us as we were dependent on others for necessities.~

"That sucks." Someone says. I pop them off the bridge. Not a place to judge others. Bad enough they do so in the break room. Another pops in to take her place, without saying anything.

"I apologize for the insult."

Crow, "This would explain a lot. The Hggys at least, cannot DS the froth."

Myra comments, "And I believe the Tafa gave them another gift as well, ecology understanding. I would guess that most of those stars on the chart have dead colonies. They are stripping this one bare."

"The old slash and burn method. They are maxed out here. This location will be spent soon too."

"But why attack the one? What was so special about that star system. They were on only one planet around a star similar to our sun."

"I concur that Tafa was likely an accident. Otherwise the attack would have hit them directly and not by accident."

~We need to go to their main planet in a small ship and ask. We can all speak Hggy. Very similar to our written language, only more complex. We simplified it to be easier and faster to record.~

"In case anyone has not already noticed their written language is very similar to their visual showing with their arms." Yes, we noticed.

"The Hggy do not have six arms, so why a similar written form?"

"That is for the scholars to determine. Not our mission. Let's stay on task. I do not like bringing the Mother Ship into their nest. Move us one froth over Nav. Outfit the froth ship. They know the Tafa can DS, having the froth ship appear out of nowhere after four thousand years of absence could be explained away. It is unlikely they know what happened on Tafa."

I turn to Myra, "Is it possible for the Meeps to split up and determine how many of the stars between here and Tafa have sen present and what kind?" She nods and they pop out. I suspect very few. I really think the Hggy or Aaaha were the target. Starting to look more like the Aaaha right now. Why none in this system? Both were affected by the Terror. That they have a similar physiology might ex-

plain it. The Tafa are very different. I feel like I have seen their like before.

"Crow, how many of the ships were star ships, not just interplanetary ones?"

"On it. Reviewing the recordings."

Less than an eighth later Nav reports, "In orbit around the principle world, one froth over as ordered." I do my own scan. Low green with a lot of potential. You would think a higher green would be better, but you are wrong. If you want to establish your own ecology, you want a green world you can change to your liking. A high green means undoing a lot before that can happen. Better to not have any surprises. Low greens generally lack surprises. There may come a time soon when we need to do the same. If the Terror does ruin Earth Two or if any of our froths are out grown, or forbid the thought, both outgrown and Terror destroyed, we may have to do the same.

Myra comes up to me, "You should not be on the froth ship, but stay here. Move one more froth over. The Tafa will need to prove their worth, as in the old ways plus 4K years of advancement. We will pretend they are in charge and imply they had the froth ship made according to their tech knowledge."

"They do a demo by taking some Hggy on a ride to this froth."

"Even better, after doing so, they install a portal between the worlds to show good faith."

"Giving them the golden goose, is that wise?"

"Can we install portals between Tafa and here?"

"We could, but they would not be expected to know how. They are only sevens currently. A star portal would be very high TK. Doubt they have even imagined such a thing."

Crow says, "I don't think they have star ship capability at present. I have reviewed the recordings and am beginning to understand their tech. It is good, but in a rat's nest sort of patched together with pieces of clearly different tech."

"They are in real trouble. What about weapons?"

"Short range ballistics, plasma lasers and rail guns. Again this matches the rest. The three do not look like they belong together. I suspect in a real fight they would just as likely to blow themselves up. No nucs."

I turn to the three Tafa in the room. With each having a buddy now, they can be their comfortable six configuration in two separate areas. Their TP level is high enough to com across the ship as well.

&Even a TK7 can destroy the froth ship or a planet by taking a few chunks out of it. Can you be trusted to not attack them even if they attempt to attack you?&

They freeze. Shit, I was not trying to scare them.

&We need to link to remove the stain of such an evil thought from our minds. Please excuse us.& I am guessing they would not then. I hope not. Hu are in enough trouble without starting a war.

# Going In

The others are disguised as servants. This is apparently very easy because of the cloth covers they wear. We are not used to the concept of a disguise or of clothing. We pride ourselves as truth givers. These are entirely new concepts for us. If it were not for the fact that this is for our protection and not to achieve gain over another, we would not participate. It is clear from the discussions that all of our species can benefit from getting back together. We were better joined. This is a core Tafa belief.

We were given a brief lesson on how a star ship is commanded and we went through practice runs with some possible problems to work around. We like these kinds of exercises and could have done this for much time, but we were reminded why we are here. Sen who truly know how to operate the ship will be here the entire time. We will not be left alone. They are well shielded as well, so as to appear to be about TK2. Another deception. We do not hide our strength, as it would likely be important for another to know in an emergency. They said it is like a game. Another concept that confuses us.

At least Myra is here, though the beautiful Meeps are out of sight for now.

Myra TPs me, *Are you ready Ta?* Meaning all of us, not just myself. Another strange concept.

*We are ready. It would be wise to use our methods of conveying information or they may become what you call suspicious.* Her hair bits above her 'eyes' are elevated. We have come to learn this is a sign of surprise. It is good we can surprise this sen. We never discuss reproductive information, very private, so we are curious about the gender differences which are visible with a simple scan, and apparently color their language as well. I will not convey in this entry any information about the Tafa. That would be obscene to discuss.

All of our six on the 'bridge', not sure where this term comes from as it certainly does not resemble a bridge across a depth or body of water. Our buddies and one companion are hidden for the moment. Myra thinks they may be too high tech for the Hggy to comprehend just yet. We were instructed to 'keep it simple'.

Everything I sign is displayed on everyone's monitor, so even though not facing the six of us in the back they can understand our desires. We also 'redecorated' the ship to resemble how we would

want a ship to appear. We did not need to do much, we very much liked the ecology themed 'art work' but of course needed for all of them to be Tafa in appearance, this now being a Tafa ship in origin.

The crew invented a Tafa keyboard for the working crew servants to use so they would not have to stand to convey information. Anything typed will appear on all monitors with color designating the sen of origin. There appear to be only Hu and Tafa aboard. The rest are hidden for now. It will be hard enough to explain why the Hu are here without having to explain the other sen as well. Also Myra wants to know if the Hggy have ever seen a Hu before as most of the Farout group were Hu and would have been seen during an interaction with them. I reminded her (a gender word) that four thousand of their years was a long time for them, but not for us or the Hggy. She was worried that the language would have changed too much to be understood. I asked why this would happen and she retrieved her question. Strange creatures. Tafa has always been Tafa, Hggy has always been Hggy. Though we have had to add quite a few new words in the last period of time. Most annoying without consensus of the rest of the Tafa. It is embarrassing to be a point of new learning, bringing unwanted attention.

&Please proceed.& We are suddenly around a world same in size but with a lot of activity. There are lights below us and great number of ships and other constructs near us. We were careful to synchronize our orbit with what was already here using probes to determine locations.

&Now we must wait. Otherwise it would be seen as very rude. Best if the cooks are ready to serve.& Always start with food. A good strategy. It took some time to properly prepare acceptable Hggy dishes as of course no one here but us had ever had them and even for us a long time ago to remember in fine detail. I hope it will be acceptable. Myra sent a Meep down to the planet to scan and dupe some meals for us and we evaluated them for appropriateness for this purpose. They were as we remembered at least.

We do not know their communication protocols. That is what is going to make this potentially dangerous. Tafa were never in charge of ships. None of the six were ever on a Hggy or Aaha ship in fact. Even if we had been, we would have not been near any control surface.

Finally a small ship large enough to hold three Hggy comes up to investigate us.

*Please be at ease. We are six Tafa and servants from the Tafa star system. We are hoping we are not intruding on your space and hope to open communications. Please forgive us for our errors.*

Myra TPs me to go to the large window in the front near their ship so they can see us. I do so, giving the formal greeting with my arms.

I can see inside a portion of their small ship, but it is too small to see their visual body com. Finally one holds up a monitor to this window and Hggy text appears on the screen. I had forgotten how much extra effort was needed to make this form.

&May we come aboard your vessel?& We translate for the servants.

*Granted. Please stand by. We will effect transfer. Please secure your vessel from drift.* Myra reminded me of that one.

I nod to Myra and she effects transfer to a space cleared for them in this space. We will need more practice before we attempt this ourselves through vacuum space from one vessel to another. We have been told it is the same as between any two rooms. Unless one makes an error.

Three Hggy are in front of us, facing the six. Glad Myra understood that need.

&Welcome. It has been too long since we were able to be with our friends. Please forgive us for our errors.&

One of the three fastens two arms to its center area and tests them. Now we can com.

&This is your ship?& Rude. Must be low level workers.

&This is our ship.& Technically not a lie. Makes me feel uneasy though. It realizes its error and does a bow shame. We acknowledge and forgive with our own bow in unison. We need to remember they are not our servants and treat them with respect due any sen.

&How may we serve you?& The three do a servant bow. They remember. Not a surprise.

*We discussed this as a possibility.*

Linked to the others we all do a servants bow back to them. The other crew do the same.

&How we may serve you is the reason for our visit.&

They are clearly in the state of shock and confusion. This is not surprising.

&If you will indicate a good place for us to land planet side we will bring everyone to this location.&

More shocked looks.

Myra shows with TP a good location. An open space near a major city.

*Will this location suit our purpose? We promise not to harm the surface with our ships.*

&Ships?&

Myra shakes her head, meaning this is frustrating to her. Hu are used to immediate resolution of difficulties. We would normally wait till it was resolved, but we are on the surface already.

*This was too fast for them Myra.*

*Do you wish to return to orbit?*

*No please, that would be worse. They are going to think we are gods in the Hu sense.*

*You have been reading our history. Good. We are not gods. We make many errors. Blame it on us.*

&We apologize for acting without confirmation.& We bow in shame as does the crew as well. I cannot think of them as servants. Never again will I tolerate this thinking.

A door opens and we can see outside. Good to be in fresh air again, but it smells strange, damaged air. A ramp is lowered to just above the surface. When we leave the ship the Hggy look back and then under the ships. Theirs is still next to our much larger ship and both are suspended in the air.

&How here get you? There be no Tafa since before times.&

&We are not from this solar system. We are from Tafa as indicated.&

&Long travel, since last meet we?&

&No, it took less than one day night to come this far. We were going slow and careful as is normal for our kind.&

&Impossible.&

A Meep pops in, *I have found the Aaaha. The are still alive on a single planet thirty seven light years from here.*

The Hggy faint.

Myra comes up to me, &I am sorry for this error. Never should have happened. Too much too fast I am assuming.&

&Vehicles are speeding towards us. It does not look good they are lying down. They will assume we killed them.&

&Not a problem.& They suddenly wake up and slowly get up, fortunately before the vehicles arrive. We are all standing in a line when they stop in front of us. Unfortunately the minimal plant life below these new vehicles are damaged. There is so much damage on

this world. The air itself stinks of rot and pollution.

There are ballistic weapons pointed at us and confused looks from the security Hggy.

&You Tafa be, who others?&

&They are called Hu. They agreed to work with us in finding your world. There are no Aaaha or Hggy on Tafa any longer. We were hoping to renew our friendship.&

A Hggy responds, &This be true.& It points to their craft, &Orbit craft ours be.&

The guns are raised to point straight at us. Then they are gone. Even Tafa can do this.

&Please be at peace. No war.&

&We greatest space fleet. You lose.& The Hu are getting impatient. The security force gets back in their vehicles and leave in a hurry. Or start to. Vehicles stop. The Hggy are suddenly standing before us again confused.

&We prisoners? No give information.&

&That would be best. Watch instead.& I nod to Myra.

She goes in the ship and comes out with a nice wood box, sets it on the ground and opens it. No one can see inside. She pretends to make adjustments to what I scan as an empty box. A portal begins to take shape between us and the Hggy security force. Myra looks back and forth from her box pretending to make adjustments. I know she needs nothing in the box and I am not sure why she is doing this.

Once the portal is done, she closes the box and returns it to the ship. We already know how to activate a portal. I sense Myra watching from the ship.

&This device is connected to a parallel world to this one. On this world there are no sen, but it is a good world, a clean world. We leave this portal as a gift to show we mean no harm and only wish to help.& I go up to the portal and activate it. They can no longer see me. The portal is a single sen in width. I come around to their side.

&Come with me and I will show you this new world.& They can clearly see it through the portal. There is much life on the other side. Good air, no rotting polluted air comes through. I step through. Two Hu follow. We beckon the Hggy from the other side. None advance.

The Hu pick some of the plant live and scoop a bowl of soil and we come back through. They set these down before the Hggy.

&Trick must be. This device be wrong. No choice but destroy all here.& It activates some device it is carrying and we hear craft over-



head starting to come towards us.

*Time to go Ta. They do not understand, only fear.*

I go up to the portal, & This could have saved your dying world. Such a waste. & I collapse the portal and it disappears. We all go up the ramp just as the craft are getting close enough to fire upon us. Weapons were explained in orientation. The door closes and we disappear to high orbit. Their craft remains floating above the surface. There are explosions on the surface. All evidence of our visit is gone as are all witnesses.

Myra takes over, "Take us back to the Mother Ship if you will Nav." Their world of bad air, no life, and tech is gone from view.

& Hu were once like the Hggy. They would have destroyed their new world too. They have not learned yet. Maybe never. I am sorry. &

We dock with the Mother Ship. What is a mother? It is many times larger, maybe it just means the larger of the two. We proceed inside and are greeted by our buddies and companion. We retreat to our space and link. This was a very sad experience. Very sad. So much was wrong. Maybe Myra was correct. They could not have changed as we hoped they would.

We are more upset in that we hoped to make amends for making them our servants in the past. Now I see, we provided abilities they lacked. The whole was truly greater than the sum.

# Aaaha

I ask, "Are the Tafa still in their room?"

"Affirmative." I sigh. This part of the mission was a big disappointment for all of us. Reminded me so much of Hu history before the fall.

Crow comments, "We did get much better scans of their working tech while on the ground of Hggy or whatever they call their world. It is doubtful they will survive even a few more generations. We found a great deal of discarded tech. Mountains of it. They are salvaging what they can to keep it going but are losing knowledge and abilities to make new."

Lena gives her report, ~There were temples and religious ceremonies going on all over the world. I think they coincide with sunset and sunrise. They raise crops and livestock, but inefficiently using slave labor. Their ecosystem is nearly destroyed. There are an insufficient number of species to maintain life for much longer.~

"What about those living off planet? How are they surviving?"

~Vat farms. As Crow will concur, it looks much more cluttered than it really is. Most are dead hulks with smaller ships salvaging what they can. It is likely the ones we encountered were doing this as well.~

Myra comments, "They destroyed the plant life we retrieved from the froth twin when they destroyed the evidence of our visit."

I sigh, "Religious hierarchies do that. They want no competition for control, least of from all a freed populace."

"Recommendations everyone?"

+We might as well finish what we started. I recommend Aaaha. It certainly cannot be any worse than this.+

"Agreed." I have consensus.

I ask Myra quietly, "Did you do any Way Back recordings while you were there?"

"No reason, it was too obvious. It would have just depressed everyone even more. If some researcher is curious years from now, the process will still be available to look." I nod understanding, meaning after they are gone and can no longer complain about our presence.

"Set a course for Aaaha please Nav. Nice and slow, we all need time to recover."

"Aye, aye Captain."

"While we are in travel mode, let's talk about all this."

"The Terror or evidence of it has only been found on Stepping Stone and of course Tafa itself. It is possible that they simply did not set up shop so to speak on any other worlds. Not all are easy to terraform or they had not gotten to it when the fall happened."

~Once they were cut off from Tafa, they seem to have lost access to DS drive tech. Since the Tafa themselves do not show much interest in tech, what happened? Our drives could be used by non-TK if trained properly. Why did theirs stop working?~

+Possibly, as we have seen, they lost the ability to repair their tech. And at least two worlds were too dangerous to visit. How would you have reacted if a world suddenly stopped transmitting. Everything went dead. Four thousand years is a long time. I am surprised the language did not change more than it did. Hu and Ku both had many languages before respective versions of Standard were imposed.+

"Why was the Terror only unleashed on two worlds? Why not all of them? Hggy must be older than four thousand years."

"Not necessarily. Hu on E1 were able to colonize their system in a few hundred years."

^But the Hu had TK. Could the Hggy have lost theirs?^

~Only if limiters were used. Maybe who ever attacked never got to the other worlds.~

"Curiouser and curiouser. Let's stay on this. Keep thinking about it."

# Aaaha - Creation

@Mother, come outside. It is a wonderful day. The jef are singing, there is a gentle cool breeze and the air smells of papr flowers.@

@I am so tired little one. I will be gone soon. Let me rest.@

@You can rest when you enter the long rest. Till then, enjoy.@  
She tugs at my wrap. I slowly rise and allow her to lead me outside. It is wonderful, but I need to sit again as soon as we come to the first resting place.

@Tell me again of the old times Mother. Please!@ Several other young come up in anticipation. I have a feeling this was by design.

@Are there not chores that need to be done?@ A last effort to get out.

@Mother, this is a day of rest. Please!@ The last was said by all of them at once. I fear I am trapped. This may be my last time.

Our story began a very long time ago, before the time of recorded time, so we do not know how long ago it was. We were alone on a dying world. We were few in number and very hungry. Each of our friends started to look like a nice flavorful meal. At this time we ate the flesh of others, so this was not seen as against the laws of Aaaha.

The land was desolate and hot. There had been no rain for some time. We had forgotten how to grow food, only to search for it. But, all creatures were hungry and even if in our weakened state we caught one, it would not satisfy.

All was lost and we had given ourselves up as lost. The people would be gone and no one would care that we ever existed.

We had been deceived by another. They promised the power of the gods. They gave us such luxury as no one had ever seen. We had shiny metal, shiny stones, food of plenty. But there was also a price. A price that was not mentioned. They may not have even known themselves. It is believed they had deceived themselves long before they deceived us. By making promises to us, they hoped to believe again their own lies.

Just when we were on the brink of the long sleep a vision came to one called Oji. In this vision Oji was told to gather the people and bring them to a specific place.

@Does anyone remember what place this was?@

The all chime together, @The Meeting Place!@

Yes, the Meeting Place. So all the people were gathered. We had no food, we had no water, we had no protection from the sun. Maybe this was the last place. The place we would all lie down for our final rest.

But this was not to be. Oji assured us we would live. We waited patiently. Day nights came and went. We waited. Many were already lying down in their final positions.

Just when all hope was lost and we resigned ourselves to letting go of our last breath, it happened.

A large object appeared in the sky and came toward us. Many were sure we would be eaten, but did not care any longer. There was nothing left to eat anyway.

The object which was larger than any wood plant and as wide as a mountain pool, stopped and touched the ground. A hole opened in the side and creatures like none we have ever seen came out. Six they came. They had six arms and no head. They could walk using anywhere from two to six of these arms. They appeared to talk to each other by waving their arms about. We could not understand what they were saying.

They brought a bowl of food to each of us and we ate. We were brought water and we drank. We grew stronger.

They could talk to our minds and we learned we were the last of our kind and that our world could no longer sustain us. They would take us to a new home and teach us how to take care of this home so this would not happen again. They would teach us now to speak to them and how to record our own observations and keep records of our history of thought for them to examine and assist us with. Once our numbers had grown, some of us would return to their world. This world is the world they chose for us to begin again. This is where we have been since that time.

It has been many winters since our helper friends have visited us, but we have worked hard to earn their trust by taking care of our world as they taught us. All creatures have value, so we only eat plants and never so much of any one plant as to kill it. We take a few leaves here and there. We take fruit and seeds. But we never pull up by the roots and destroy their kind. We attempt to help all that suffer harm from conditions or others.

Such as it was then, such as it is now. We await their return. Each day we give thanks to our saviors and we give thanks to the life around us. We teach the young this story so they may teach their

young. We teach so these lessons may never be forgotten, so many will know, so we can stand proud upon their return and not in shame as we once lay before them when they came for us.

@I grow tired and must sleep now.@ This is my last time of rest. My final rest.

@Mother come quick. Mother you must awaken. Mother please wake up!@

@Mother, they have come. They have returned. You must rise to meet them Mother.@

I was so close, so close. I want to rest.

I get up slowly. I nearly do not make it. I want to rest.

The little ones take my hand, several on each. They help support me, they help me walk.

It is not far. I could not do far.

I bow down before them. The little ones bow down as well.

There are six. The holy ones. The saviors of our kind.

# The Surface

"I believe we are in the garden of Eden everyone." If even Myra is impressed we are in serious trouble. It does look like paradise though. It is so green. There is life everywhere. We are drowning in life. Scans showed the entire world from pole to pole is alive.

"Uh, Myra, we do not belong here and they know it too. I can feel it closing in on us."

"I feel like an imperfection that needs to be cleansed."

The six Tafa emerge and everything stops and bows. Even the trees, the bugs. I think the very air is bowing. The Aaaha emerge from the forest and bow down. There are hundreds of them lining a path into the forest. Sort of cute if you like a creature whose arms are covered in suckers instead of hands and of course, four eyes.

Crow whispers, +Should we bow too?+ I shake my head no. We know the six. They are no gods. The question is why do the Aaaha think so? Why does this world think so?

We are lead to a clearing where there is a structure that looks just like six huge Tafa linking. It is made from 'thn metal. But the quantum matrix is blank. It is not a portal then, just a structure. One that will never corrode or fail. When they reach the structure, the six go to the empty center of it and link. We are forbidden to enter. Gently, but the message is clear enough. The Aaaha bow down in circles around them.

*We thank you for your help and for your gifts of knowledge. We now have what is necessary to help them. Leave now. We are staying to help them to the next step as prophesied from times of old.*

*One more thought. A warning in thanks for your help. You are on the edge of an abyss. If you do not change your ways, you will also end up as the Hggy have, a lost and dead culture on a dead world. Heed us. Now go.*

As we walk down the path back to the ship we hear chanting, "AAAHA, AAAHA, AAAHA"

Myra whispers to me, "Aaaha is not their name, it is how they say Tafa." Now it makes sense. "I TPD them. They call themselves the People of Tafa, A Tafa." Makes sense.

We DS back to the ship and then DS to orbit. I do not feel safe down there, even with all of our abilities. Are they gods?

Back on the Mother Ship, we look down on their world.

"My head is swimming. I thought the Tafa were nothing but pets, then I thought they were simply used for their ability to help the Hggy ships get between stars. Now we see them treated as gods. What are they?"

Crow comes up and opens his hand. A baby Yesan is inside. They get everywhere and most of us have come to ignore them.

+Have we ever seen a baby Tafa?+

We all shake our heads no.

"The baby Yesan does look like a small Tafa, though it walks on all six and never stands. The adults can stand sort of. Not that stable."

"And Hu walk on all fours at first as well."

+And caterpillars look nothing like the adult moths and butterflies.+

"We were forbidden to know anything about their reproduction. You cannot even TP this information. They shield very well on this topic."

+I have a theory about that.+ A star chart appears.

+All of our worlds are on this arm of the galaxy. We dare not go very far because of the promise. Here we are. About two thirds of the way from the center. Even the ancients on both our worlds knew this. Here is Tridon.+ Nearly at the end of the arm.

+Here is Yesan.+ Further in towards us.

+Here is Tafa.+ Even further in, but still some ways away.

+Here is where we are now along with Stepping Stone and Hggy.

+ All in a line further in and definitely more crowded.

~Wait, you are saying the Tridons, the Yesan and the Tafa are or were the same species?~

Crow shrugs.

I answer, "Certainly warrants further investigation. Complex. We know of Tridon and Yesan reproduction. They do not appear to turn into each other and without star flight till others came along to carry them. How do they get back to Tridon to reproduce?"

Myra says, "They don't of course. Who says they were never the same species though. Each world changes us. What if all three were once part of a some empire that lost star flight and over time changed to better suit the world they were on."

"Let's go home. A lot to think on. Others may be able to help. In the meantime, we make these world off limits. Probably should make Tafa itself either off limits or subject to a lot of bureaucratic paper work. No spur of the moment ideas."



"They used us to get here. I agree, let's go home."  
+I hate being used. Makes me feel so stupid.+  
I laugh, "You mean like when we are around Silver and Turtle."  
Everyone laughs at that.

## Earth Two - Fragrant Harbor

"It has been a long time since I was here last with Drup and the Black Wind II. I brought a map from the library to help us look for the past. Ever since the Tafa trip I feel like I should know more about my own past, as trivial it was in comparison."

"What no mysterious star gods?" I smile at her remark.

"Don't remind me. That warning is going to scare me the rest of my life."

"That was an easy one to make. We have several in our group who could possibly even end the entire incarnation, not just this world."

"Oh thanks, that helps a lot. I think I chose the wrong traveling companion. Speaking of which how are the Meeps doing without you?"

"They are happy as can be. Lots of parasites here for some reason. They nearly burst on Hggy from eating so much. If this keeps up they will reach adult size soon. Too soon in fact. Might need to go on a diet."

"A Meep on a diet. I can't imagine." I smile at the thought.

"Did you really wear clothes like this? Practical anyway."

"You mean they are not stylish? You have been on Alexandria too long. Oh, by the way, Alexandria here is a port in the Med."

"Right, got it. At Crab Cove growing up we did not learn much about the world outside west Frica and Indland. I only saw a few ports near Crab Cove myself actually. Heard about the rest. There were always crew on board who had visited or knew of someone who had visited." She shrugs as if it is no big deal. Not now of course when you have the entire multiverse in your hand. That is scary too.

"Pilot when are you going to tell me your real name? I suspect this visit has something to do with it. Let me help."

"This is a secret you cannot share with anyone else. No one. Promise?" She nods.

"Say it."

She holds up her hand as if a solemn pledge, "I promise."

I look around and say quietly, "Mei Ling, or in Standard, Beautiful Bell. A very common name in Chinese before Standard was imposed."

"How come you have it now?"

"My mother liked the sound of it and probably did not even know

the meaning. I had to look it up myself. I am only part Chinese anyway. Very dilute actually."

"Over a thousand years of mixing does that. I have no idea what I am either." She shrugs. Apparently does not care that much. She could do the necessary genetics to find out if she wanted to.

"This is a southern port of former China, called Fragrant Harbor. We landed here on the Black Wind II when I was a pilot for Drup. We came ashore to get a map of the islands to the east. They did not have anything accurate, which was perfect to Drup. He did not want to be found and it helped that where we ended up was not on any maps yet."

"Oooh, food. Let's eat."

We find a variety of foods at small stalls. My favorite. I steer away from anything that is not vegetable or fish. There is a lot in that category. True in Crab Harbor too. I sigh and stop being so picky. Myra eats everything, running to the next stall to try that too.

"Are you sure you are not Meep?" I tease her.

"We are bonded. When they feed I get ravenous too. Can't help it."

"As long as you don't double your size." She roles her eyes and pretends to be enormous.

"Your name. Sounds familiar."

"I know, the journals. That is why I don't want it known. I would suffer no end of teasing. Both of us being space pilots does not help."

"There is that. She was pure Chinese though, so not a direct link at least."

"Different incarnation. Not your problem."

"Down here. The map store should be around here if they still exist."

"But you know how to get to Hawaii now."

"Drup wants me to find out if they have learned anything and I want some old maps of the interior."

"But they are not allowed inland. Though I can see some are just beyond the line."

"Sssh, we are norms here."

"You said the city was far north of here. Shouldn't we be at a city closer."

"Myra, be patient. We will get there. Here we are." I knock on the door.

A window in the door opens, a set of eyes look at us, then it

closes. A voice through the window announces, "What do you want. No hand outs."

I hold up a hand full of gold coins, "Does it look like we need a hand out?" The door itself opens.

"Welcome. Lots of problems with the poor and hungry."

*I did not see many. No more than usual.*

*This port is very rich by Earth Two standards. Lots of trade comes though here and they don't tolerate disruptions.*

We enter and go down the long fake alley between building with nothing behind the walls.

"I have been here before and know how to get there myself if you think to rob us."

He pretends to be shocked.

"We are well armed and know Kung Fu." Not that much, but I did take classes at the University. He looks at us like we are faking it. Oh, please test us. Please! Myra and I give the most evil smiles. He turns shocked and hurries to the room we want.

"The evil eye works every time," Myra says lowly. I nod.

We are greeted by a bow, "Black Wind not in port. Why you here?"

"You remember me then. You are good. Then you know why we are here. I am still looking for maps of the islands east of here. Oh, and if you have any maps of the inland area before the fall, I might want that too."

"Ancient kingdom maps. Pah, get those cheaper in the open market. Lots of stall sell fake copies. No one knows where are real any more. I get the map you want. Not cheap." Yeah, we did this before. I sigh. A servant comes in and serves us tea and treats. Myra jumps right in, till I hold her back to wait for the others.

"I can't help it Pilot." Yeah, yeah, Meep brain.

They arrive, we are served tea and we all sit and enjoy it.

After this small ceremony is cleared up one comes in and lays a map before me.

"No tricks. Best one." Sure.

I open it and compare it to scans I can do from here. They are getting better. That one kilometer rule makes the smaller island very popular, especially if they have a nice harbor area. Further out is still in the realm of legend.

Myra holds my hand underneath the table.

I sigh, "Okay, now the good one." I place a bag of coins on the ta-

ble showing I can pay. A servant takes the bag. They are counting it in the back.

She smiles, claps and we wait. In a moment a new map comes out.

"Why all the subterfuge Pilot?"

I shug, "Tradition is the best I can guess. It is part of the ritual and game."

A new map arrives and is spread out. This one is clearly better. Gold does that. It won't be long before they find Drup's kingdom.

"This is better. I will take this one."

"Here, free." He hands me a map of old China, waving it off as garbage. I smile as if I am in on the joke and bow to him. We are shown out the door, but have to make our own way through the alleys. No money makes us less of a target now.

"They don't care about the map?"

"How many do you think would be interested? They probably only sell one a year at best. Not worth the storage space actually. Now, if we had a detailed map of the nearby island, that would be worth much more."

"This makes no sense to me."

"That is because you never had to pilot a sailing ship in these waters. There are thousands of islands within a few eight days travel of here."

"Yeah, I can see that. Ah, I mean I can imagine." Got you. I smile at her mistake. We have been spoiled by being around TKs for too long and taking our gifts for granted. I fill my money pouch again to be ready.

I send the island map to Drup's desk in Hawaii.

*Thanks. I have worn out my welcome there.*

*I can imagine. They were not that happy to see me either. But when they realized you were not in port it made them calmer.*

*How was your trip?*

*Really weird. More later. We are going to Beijing to do some personal research.*

*Sure thing Mei Ling.*

*You knew?*

*You weren't TK when we met. Of course I knew. And you did not know what the name meant to TKs either at the time. True.*

"No secrets from TKs."

"Drup got the map then." I nod.

"Are we going to book passage on a ship?" Myra really looks like she wants to.

"You do realize how much of an ordeal that it is right?"

"No idea at all. You mean it is not the same as the Mother Ship?"

"Land lubber," I sigh and she laughs.

Once out of sight, I DS us to Beijing. Or what was once here.

"Nothing here but open fields. Snow. This is snow!" Myra starts to make a snow ball to throw at me. I sigh and make my own. We have a short snow ball fight laughing the entire time.

"We never had snow off Frica."

"Neither did I of course. At Uni we visited the snow areas to learn how to work in it without using TK. I prefer TK." We both rub our cold hands and then use TK to warm them.

"Are you sure we are in the right place?"

I pull out the GPS unit I got from archives. We placed new sats up there some time ago. Improved tech too.

"Zoom out a bit." I do so.

"What's that? I thought there was nothing here."

I scan and sure enough.

"Scans like a temple of some kind. I remember some of the older TKs spent time in one in Calif didn't they?"

"Heck if I remember. Let's check it out. You are not going to find any records in an empty field."

I hold up the tablet, "This can also read a Way Back record Myra. Give me some credit for being prepared."

"Yyou only brought me along to use the Meeps?"

I pull out a hand full of Way Back spheres.

"Nope." She is actually surprised.

"Many requests once the archivists learned about it."

We walk to the temple. There is not much there to block our view of using DS and it is not snowing or windy, so this is nice.

"Looks like someone is keeping it up even. I thought no Hu were allowed this far in."

"They're not. Getting close to dark, best pull the bell cord." I do so and it is actually a metal bell. Good sound. Not an antique, not as many overtones. When did I get so picky.

The small door within the large gate opens and a person of unknown gender answers then waves us in. We are shielded as per protocol when encountering an unexpected situation.

"Hu at least. This place is crackling with limiters though. You

okay." I nod. Lots of practice defeating them. One thing Uni taught us big time. A lot of pranks involving limiters. Sigh . . .

We are taken to the classic meditation hall where the 'master' is already seated. There are two cushions set before her. We bow and then sit. And wait.

Finally the master takes a deep breath and looks at us.

"You were expected an hour ago."

An hour? I have not heard that term outside of the 'thant library. And old measure of time. I forget how long though.

Myra is not proud, "Snow ball fight. We don't get much snow at the equator."

"One of the perks of being posted here. Welcome." She does a hand signal and the limiters are turned off.

"Sorry, it keeps the young and restless from testing us. Of course with you two it would be pointless."

"Understood and we are not offended. We use them too. TK2s can be a pain when they are first raised." She smiles at this comment.

"Try a courtyard full of them." We both smile at this thought.

"You certainly picked a remote location. Not many curious Hu make it this far."

"Unfortunately the Terror has. We train our students to fight more than anything else now."

"You might be interested in the latest research on them then. If you get them young enough they will bond with a sen and form a partnership similar to the buddies. Unfortunately, you still need to feed them and clean up after them."

"Some advantages to the buddies then." We all smile. I call my two in and the master calls hers in. Two companions as well. So she is at least TK6. Not so subtle way of finding out. She then turns to Myra.

"Really? I don't have buddies or companions."

"Come on Myra. We know you like to show off your kids." This raises an eyebrow of the master.

Myra sighs, "Fine." All thirty six pop in and go to every corner of the hall snooping at everything.

"They don't get to see so much old wood. It fascinates them."

"The rumors were true then. These are Meeps?" Myra nods.

"They like to hunt Terror if you need a clean out while we are talking."

"Sure, would be nice to be able to get back to our intended pur-

pose." The Meeps disappear. They can't eat them, but they have had plenty of parasites to eat lately. Stuffed in fact.

"How can we help you?"

Myra looks at me.

"My name is Mei Ling. Yeah, I don't look Chinese. My mother liked the sound of the name and there are some Chinese genes still in me there somewhere. I would like to know where my ancestors came from. We had no tradition of passing down family history."

"And you have the same name as a famous Chinese TK, who was an astronaut. Do you travel in space ships too?"

Myra almost breaks out laughing.

I look down, "I am the captain of a star ship."

Myra whispers, "More of an admiral actually. And it is a huge star ship."

"It is natural to be curious about one's past. Your DNA suggests you have ancestors from several regions of the former area known as China." Should have figured out she could do that. I have done it enough times.

She looks at me, "You could have done this yourself you know. You did not need to come here. The descendants are still here, just on the coastline now."

"I was told we had ancestors near Beijing. Seemed like a good place to start. I was hoping to retrieve DNA from graves."

"You weren't told about us?"

We both shake our heads no.

"Seems we have been forgotten. Please let them know we are still here."

"You get the news broadcasts at least I hope." She nods she does.

"Not the same as actual visitors. Are you hungry?"

"We got stuffed in Fragrant Harbor." Myra says without thinking.

"Ah, Hong Kong. Yes the food stalls are wonderful. Have you tried the scorpion? The sauce they use is something special."

A monk runs in and up to the master to whisper something. The Master smiles and nods.

"It would appear your 'kids' are putting on quit a show and all the students are lined up at the walls to watch."

"See, this is what happens when I am made to bring them out."

"On board ship everyone ignores them now." I shrug.

Another monk comes in with a large tablet.

"Thanks Dogan. Okay, back to the task at hand." She turns it on



and futzes with it some.

"Sorry, not really my thing. Maybe you can use it better than I can?" She offers it to me. I take it from her hands. The characters are all Chinese. I find the Standard button and they change. The three of us huddled over it.

"Here is Beijing, northern capital. Chinese is very literal. Nanjing is southern capital." She points to a city to the south east of here.

"You ancestors might have been government officials as most of your DNA is from these two places with a scattering from other areas. It was very sexist back then. Brides of officials were chosen for looks, it did not matter too much where they came from if they could be presented properly. Of course wealth still helped. A good designer could hide almost any flaw with the right dress and accessories."

"So glad we are past that."

Dogan comes running in, "The Meeps have brought the Terror back here! There are thousands of them, all sizes, in the courtyard."

"I am sorry. They love to play with 3D life and I rarely give them a chance. We best get this cleaned up. At least we do not need to hunt for them ourselves."

The Master laughs, "I doubt they found them all." Probably true.

The courtyard is solid stone, walls and ground. The Terror are going crazy. All different sizes. Some are even attacking others.

Myra, "This is very dangerous. The larger ones could go into spore stage soon if we don't take care of this."

The Meeps suddenly stop playing with them and form a matrix above the courtyard. The students quickly leave the wall. Most had already once the Terror was below them actually.

"Can't have any escaping. Ready Pilot?" I nod and they all go up in flames. The sound is horrendous.

"I did not realize they could scream." Apparently no one else knew this either.

"Interesting. We usually find them one at a time. Not so much noise from just one. What size do they need to be to become 'friends'? Myra indicates with her hands and the Master nods.

"We may try it on a limited basis. Do they get along with companions?"

"No problems there so far. They don't get along with Meeps though. Just as well as the two of us go back and forth to the University there. A lot and none are allowed there."

"Understandable of course. At least not until you understand them

better. Any idea where they came from?"

"They are the transformed result of some kind of bio-warfare done by one of two sen we just got back from a trip studying. We don't know who started it though. The strange thing is that it does not kill them, just makes them into one of the Terror. Once transformed, the Terror kills and eats anything organic. I am surprised you have any plant and animal life left around here."

"We only find one occasionally. I never even suspected there were so many. Their damage has actually been minimal. Maybe they are changing and adapting?"

Myra adds, "These are from all over northern China. Once the Meeps are set on a task, they tend to go overboard. Tell you what, we will retrieve six of the right size." She nods and it is done. The six chosen ones settle down and begin to look for food along the cracks in the stones.

"Be careful making them pets. Only a few at a time and well watched."

"Agreed. Anything else I should know?"

"The bond is both ways and they can see each other's thoughts. Probably not good for sensitive positions just yet? The two of us are not allowed for that reason and the ones who have, are not allowed at the University till we are sure it is safe."

"Understood. Too bad, I was curious myself. I am patient though."

"Once larger, they will defend the bond to the death. Best not to threaten a pair. If you feed them too much they will reach a size where they divide into three. All are bonded to the original sen. One person made an army this way and took out whole towns of slavers in the north Med region. Eventually it was figured out you could fight them with fire."

"So not cute little kitties." Ah no.

"How long have you been the Master here?"

"There has only been me. I was a student here before the plague."

"Shit, sorry. That is a long assignment. Hope you like it."

"Pluses and minuses, like anything else. If you ever need an extra crew to wash the floors on your ship let me know though."

"Definitely, but I think having you teach meditation would be a better use of your talents. Some of the crew need to learn to control their emotions better. It can get scary out there on some of the missions." We all laugh.

"Hey, I have contacted some of the bonded ones at Frog Harbor in

south west Fricka. They will send a rep here to help with the learning process. You may want to visit them too. An exchange would benefit both groups."

"A monastery is different from a normal group of like minded. We believe in discipline here. Strict discipline."

Myra laughs, "That would be fun to watch. We tend to be the exact opposite I am afraid."

"I have noticed. Still appreciate the help." She smiles and bows. We bow in return and pop out.

# Regional Center

*This is crazy.*

*You are not alone. Be on top of your game as you Hu say. Remember I believed in you enough to trust my children to you.*

*I still don't like it.*

*That describes most of life in an incarnation, even for us.*

I am purposely dressed in my old Hopi white trousers and top. Hair tied in back. Turquoise and silver pendant of a soaring bird and head band. Simple. A little red dust on everything. I carry nothing else. No weapons of course. They are not allowed here and would be pointless anyway given that everyone here is at least an eight.

I move to quick time, but maintain my appearance as if I am in normal time. That took a hell of a lot of practice. I don't want any surprises.

*We are in position.*

*Thanks. Approaching the canteen.*

I have never seen sen of this description before, but I know we come in all forms.

As I approach, one pulls a baby 'thn out of some pouch and drops it on the floor. Are all of them this pissed.

She rises and looks about. Don't ask me how I can tell.

Others set their 'thn on the floor, gently though. They also rise.

*All you had to do was ask. We have denied no one.*

*Who gave you the right?*

*I was given the right when the high 'thn sentenced me to death without cause. Look at me? I am nothing. Yet, none of you stood up for me then. None of you offered to take my place. You stood aside when my froth was sentenced to Farout earlier. Now you conspire with them to use them for your own gain. Yes, we know of that. Do they understand your intentions? Do they understand how you intend to use them for your own gain and then throw them to the fires? You are cowards. Go home. Take care of your own. We abide by our promise. We set up no colonies, cities, outposts of any kind outside of the Earth Froth system. You can do battle with anyone you chose. We don't care. All we ever wanted was to be left alone. The multiverse is huge. There is plenty of room. Leave us alone.*

*Or what? We have our 'thn back. You are one small sen.*

Their 'thn fall to the ground. Again.

*Really? I gave you an easy, no pain out. Still you fight me. Go ahead, kill me, if you dare try. Take out the entire Earth Froth if you think you can. But understand this, I came alone. I did not bring an army of destruction, though I could have. I came alone. And still you provoke. We have not stood still since this started. This is not a threat, this is a fact. Leave us alone. Period.*

I turn to go and their 'thn rise again.

I am attacked of course. The three have my back. I turn to find them all limited and in a AuC bubble. Qr'thn, Br'thn and Pr'thn are visible now.

%What the hell are those?% The 'thn translate for me. They have no TP any longer.

*Your worst nightmare. Think of them as super 'thn, only really, they are no longer 'thn even, but much, much stronger, better, smarter and of course from your point of view, more dangerous. You would not believe what they are capable of. You would not believe what we are capable of. All we ever wanted was to be left alone. Why is that such a difficult concept to understand?*

Their 'thn come through the barrier and come to us.

I address them.

*They are permanently non-TK. Take them home. We cannot abide such idiots with the gifts. After that you are free to go as you wish.*

*But we are not sen. I smile.*

*You just proved you are, congratulations. You are now upgraded to the next level. Qr'thn does the deed. Oh, still 'thn metal. We are not stupid either.*

Let's see what Farout thinks of this when they come in a few minutes for their meeting. Yes, we knew. We have always known.

I sigh, so stupid. All we wanted was to be left alone. We are not prey.

# Regional Center

"I hate it here. This place still gives me the creeps."

"You know why we are here. We have no chance against them without help."

"Then, where are they? We are on time aren't we?"

"Hard to be exact across sen and space. Give it a few. Want something to eat or drink. They might still have Hu stuff here."

"Why should they we have only been here a few minutes after four thousand years."

"Roger, everything is synthetic. They don't store it here, just made to order. Come on." We go up to the counter. Oh god, a Keei. A slug like creature with the speed of same. I know I should not be timid, but this is the center. We could be here a year before receiving food.

Food is set before us. Smells wonderful.

"How? We did not say anything."

*We are among the best mind readers in this quadrant. A survival skill against those who waste time on useless tasks.*

"Touche." I bow and laugh. I deserved that.

Roger asks, "You have not seen the wild bunch have you?" He pictures them in his mind for the Keei to see.

*They were here. Now they are not.*

This could get frustrating.

"Did they leave a message for us?"

*Ask the one behind you.* I am on full scan mode in this place, there is no one behind us. Still I slowly turn around. Old Hu habit.

"The Most Beautiful of the Seven Realms spoke the truth. They are gone." Puu! Shit. I try to DS us out, but nothing works. We had this training. Hidden weapons come out and disappear. I concentrate. Silver could do it, so I should be able to.

"If we do not return, they will come after us." Puu shrugs. She does not care.

Roger asks, "What do you intend to do with us?"

"What would you do, if our roles were reversed? What should be done to plotters of destruction, of seven sen worlds?"

"We only wanted what is rightfully ours. What the 'thn took from us."

"You were offered that, but thought you could get more, that you could take it all. You are not the only sen in the multiverse."

"We are not without friends."

"Like the 'wild bunch' who intended to dispose of you once they got our abilities for themselves? Here you are alive. With them, sen with TK for several million years of plotting and survival, you are like the new born. Easy pickings with a promise of huge reward. I will give you the same advice I gave them. Go home, leave us alone."

Roger is livid now. Not a good sign. Makes you stupid.

*Shut up Roger.* I warn him. He calms down. Hey, TP still works. That is level 7 and the only TK ability that still appears to work.

"You have taken our home."

"You have a new home of equal value. Earth One is off limits to all sen. I do not even go there. What was given was more than you deserve. The Cetaceans have agreed it is a good home. They are not here with you trying for more are they?"

Roger finally spits out, "The water rats are easily pleased. We were unjustly abandoned at Farout." He just can't help it.

"Agreed, and yet, you live. I was sentenced to death by seven galaxy level 'thn, simply because I might learn skills they saw as threatening. No warning. No explanation. Skills I did not even understand at the time. I do now. Do not test me."

"Hell, we were better off at Farout." A flash.

We are back at Farout. Alone. Just the two of us.

"Roger you idiot!"

"There is no one else here either. Shit." Now do you get it?

# Alexandria - Hotevilla

It is nice to be back from traveling on the Mother Ship. I feel I can think here. It was so chaotic on the ship. It worked, but I have no idea why. It should have failed. I left a few hundred young to suss out what is going on. There are plenty of scraps to live on and the ship will probably notice it is cleaner as well.

Here it is mostly Tia, Sam and I. We get very few visitors, mostly students like Keki who decide to walk to the University in a quiet way. The University was the worst. Too many different sen all in one place, worse than the ship because it had many times the numbers.

Sam and Tia are well organized. They like it simple. This is such a relief. We have minimal objects, just enough to complete necessary tasks without gaining notice. As most sen have seen Hu before, but not Yesan, I keep out of sight until needed. I have children here as well, but food is limited. We feed them the waste from the canteen. I have to be careful to keep them out of the sugar water mixes some sen like in the heat. It makes them drunk and silly, exposing themselves to harm. Easy to be squished by accident.

It is near noon, when no tourists will be about. I love the heat and often go for a run looking for creatures to watch and learn about. I am high enough TK I can make my own food, so I do not prey on anything anymore. I have learned so much by watching the simpler forms. Reminds me of my own growing up experience trying to understand the world around me on Yesan. Of course much different from here and my children will be adapted to here and would not last a moment on Yesan and likely true in reverse.

I go for a run on all six arms. This is the fastest way, but I am curious how a nest of scorpions is doing. There are not many insects yet for them to prey on and I will bring treats with me to wiggle in front of them to attack. I have been making it harder and harder to see how they adapt. With TK I can mimic many creatures easily. Not as smart as my young, but will give them a suitable challenge when they are ready.

I come back into town for my meeting with Tia and Sam. I put my sheriff badge back on. We do not usually wear bits of metal, but they insist this is important for other sen to recognize my authority and not have to put up with challenges all the time. I have seen no one today thankfully.



The General Store and Canteen doors are wide open to gather whatever fresh air might blow past. They are sitting at one of the tables already. No one else is present. I fold up two arms to act as simulated chair legs and raise my middle high enough to act as a sort of head, though we do not operate that way of course. Still, I am playing a part and do my best.

Normally we Yesan are very social and need to be around many others of our kind. I was always different. Marie says this is one of the reasons why I was selected for University. Yesan need ones like me to help watch our own culture and contribute to strange cultures like those here on Alexandria. That all sen can benefit from what we each learn.

*We just received a cat box that you need to see as well Tewk.* Tia takes it out from behind the counter and sets it before me then sits down again. I touch the top and it opens for me. Would have for any of us three.

*You have already seen?* They nod. I have learned to read non-verbal signs. We can 'hear' but not our natural means of communicating, just helps sense prey or predators.

Inside is a scroll of paper. I take it out and unroll it. It is not really paper and has a video screen. I almost want to learn how to make these and will likely spend time with it later for that purpose. Initial scans show it is very intricate. Perfect. A challenge.

"This is a broadcast of the high council. Please insure that no one else is in the room before pushing continue." Standard issue screen so far.

"The Mother ship and crew recently completed a mission to Tafa and surrounding star systems. This is a summary of their findings. More information can be found in the council chamber at the University Library. See 'thant Edwin for access.

Six Tafa agreed to come on the mission. One was of the original six from Farout." An image is shown of the six. I hiss, probably too loudly. I can see from their expressions I will need to explain my actions.

"The Tafa world is proceeding well and major ecologies are coming back into good condition after some initial setbacks. It was decided that more information should be found out about the attack on Tafa and what happened to the Aaaha and Hggy." Strange names for those two sen. Not what we call them.

"They were able to find the world the ship that infected Tafa came

from. Unfortunately, this world is now brown. Most life has been removed. Ruins still remained, but after four thousand earth froth years, much is gone. Still, DNA and ship design information was retrieved. A ship in near functioning condition was brought on board in a sealed cargo bay.

My using the Way Back device it was observed how the Terror laid waste to this world as it had nearly done so to the Tafa. The ship, with help from the Meeps, determined where there was still a living Hggy world and we proceeded there." That is interesting.

"This world was not their home world. The biocode did not match the few remaining native life forms. Nearly every planet and asteroid had been terraformed and used by the Hggy. There was a huge excess of ships and system level transports that were non-functional in nature. It was determined this was a culture that had lost interstellar flight ability and was living off their dying culture. Consensus was reached that their system would not support their kind for much longer. Attempts to engage with the Hggy on the main world were met with hostility." Not surprising there. Arrogant little beasts.

"They next proceeded to a world containing the Aaaha. This proved to be a non-tech world with minimal sen present. Outwardly it presented as a jungle world. No ice-caps, humid, high oxygen level. Inhabitants rarely would have seen their star. Upon landing however it was quickly seen that the Tafa were expected, in fact worshiped." Here we go again.

"The six were left on Ta'aha, or People of Tafa, as the resident sen referred to it. They were also not native to this planet, but had done an excellent integration with the local ecology. Their population was limited as to reduce the strain on the flora and fauna and at the same time enjoy a fulfilling life." If you like only living thirty solars.

"In conclusion, no evidence of living Terror were found and the mystery of who infected the worlds or why was not solved."

That was easy, but they are unlikely to ever find evidence.

&Show me an image and stats on this Terror they talk about.&

The screen changes and a still image of one shows up. Oh, yeah, I know you, you nasty thing.

Tia asks, "I know your expressions now Tewk. What do you know?"

&Not so much know as you suspect. We never found direct evidence of who did this, but know it was a sen that did this, not an accident. You may wonder what made us so suspicious and careful

around other sen. This is why. We too suffered under a similar creature. We were able to defeat it and no traces remain, except in our memories.&

"You need to get to the council with this information ASAP Tewk. We will go with you as security."

&No one listens to a Yesan. We are the cockroaches of all worlds we exist on. Sometimes useful, but usually in the way and stepped on when needed.&

"Are these you suspect likely to do this again?"

&Definitely. It is in their nature. They are perfectionists.&

"Stop. Lock up, we go immediately. No chance of being heard by others. Now everyone move."

At least this time they are appearing to take it seriously. I am sure they will find a reason to discredit what I say and I will be back here before dark. The scorpions will be most active then and I can continue my project.

"They are ready." We pop straight to the chambers. All are waiting. Everyone is staring at me. I do not like being the center of attention. One of the reasons they liken us to cockroaches skittering back into the dark to avoid being seen.

Puu leads the council this time.

"Welcome Tewk. You have some important information for us?"

&I do not have proof of anything I present.&

Myra whispers something to Puu, who then calls up a panel.

"Tewk, can you read this text?"

&Certainly. It is small Yesan writing we teach the ones who have reached eighty centimeters in size. Any of us could read it.&

"The way you present information with your arms is similar to this written form."

&Of course. What is your point?&

"This was not written by any Yesan, but by the Tafa." Exclamations are heard.

&Of course, they learned it from us. Is this a surprise?&

"You know the Tafa?"

&Yes, they are our most dangerous enemies.& Chaos ensues in the room. Why?

"Calm down. We need to hear this out please."

Puu turns to me again, "Could you be more explicit please?"

&We were reading the latest newsletter when I made comments that Tia and Sam thought should be brought before the council. But,

as I said, we have no proof. We only suspect.&

"What do you suspect then? Forewarned could prevent a disaster."

&The mission mentioned something called the Terror that destroyed one world and nearly another. We also suffered such a fate, but survived. I recognized it from the image presented.&

"That image folks was not from Tafa or nearby, but from Cat Land recently."

&You are in extreme danger then. I hope safeguards are in place to prevent it from reaching other worlds or here.&

"Yes. Please continue."

&At first, it always presents it self as friendly, then useful, until such numbers are reached that they are essential, they they attack and kill all life on the world they have reached.&

"Killing themselves in the process."

&Yes.&

"That makes no sense. Why would anything evolve that would kill itself off?"

^Hu have come pretty close.^ That gets a nervous laugh, but true.

&They were made, not evolved.& More chaos. I am not sure I can handle more.

"Calm down, let Tewk present. I'm sorry, I know this is hard for you, but the information is likely vital to our understanding."

&Essential if you already have them on one world. They will find a way to reach others soon enough. Whatever you do, do not let them bond with any of your kind. This is vital.&

"It has already happened."

&These individuals will need to be destroyed to save yourselves.&

^Okay, back up. What are they and where did they come from?^  
First good questions asked today.

&They are a means of biowarfare created by the Tafa to remove imperfect cultures from existence. The Tafa have defined perfection in their own image of course. No one has achieved this level of perfection except some select few of themselves. They will eventually judge all others and remove them from existence. Please tell me you have not shared tech with them?&

Pilot speaks, "We did not share so much as allowed them to be around it. The Mother Ship was high TK tech."

&That may have saved you, I hope for your sake. Any bonded will still need to be destroyed.&

"That is not our way."

&Then you will need to quarantine them on a world they cannot possibly escape from.&

"That could be done if necessary."

!Wait, you are saying the Tafa infected their own world and nearly killed it?!

&Of course. They do not even reach their own level of perfection to avoid judgment. Or it could have been an accident.&

"There is evidence this could have been the case." Myra comments. "You should also know that the Beijing monastery might have bonded ones as well as norms in the Med area."

"Might as well make it the entire Earth Two given how far they have likely spread."

"I need to check something. Tewk, please come with me." I affirm and we pop out.

I hear a loud hiss.

"You should not have brought anyone here Puu."

"This is important Cat. The entire survival of Earth Two and maybe all of us is at stake. The Terror is spreading and now using a new tactic, friendship."

"The most evil by far. Come on Puu, I am busy."

"You have been sitting on your butt here for scores of eight days. Time to get back to work with a nice distraction. Actually surprised to find you here. I thought you were in your secret asteroid hideout."

"There are no asteroids in this system."

"What? What happened to them then?"

"An experiment. It is okay, no one was hurt. Much."

"Cat! Come on. You will like this one. An evil force trying to make the entire multiverse in its own image or destroy it."

We pop out to the receiving area for unknown sen.

"Oh good, are you my relief? I am so bored."

"Sorry Mike. We are here to see the Spikes in stasis."

"Level five, 12C. Can't miss it."

"Thanks." We pop again. It is before me. I am afraid of it even though I know a stasis form cannot be animated.

"I suppose you want to figure out the differences between the original and the ones Owa and Sylvy made."

"And we can't bring one of them here for obvious reasons."

Cat turns to me, "Tewk, how is your TK? Can you handle a vacuum for a time?"

&I could handle a vacuum for a long time even without TK.&  
"Excellent. Here we go then." They make an exact duplicate of  
the Terror in stasis and the chamber itself. Then we pop out.

# Earth Two - Ceres

We arrive in a dark chamber with no gravity. I can scan the edges of the chamber, so I have TK and it is not larger than my ability. The walls light up. They are some distance away. We appear to be in the center of an artificial structure approximately 500 km in diameter. I scan and see craters and such on the outside surface. I am taking care of my bio needs using TK. We are under vacuum.

A moment later a second Terror arrives in similar condition to the first. Outwardly they look identical. I begin my own low level scans.

*Interesting. How did this second one come to be again?* I ask.

*Marie took the form for the first one from a sen and put the sen into a completely new and separate fem Hu form. Then put the original into stasis so it could returned to the sen when it left the University. This is common practice for sen we do not know. It remained in Hu fem form for approximately five years before it was sent to Cat Land to do a graduate level study of the Cat culture. It adapted very well to the Hu form and it would be hard to tell from one born to the form. Once in Cat Land, Owa and Sylvy, the two Cat Queens, read her original form from her mind and made a new Terror body for her to be placed in. They did not have the original to work from, only what was in her mind. That was apparently enough, which is certainly interesting in and of itself.*

Cat says, *This means that the Terror is not a what but a how.*

I conjecture, *This would suggest that any sen could be made into a Terror if the right adjustments were made to it's thoughts or form. The resulting sen/rom would follow naturally from there.*

*Form naturally. Precisely. Puu, you are the biologist, you do not need my help for this one. I am going back to my own projects.* Cat pops out.

Puu phases into 6D with only a shadow of 3D remaining. I need to learn how to do that. I enter DS space to watch her better. Fascinating.

*Look at the stasis forms. They both have projections into 4D space. They are not just 3D life forms.* She tells me.

*IF this happens from a thought, then anything in stasis is just a shadow and even if you put another into one of these, it would not become a Terror.*

*I believe you are correct Tewk, but what happens when you con-*

*front a true full Terror and persuade it to return to its original form?*

*That would be most interesting. How do we do that and what does it become?*

*Puu states the obvious, I believe it would be better to leave both of these here. I do not believe they are dangerous, but why take a chance. How to you feel about experimenting on live Terrors?*

*It would be most interesting and instructive. I request that this knowledge be allowed to return to Yesan. We only have memories of a past low ago. This would be important knowledge to fill in a gap in our experience.*

*Is it possible that in the Yesan library such knowledge as we seek may already be known?*

*Possible, but doubtful. We were attacked because we were too chaotic and high tech for the Tafa to tolerate. Both remain. As you may have noticed I am different from other Yesan. I did not fit in well. I prefer a less crowded existence.*

*We were all chosen for the same reason Yesan. You are among your own kind now.*



# Ceph Eden

~Rooi, more and more shipments have been coming in. The genetic code is compatible with our own species in most cases. This will provide hybrid vigor that may prevent a recurrence.~

~Nothing will prevent a recurrence. These actions will definitely have additional unforeseen effects. At best this gets us out of the immediate emergency.~

~Some are coming from other froth worlds with no sen present. Both of our kind are old, but the crustaceans as they exist now are likely older. This presented a number of worlds to harvest from.~

~It is very important this be seen as a one time event. We do not want to become dependent on these actions. We know we have this tendency now and need to take steps to prevent a recurrence.~

~Up the culling then?~ I affirm. We let too many go for too long. Now we have clearly defective adults that are breeding. It helped fill in our world, but it is not working for us. We are different and we need different solutions than the other sentients would use.

I have been following the Tafa debate and I agree theirs is not a solution either. Life is dynamic. There is no perfect solution that must be rigidly adhered to. This also means we need to let some of what we would call defectives live as well. It may be they will be our salvation at some point.

~I am thinking about a normal defective culling, but also a small percentage chosen by lottery or chance. The Hu like to play this game of chance and it might serve us to keep our gene pool diverse enough to handle challenges. This is not my idea, Nease said this was the way they did it on Ceph One.~

The imports are not enough to explain what has been going on. It is too fast. Our entire world seems to be repopulating the crabs too quickly. I need to spend some time watching more carefully. I will get some of the high TKs to begin doing scans as well. It might be very small though. Larvae can hide easily in a large ocean. And of course it will take a few years to grow to food size.

We have enough emergency food. No one will starve, but we can't have this happening again either. Embarrassing now that we have high TKs present. Change is coming.

And no, it does not help that almost every other world is having problems too. Maybe this is normal. I have not been TK for long.



# Earth Two

Well, this sucks. We try to do the right thing and help out on special projects and now we are all quarantined? My fluffy has been no problem at all. Even George is having fun with his. Too bad the Cats did not figure this out from the beginning instead of letting them run wild to eat everything they could reach.

They have us on on Madscar of all places. Back to the beginning. Never thought I would see this place again, but less as a prison of sorts. Granted the first time it was self imposed, but I did believe at the time I would be spending the rest of my life there.

I am working on a leaf cutting, but can't get into it. At least our exile is on the honor system. They have not taken away our TK. Yet.

I thought it would be just the six of us, but a few dozen from a monastery in China, never heard of it, are here. They speak Standard, but keep to themselves and have set up a mini monastery to try and maintain their lifestyle.

Then there are the norms. Who let the norms mess with them? Apparently they figured it out themselves. What was her name, Ali or something like that, who died using them to hunt slavers. She figured it out. Guess others could too. TKs are easy, we can pretty much set up anywhere, even a black world. Not fun, but we could do it. Norms, especially if you do not want them to know about TK, are MUCH more of a pain. How did the human species ever survive on its own? They seem totally helpless.

Not exactly the fault of the ones here. Their entire culture has fallen apart. Between the bullies, slavers, fires, plagues, and starvation, it is amazing there are any alive. It is worse in that we are told not to set down roots. Make shelters, food, water, latrines. Not much else matters. We do this at night when they are asleep. Yeah, they live with us. Not my idea. I can pop anywhere on the island, why can't they stay on one end and us on the other. I admit I am not real crazy about norms at the moment. We lived in near paradise and it has all fallen apart.

The Ba had their problems of course. And I read the reports of the others. Maybe it is just something every culture goes through. Not encouraging. The University was probably my favorite place so far. Lots of ideas, plenty of space. Could pop anywhere on the world and go for a nice run and not see anyone. Not enough prey for George.

He complained constantly to make his food move. I told him to do it himself, but he insisted it was not the same. Randomness and unpredictability were important to keep his skills up. Seems to me napping is his only skill. Even his fluffy curls up with him and sleeps most of the time.

I absent minded find myself petting mine all the time. They all learned to purr. Not sure is this was because they came from Cat Land or because the Cats here taught them. It does work to endear themselves to us. We were warned that at least for the norms, separating them could be lethal to both. No one wants to try it with one of the TKs.

It is Keki that I feel the worst for. He is all alone, the only Ku here in prison. We all know and respect him and have offered to give me a Hu form, but he likes what he is. We are the same. We all went through multiple forms at the University of course. Droop is the only TK I know who seems to prefer Hu over his native Di. I wondered why, but was told it was because he really likes being on a large sailing ship. Nothing like that in Di Eden. Of course explaining Keki to the norms was a bit of a problem until we convinced them he is just a really smart bird we have taught a bunch of words. Right.

I laugh and George rolls over, being careful not to upset his fluffy. None of us could master being Ceph. I am convinced they are the smartest of all of us. They have small brains in each arm as well as the central one. That gives them a nine fold multiprocessor advantage. The only one who seems to have no problem with this is Myra, but no one thinks she is close to being normal even for a TK.

Speaking of Myra, she and the Meeps are clearing the world of any other Terrors. They do better than any sensor. We really cannot have them running free until we get this figured out. I am convinced they are true sen and I would like to see them receive the respect of one. Killing them is not a good start of course.

Meanwhile they are looking for a safe world for us to go during quarantine. This could last hundreds of years, hence our own world is not ideal. Staying here is just too big a risk. As mentioned, the norms are the problem. Of course the last thing we want is to risk another new sen on a new world with us, especially if the fluffies do get away from us and go full Terror mode again.

My turn to cook. No one likes my cooking. Between being alone here for twenty years and learning to eat pretty much anything and being with the Ba at University, my dishes tend to be repulsive to

non-Ba. I admit, I may be a leaf cutting master, but I am no Ba chef by any stretch. I am just not patient enough when it comes to food. Means to an end. I don't understand the need to be fancy.

I leave George where he is, no point in asking for his help. Sweet Pea is there with her fluffies on the counter tasting things as she works. I let her lead so everyone else can eat too. I am fine chopping veggies and sauteing fish. At least they allow us to fish. Most of the norms are good at this actually, once they get clued into the local species. The norms have come from all over the planet and the ones from the arctic are very different. Weather is too. Med section is treating a lot of sun burn and bug bites. A few broken bones, etc. of course. I would not want to be them. It would be hard to hide TK when someone is in pain and you want to help them.

"More keep coming in Mouse. I think we are over two hundred total now."

"Are they finally seeing this and splitting us into smaller groups? Two hundred is as large as the largest town when I was growing up."

"I agree, smaller groups are easier to keep track of. In class we learned that management goes up with the square of the number of individuals included. I am seeing it here in person."

"I am sure they will find a solution and we can get back to star hopping someday."

"God, sorry, I hope so. I am so bored. How did we ever survive being norms." I shush her. Someone just walked in. They will help serve and clean up on rotation with the other norms. Their fluffies are with them of course. Usually on a shoulder or a pack. I don't quite get this as I have seen mine keep up when I run just fine. It is amusing watching their spikes move at a blur. I think it is good for them to exercise just like it is for us, even TKs exercise, well except for the Cats.

"How do you like being leader Sweet Pea?" Just trying to make conversation to keep from going brain dead.

"Okay, I know I was technically trained for this, but it is crazy. Everyone thinks they have the most important problem. Everyone. Norms, ah, us, fluffies, everyone."

"Fluffies are petitioning you now?"

"Mine asks me for stuff constantly. I am really glad I never got pregnant and had a kid. I would likely kill it one day. I hate the 'why' questions the most. A thousand a day I am sure."

"Many parents say that. Just remember I have three 'kids' now." I

smile.

She looks confused then gets it, "George and two fluffies." I nod.

"Good practice for when we get our own commands. Can't believe Pilot jumped so far ahead of us so quickly."

"Right time, right place. The, ah, ships are new and she understood what was needed. She was first in her class too. I am sure that played a part."

"We were too, but no one gives a diplomat or a leaf cutter a command." She smiles when she says this. Ha-ha.

# Di Eden

Puu and a fem Rap student from the University pop into my office. It is now in the basement of a building on the edge of the government complex. They did it even to me. Granted I was gone awhile. White let this get out of hand, but he is married to Library and has five kids now. Just like Rap culture, you are really nobody until you have kids. But, kids distract you. Imagine being married to Library. She does not take no, or I am busy, for an answer. I don't care. I am never getting married.

<sup>R</sup>Squeak, this is Nya a new grad student of mine.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Puu and Nya, glad to meet you. I am sorry Puu you have to be in Rap form for this.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Not a problem. Spent a lot of time in this form when we were learning TK together. Some advantages actually. Not that crazy about raw rat though.<sup>R</sup> She does that to tease me. Nya looks concerned that it is what she will have to eat while here. That would be nice, but we rarely eat rat raw any more. We are civilized now. Right. Tell that to the Di.

<sup>R</sup>Sorry, Edwin declined. He said it is wrong for 'thants to get involved in how sen choose to run their cultures.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I can respect that. Would have helped maybe. On the other hand keeping this all Rap might be best.<sup>R</sup> She nods.

I guess I am staring at Nya. She is the unknown here.

<sup>R</sup>TK6 Professor Squeak.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Good to know, but I am more interested in your study area.<sup>R</sup>

She looks nervous and looks to Puu who nods it is okay.

<sup>R</sup>Warfare Professor queak. Mostly history of course.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Please call me Squeak. I am more comfortable with that and it is important to appear as if we know each other when we move in.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Nya, you have been told about the situation? How was it when you were here last?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I have been told and live to serve. I was so happy when accepted at the University because it was off world. My family is all dead now. Died in the camps.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I know this should be a surprise to me. It is not. I have been there myself undercover. Do you know the rules and regs they are supposed to be following?<sup>R</sup>

She nods with a smile.

<sup>R</sup>Well, lets suit up and inspect one, at ah random.<sup>R</sup> I wink in the Hu method. It will definitely not be random. I can get away with this at the moment, but expect to find my position canceled at any moment. Surprised they hadn't already. Off planet so much they probably forget I was even on the roles.

Puu and I are very quick. Nya is slower as expected from a six. Her armor is much less detailed and more subtle. I scan and find a lot of hidden weapons though. I nod approval. Many are hidden right in the design. Some are obvious and can be turned over. Always have something to turn over to the bullies of course.

*She going to be okay with this?*

*She has a black belt from Marie if that helps. The weapons are redundant and more for show.*

*Can she work as a pack follower? So many want to lead.*

*She worships you as the first Rap high TK. There will not be a problem.*

*I had better be good then.*

*Yep. Puu shows amusement and Nya is confused but does not ask.*

We pop to outside the Re-education Camp that I had visited four eight days ago. White promised changes would happen and the camps would be closed. We walk up to the closed gates with obvious guards in full battle gear.

!Well what have we here Gurdi? Raps in party costumes.! They lick their lips like they want to eat us or rape us.

<sup>R</sup>Open the gates for inspection by the High Council.<sup>R</sup> We let Nya do the talking.

!Sorry deary. We do not speak rat.!

!Open the gate for inspection by the High Council.! That gets them laughing and pretend bowing.

<sup>R</sup>Permission to slay these two for their lack of respect your Honor.<sup>R</sup> She takes out a good size sword and takes a stance ready to act.

<sup>R</sup>Whoa, wait a minute. You can't do that. We are just grunts. We are under orders to not let any Rap in or out.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>So, you do understand Rap. This is not any Rap, but a member of the High Council. You will let us in.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Not with all the hardware.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You are going to stop us how?<sup>R</sup> She turns to Puu and I, <sup>R</sup>How do Di steaks sound your Honor?<sup>R</sup>

One talks on a squawk box explaining the situation. There is a heated discussion going back and forth.



<sup>R</sup>No offense ladies. But we just quit. Do what you want. We did not sign up to be eaten.<sup>R</sup> They take off the guard uniforms, which are really little more than vests, and gear and leave it on the ground. Against unarmed defeated Rap they are brave, against us not at all.

A moment later two come running up to the gate putting on their uniforms at the same time. One is higher rank at least. The lower ranked one collects the gear left by the deserters. The officer pulls out a photo and compares it to me. I am wearing the same armor so that helps I am sure.

<sup>R</sup>Many apologies your Honor. It is so hard to find good help these days.<sup>R</sup> Knows Rap. Amazing that all seem too isn't it? Opens the gate himself after fumbling with the lock. Not his normal task. I have no respect for leadership who cannot do the tasks of those under them. This one is suspect.

<sup>R</sup>You would not really have eaten them would you?<sup>R</sup>

I finally say something, <sup>R</sup>It is within my right to do so.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Let me be your guide then. We run a clean efficient camp here. No trouble or problems to report.<sup>R</sup>

We let him lead us around for a bit, then I start walking towards Block 8. The one I helped wire for light. He scrambles to keep up and tries to redirect us of course. The front light is broken. I go around to the back and see it is no longer wired to the panel. Nya pretends to write everything down.

We go inside. Everyone is out at the moment, working on the farm. It stinks bad in here. The beds have not been changed since I was last here I suspect. The back door is locked against regs again. There is no fire extinguisher, only the hook it is supposed to be on. The first block we went to, Block 1 had everything in place. My guess is no one actually lived there.

*They will be serving lunch in a moment. We will get in line with them.* Nya shows amusement.

<sup>R</sup>We will eat with Block 8.<sup>R</sup> That makes him very nervous.

<sup>R</sup>I will go ahead to make sure everything is ready.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>No, you will stay with us. Any attempt to call or signal anyone will be another violation and you already have so many.<sup>R</sup> Nya growls.

We wait. Block 8 eventually comes in from the field exhausted. They see us, but are only curious. Not everyday you get to see three Raps in armor and a Di officer being nice to them. They are all lined up ready to go when Block 8 is called forward. We all go together.

One comes up to me, <sup>R</sup>You were our electrician weren't you?<sup>R</sup> The

officer is horrified and tries to remove her. I wave him off. I smile to her and wink. She stands prouder now.

At the food line the servers see all of us and don't know what to do. Nya tells them, <sup>R</sup>Serve us the same as everyone else.<sup>R</sup> She shoves the officer into the front. Of course they try and find better bits in the mess to serve him. There are no better bits. He looks in the bowl and I think he is going to throw up.

Nya whispers to him, <sup>R</sup>That would look bad in front of the others sir. Best to remember your survival training in boot camp.<sup>R</sup> He nods and calms down some.

We are served as well. Looks and smells the same as when I was here last. The three of us split up to sit with other members of Block 8. The officer dumps his when he thinks we are not looking. Nya grabs his bowl and gets him a second helping. The bottom of the kettle. She hands it to him, <sup>R</sup>Eat.<sup>R</sup> She leaves the or else clear enough.

*I like her. Can I keep her please?*

*Maybe, we like her too. Takes after you don't you think?*

<sup>R</sup>How have things been here since I left? I am surprised you are still here.<sup>R</sup> She was the one who helped me the most during the electrical work. Never learned her name. I read it, Lysa.

<sup>R</sup>I am Block 8 Alpha now. I was elected this time. I am sure you noticed the lights are out again. They haven't even given us a lantern this time.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Bedding still has that wonderful smell I love too.<sup>R</sup> She smiles at this.

<sup>R</sup>I am sorry for being rude, but who are you?<sup>R</sup> She waves to all the gear.

<sup>R</sup>As you might guess being a FreeRap electrician is not my normal role.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Yeah, that much is obvious. Just one of those gold/silver things could buy the entire camp I suspect.<sup>R</sup> I shrug like it has no meaning for me, which it doesn't.

Lunch is over. The officer is anxious to get us out of here I am sure.

I tell Lysa, <sup>R</sup>Stay with us please. I want your view of where we go next.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Sure, but we are not allowed out of the yard.<sup>R</sup>

I smile, <sup>R</sup>That won't be a problem.<sup>R</sup>

Nya and Puu have each found a new friend too. The officer will totally freak out next.

Nya informs him, <sup>R</sup>We will now go to the officers mess hall.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>It may be easier if you just accepted my resignation now.<sup>R</sup>

Puu looks at her pad, <sup>R</sup>Officer Dfrg, we understand most if not all of this it out of your control. Are we correct in this understanding?<sup>R</sup>

He nods, <sup>R</sup>We are given very strict guidelines on how everything is supposed to work and almost no budget to do so with.<sup>R</sup>

I ask, <sup>R</sup>You had a guard. Name of Hijj. What ever happened to him?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I do not recall the name. As you saw, guards come and go so fast I doubt even our office knows.<sup>R</sup> I nod. They know, just one more embarrassment. The pay must stink too.

We enter the mess hall and everyone comes to attention and freezes, serving utensils not moving. We get in line to be served. Not the same. We are offered a variety of items that we get to choose from.

I mention to Lysa, <sup>R</sup>I don't see any thin rat soup here at all, do you? Please help yourself. You are my guest.<sup>R</sup>

She tries so hard not to grab everything, watching others to see how it is done. Good. She ends up with a modest amount. I grab some more fish and add it to her plate. No cracked wooden bowls here. All ceramic. No chips even.

The seven of us sit at our own table. Dfrg's plate has only a small portion on it.

Lysa offers him some of her fish, <sup>R</sup>I am sorry sir. I think I took more than I can eat. Not used to fish either.<sup>R</sup> He reluctantly accepts it.

Nya asks her new friend, <sup>R</sup>How it is.<sup>R</sup>

He answers, <sup>R</sup>Best rat soup I ever had.<sup>R</sup> Some of the other officers overhear this and get even quieter if that is possible.

I address Dfrg, <sup>R</sup>The camps will be dismantled. Best be ready for another profession.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We could not keep anyone if we did not offer inducements of some sort.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I am not blaming you. I am blaming everyone, myself included. We all played a part in letting it get this bad. Rap were always meant to be free and equal to the Di.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Not this.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Not this.<sup>R</sup>

We get up to leave and Nya motions everyone else to finish their meals. Probably their last here.

Dfrg gets up anyway and comes with us.

<sup>R</sup>How much trouble would I get in if I removed all the locks from everywhere at the camp and left the front gate open?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Excellent idea.<sup>R</sup>

He runs ahead of us and gives the order. We take our time, talking mostly. Di scramble all over to comply. When we get to the front gate, our three friends confused, but still with us, pause as he and a few others not only open the gate, but remove the hinges and let the gate doors fall off to one side, then throw the hing parts in different directions. He then climbs up and removes the sign above the gate and proceeds to smash it apart. He then takes off his uniform to have simple peasant clothing underneath.

<sup>R</sup>I think I have just officially quit. This is where I came from and am most comfortable with. I only ended up here because I was good at getting things done and was ordered to.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Or else,<sup>R</sup> someone says. He nods.

<sup>R</sup>Assuming you'll have me of course.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>That is up to the group, not me. Is anyone opposed?<sup>R</sup> Everyone looks at each other, but we really are too new of a group yet. He did more than asked to close the camp. I finally say, <sup>R</sup>With the understanding the three of us will always be the leaders.<sup>R</sup> Puu immediately points at me. Okay, fine. I am alpha.

Nya looks at me and I nod.

<sup>R</sup>We are going on a little adventure, the seven of us. Originally it was supposed to be only three of us, but it looks like we have some new friends, so why not.<sup>R</sup>

The three from the camp are on one side and the former officer on the other until Lysa comes to the end next to Dfrg.

<sup>!</sup>In was not nice in the camp of course, but in a lot of ways it was safer too.<sup>!</sup> He nods a thanks. We just learned she is fluent in Di also.

I turn to Lysa and ask, "Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Of course, we had Hu in school. Not as good as my Di or Rap of course, not many Hu about to practice with."

Puu comments, ~She is good. A keeper I would say.~

~Ceph, not so good.~ She obviously got that too.

Not to be left out Dfrg adds, ^I studied Ba in school.^

Nep comes in, ^So did I! Who would have guessed.^

^Do either of you do leaf cutting?^ The both nod and then laugh.

We all turn to Fay, <sup>R</sup>I was just a poor kid. I know several Rap dialects is all I got.<sup>R</sup>

I sign her quickly, <sup>Rh</sup>We need you too. Please do not feel left out

of our new pack.<sup>Rh</sup> She calms down. Must have felt very isolated there for a moment. Scary to be suddenly out of camp and then face being alone too.

When we get to the rich part of town, small as it is, Fay comments, <sup>R</sup>I was raised here. My parents were both servants. I was brought in to help all the time.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Perfect. Take us to the richest home in town.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Granted this is not as good as the city, but if we go up two blocks on the right you will see a gated estate. I have only been inside once. The servants entrance is around the back of course.<sup>R</sup>

Dfrg adds, <sup>R</sup>I was a guest here once. Not that they would remember me dressed like this. They wanted to impress on me how important my position was in keeping the 'rats' under control.<sup>R</sup>

I ask, <sup>R</sup>Your Rap is very good Dfrg. Where did you learn it?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I grew up in an integrated neighborhood before those were not allowed. One of the reasons I got the position. Educated and knew Rap. Made me an officer without having to go to officer training. Resented by the others for that reason.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>If the other officers were racists, what do you think happened when we left the camp?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>They were not bad Di, just a product of their culture. Most do not see how they are being manipulated. But about the camp, the weapons cabinet was locked. I had the only key. I gave it to a Block leader on the way out and told him where it was.<sup>R</sup>

I smile. *We did chose a good team. Normally this would take time and experience with each to be sure, but this feels good.*

*Indeed. Even I am impressed.*

*Do you think it is too soon to let them know more?*

*As the Hu say, play it by ear.*

*I agree. Nya.*

<sup>R</sup>Here we are, now what?<sup>R</sup> Fay says pointing to the main entrance.

Nya smiles, <sup>R</sup>I have another idea. Take us to the servants entrance. They are having a dinner party. Play along.<sup>R</sup>

Fay looks confused. <sup>R</sup>How do you know this? I agree, just curious.<sup>R</sup>

Nya points, <sup>R</sup>Fancy carriages, wagon full of food and drink. The musicians just went that way. Let's follow them.<sup>R</sup>

We traipse after them and no one questions us until we get inside.

The house mother looks us over, !What are you supposed to be?!

Dfrg steps forward, !We are players. This is the evil Rap Squeak,

the member of the sen High Council Puu and her commander Nya, three servants and I of course am Di White, savior of our world, starting from the bottom and reaching for greatness.!

She nods, !Great costumes. You can eat with the others in the main kitchen. Be ready for when you are called. All except Di White actor will expected to wait on tables too of course. ! Dfrg looks mad at this, but plays along.

Nya whispers to him, <sup>R</sup>Keep your ears open. Mingle among the lower class Di and let us know what they say.<sup>R</sup>

Puu looks nervous, *What do I do?*

*Fortunately, yours is the easiest part. I can TP you what you need to say and do, but basically it is just to look arrogant and nasty, especially towards our White. Everyone else knows the story already.*

Nya comes in, *How about making it a comedy?*

*I like it.*

Nya tells Lysa, Nep and Fay what is going to happen. They smile at the thought.

Food for us was not rat soup, but not much better. I have already scanned the entire place. Lots of expensive food and wine. A bad Hu habit the Di learned unfortunately. A drunk Di is not a pretty sight.

The Di Mother watches us like a pack leader. We are struck with a stick she carries if we mess up. We all get struck at least once, just because. Our camp Raps are used to it and pay no attention. Dfrg is not used to it, but one look at us and he 'sucks it up' as the Hu say. I really spent too much time with Sam and Mike.

Our performance was silly. Lots of hitting and bumping, not great, but we get to the end and get a resounding pounding on the tables at our bows. We then mingle among the guests. We all speak Di and are listening as much as participating.

Puu comes up to me, *Do you really do this sort of thing here all the time?*

*This was all about making fun of Raps and some putting down White as an ineffective leader.*

*I noticed that. A lot of off hand comments going around. No fear among this group.*

*As a leader you learn never to upset the ruling class. They can make your life horrible.*

A Di male comes up to me and pinches me on the belly.

!You were great. Fantastic costume. It almost looks real. Let me know if you want to make some extra, if you know what I mean.!

!Unfortunately we have a second gig and will be leaving in a moment.! Besides, losing all your privates may not be what you had in mind as 'extra'.

Fay must have noticed and comes up to me. She hands, <sup>Rh</sup>You okay? Probably not used to this type of behavior, but it is normal unfortunately. They were asking me when I was only three.<sup>Rh</sup>

<sup>Rh</sup>I wish I could say my life has been pain free, but it has not. Everyone gets some of the 'fun', it is all a matter of how you let it affect you.<sup>Rh</sup>

<sup>Rh</sup>We can't get with eggs if raped by a Di, so they think it is okay then.<sup>Rh</sup>

I nod. The rich merchant would have loved the fantasy of raping the High Council Rap. I suspect there are a lot of Di males with that fantasy about.

*Pass the word. We are leaving now.*

It is dark outside of course. Our norms are likely very tired. A long day for them.

Still Lysa asks, <sup>R</sup>Where to next?<sup>R</sup>

*This is your call Squeak.* Puu of course.

<sup>R</sup>How far is the capital from here?<sup>R</sup>

Nep says, <sup>R</sup>About three eighths by train, which does not run again until light. Buses might still be going and take about five eighths.<sup>R</sup>

I sigh in the Hu style. This makes a few jump.

<sup>R</sup>We three are not exactly as we appear. Puu here is on the sen High Council on a world called Alexandria.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>For real? Not just for the act?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>For real. She is actually a Hu, but as that would stand out a lot here, she decided being Rap would work better.<sup>R</sup>

They look at us like we have lost our brain fluids.

*Going to have to show them.*

No one ever takes my word for it. <sup>R</sup>Please sit. It might be easier that way. Have any been to the capital before?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I have, field trip when I was young. Don't remember much.<sup>R</sup>

They are all sitting though.

<sup>R</sup>Do you remember Freedom Square?<sup>R</sup> He nods. And we are there.

<sup>R</sup>Is this what it looked like?<sup>R</sup>

Silence. Lysa is the first to rise, <sup>R</sup>I knew it! I knew you were special. Why didn't you just tell us right away? We suffered through rat soup, twice, and butt pinches and so much more.<sup>R</sup>

Nya answers, <sup>R</sup>Because this trip was not for your benefit but ours.

We needed to see for ourselves what Squeak had found out. At first we were not intending to include the four of you. We are now going to appear before the High Council, which is already in session by the way.<sup>R</sup> We took longer than I thought, but this could work to our advantage.

We enter the building. At first we are questioned until I snarl at the guards. They recognize me now.

White is coming down the stairs as we are going up. He freezes.

<sup>R</sup>Squeak.<sup>R</sup>

!White.!

!I have to get home to the young ones.!

!I would recommend staying.!

!It is finally happening. Oh guano, is that Puu in Rap form.!

She nods to White.

!This has sen High Council approval then?! I nod.

!You can't say you did not see it coming. I warned you enough times.!

!You did. I freely admit before the sen High Council I was told.!

He says this to Puu of course.

!Who are the others?!

Nya goes first, !I am Nya, grad student of Puu's at Alexandria.!

She nudges Lysa.

!I am Lysa and this is Nep and Fay, all former inmates at one of the concentration camps.!

He does not like the sound of that. He was not supposed to.

!I am the former commander of the same camp.!

Dfrg actually smiles. That was good. White is sunk. We have first hand witnesses with us.

!We have been to a merchant household as well. We entertained them as a traveling troupe. That was fun at least. I can't believe how much wealth they had. So much wealth.!

There goes the argument that they were all suffering.

!We best get up there then. They are having a reception of some sort. Those things sicken me, so I begged off. The formal council meeting ended some time ago.!

He sighs, !But they are all still there.!

He looks at Puu, !You are not limiting me?!

!Do I need to?! Our four guests look confused, but do not question this.

When we enter the room it goes silent.

*You did tell them this could happen right?*



*Many times. I am more a figure head than a real ruler now. Of course I could have forced it, but we all operate under rules to avoid that if at all possible.*

*At least some rules still apply, good to know. You will back us. Not a question.*

!Council Members and guests. High Council Member Squeak you all know. Next to her is Soaring Bird of the sen High Council, yeah, they are real. Next is her, graduate student Nya. Any of these could have you for lunch with a single thought. Don't be stupid. The remaining four are from Re-education Camp Di Pride. Di Dfrg was the commander, the others were inmates. Any questions so far?!

!You have no authority here. Leave.! She signals for guards to come forward to escort us out and likely kill us once out of their sight. They are fully armed with ballistics.

Puu steps forward, guns are pointed at her. She smiles.

!I am not prey.! The guns, guards, sensors, cameras, etc. are all gone from the room. Even I do not know where.

She pulls a scroll from her pouch.

!You are hereby charged with attempted genocide, false imprisonment, and failure to abide by the Di-Rap accords set out one thousand three hundred and five years ago on this very spot.!

!We know nothing of these accords. You can't hold us to something we were never told about.!

Lysa points to the wall behind them and starts to read, !We here gathered to hereby affirm for all time that in all regards Di and Rap are to be treated equally in all aspects of life, property and rights.!

<sup>R</sup>Seems straightforward to me.<sup>R</sup>

!Nobody likes a smart rat.! Someone whispers.

Puu sighs, !That was really stupid.! It is the middle of the night in the chambers, but we are suddenly in a desert at high noon. I quickly determine where we are. Not a nice place.

!Now if we can continue without any more interruptions.! Neither Di or Rap like being in this kind of heat. I am covering our four so they do not suffer.

!Who are you? What are you?!

!I am your worst nightmare. As of now, you have all resigned your positions on the council. Behind you, you will find modest housing, water and sap chow enough to sustain you. Unfortunately I will not do anything about the weather. You earned that all by yourselves. Please understand we have NEVER had to evoke this clause

before. I am very disappointed. I have know White for a very long time. I know this was not of his doing.! He could have sent a Cat box or two though.

!You have no proof. We have done nothing wrong. We can't be responsibly for all the Di under us and under them.!

White speaks up, !I warned you till my feathers nearly fell off. You knew exactly what you were doing and why. I get it. I was once against the Rap as well. I hated them. They were annoying pests that raided crops and livestock. I thought they were nothing more than stupid rat catchers. Vermin to be exterminated. This sound familiar? Like all of you have been saying we needed to get back to the good old days.

Where do you think all of our tech advances have been coming from and are now failing? Di did not think these advances up, the Rap did. I learned they are definitely sen, maybe even higher than we are. They were even willing, after millions of years of abuse from us, to work together with us. They had the intelligence to see that working together we could be more than either of our kind could accomplish alone.

Squeak, the same one you see before you, was the one who turned me around. A friend of Soaring Bird took her as her own even though she was the weakest of a clutch and destined to be abandoned.

Soaring Bird, if you will please.!

Puu sighs and morphs to her true form.

White continues, !Even though Cat was a Hu, like Soaring Bird, she took on the care of an abandoned Rap chick. She was given the name of Squeak because that was the sound she made as the Hu heard it.

Do you remember the 'thant attack? We were nearly destroyed. Squeak fought along side me during that conflict. Another Hu, a friend, figured out the 'thants were not enemies at all. They were just trying to protect their homes and members, same as any of us would.!

!That is just an old myth used to scare the young into behaving. We only put up with Rap Squeak because you insisted.!

I shake my head, Hu wise, !This is hopeless White. Let's go. Most norms would be totally freaked out by what has already happened. They are so steeped in their hate they cannot see what is right in front of them.!

Puu says, !I see three possibilities. One, we leave them here to slowly die. They deserve it, so I certainly would not feel bad about

that choice. Likely others would just step in and continue as if they had never existed. Two, we force the changes that need to happen. This would involve a long period of heavy stewardship. This usually does not work because as soon as we left, they would revert as fast as they could. Three, if they hate the Raps that much, we remove them from their world. They see the Raps as having so little value that they have already killed over fifty percent of the population and the rest are imprisoned or made lowly servants before they are sent to the camps when space becomes available due to death.!

Puu turns to me, I turn to the four we brought with us.

<sup>R</sup>What say you four? Yes, we can lead all of the Rap from this world to another one without Di. Understand, this will be hard. We can help set up some infrastructure to get things started, but you will have to work nearly as hard as the camps to get farms going, transport, government, schools, everything that is needed.<sup>R</sup>

Dfrg speaks first, <sup>R</sup>I really have no right to speak at all, so I will go first and then be quiet. Number three. I have seen nothing in my short life to indicate that more than a few Di could accept the Rap being equal. I admit I have not always understood this and deserve to be punished with the rest of Di. I accept, in saying this, that I will remain here and likely killed for being a traitor. If this sets the Rap free, it will be worth it.<sup>R</sup>

Well said Dfrg.

The three Raps confer among themselves for a moment.

Lysa steps forward.

!You are letting camp rats determine our fate? How is that fair?!

Puu quietly says, !Silence idiots. You shame all who call themselves sen.! She removes their ability to speak. I doubt she will give it back either. This situation is really making her mad. Worse than I have seen since the Regional Center incident.

I hold Lysa back a moment, <sup>R</sup>Understand that the other sen worlds also have problems. But this is the second time a Di world has attempted to exterminate a competitor on their world. They succeeded eventually on Di One.<sup>R</sup>

Whites says, !This is true. They were called the Dia, a very peaceful smaller sen. Very wise. Great healers.!

Lysa looks to me and I nod.

<sup>R</sup>We agree with the council, as much as we hate to admit it. This should be decided by all Raps, not just us.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>But not the Di. <sup>R</sup>Dfrg is insistent on this. The others nod.

The council members have all retreated to the shelters. It won't take long before they start attacking each other. Always blame someone else. Seems to be a common sense trait unfortunately.

Puu makes a Cat Box and sends it off.

We do not have to wait long. Myra and the Meeps show up to help. The four are totally fascinated by them of course.

"Understand that with the Rap gone, the Di are likely to take it out on the 'thants next. Surprised they haven't already, but the nest appears fine."

White comes in, "They have been keeping a low profile and out of sight. They did not approve of what happened either, citing evidence from other cultures where this always leads to collapse."

<sup>R</sup>Hey, everyone, not all of our new friends understand Hu yet.

They were talking about the 'thants likely will be the next victims of Di hate.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I have never seen a 'thant.<sup>R</sup> Nep says.

<sup>R</sup>They live under the capital and only come out at night when they sense it is safe. They have tunnels that extend to the arctic too. They love to eat lichen for some reason I never figured out.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Oh, that is easy. Even a brown world is likely to have them. And any sense is likely not interested, so no competition.<sup>R</sup>

Fay, <sup>R</sup>That makes sense. Good for them. I would love to meet one now.<sup>R</sup>

*Okay Edwin, I know you have been listening in. Come into the conversation. They have seen and experienced DS.*

Edwin pops in. Everyone freezes.

<sup>R</sup>This is a 'thant? They are huge.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Not just any 'thant, this is Edwin, The 'thant Librarian and also on the sense High Council.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You should see their warriors, ten times this size.<sup>R</sup> Eyes go wide.

<sup>th</sup>Welcome Edwin.<sup>th</sup>

*I am glad you included me. Their decision will affect our kind as well.*

<sup>R</sup>It spoke in my mind! Amazing!<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Only because you don't know 'thant yet.<sup>R</sup>

*We hope we will be welcome on the new Rap world as well.*

<sup>R</sup>Definitely,<sup>R</sup> they all say at once.

Edwin does a bow and they laugh and return their own bows.

Myra TPs me, *You know you will have to keep them now.* Smiling of course. She knows this role well with the Meeps, umm, and Puu

and Cat especially.

*I was intending to. Definitely. None of them freaked at all.  
Excellent. An open mind is hard to find. I nod agreement.*

# Mars

A Cat Box appears on my desk. I hate these things. They always mean intrusions. I sigh and touch the top. It will only open for me, so I can't pass this one off on anyone else either.

Inside is a small note written in Martian of all things.

It states simply, Myra is here with her children.

Her children? Since when do TKs have kids, well at least Hu do not. We have had to adapt here on Mars, genetic diversity cannot be wasted. I tried to stay away from this idea, but eventually I was talked into artificial means. The idea of touching someone else is repulsive to me. Years of being a monk set that in permanently.

I put things away. I do not like disorder. Another monk leftover. I make my way to the outside to the receiving garden. There is a short female attempting to smell the flowers. Hu noses are not sensitive enough to smell our flowers. Then she runs to one of our art works, pauses and then starts laughing. Now I am curious. Hu usually just see a mess of disordered colored tiles. It is not, but this is what lower minds see.

I approach her and stand next to her for the prescribed time. Not polite to interrupt someone appreciating art. Most of our art is ephemeral, which we see as the highest art form, but we have a few, in this garden only, that are more permanent. They are changed out often.

<sup>M</sup>This is really funny. I would love to meet the artist if that is not rude.<sup>M</sup>

I wait.

<sup>M</sup>I'm sorry, I am being rude again for not introducing myself. I am Myra. I assume you are Ron.<sup>M</sup> I nod, but say nothing.

I hand her the note I received.

<sup>M</sup>Oh, the kids, you are wondering about the kids. I did not write the note, so of course. I will get them. You will love them.<sup>M</sup>

I finally say something, <sup>M</sup>What does this piece say to you?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>You do talk! I was warned you do not say much. As you can guess I talk too much. It is okay to just tell me to shut up. I will not be offended. I have not been here since the kids. Do you have a TK parasite problem? They are usually quicker than this.<sup>M</sup>

I tap my torque. She is not wearing one. Dangerous.

<sup>M</sup>Here is one, oh she is full too. Well, you used to have a parasite

problem.<sup>M</sup> She smiles and laughs. I am not taking off my torque. It has become part of me.

<sup>M</sup>She is not Hu.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Oh, you thought they were my kids, as in genetic contribution. I am their step mother. Apparently the way Meep reproduction works is once they are ready, they split into thirty six. Here are the rest of them.<sup>M</sup> Definitely not from our dimension.

She is looking at the sculpture mosaic again and smiling.

<sup>M</sup>What do you see?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>It is hilarious. I would really like permission to use this in my classes. If a student gets it, they pass. Such an elegant easy way to assess them.<sup>M</sup>

I wait.

<sup>M</sup>Oh, you mean what does it Mean? It is an excellent mockery of a sixth dimensional quantum theory that has since been dismissed as juvenile. Quite good. Do you have more?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>I assume this is not the reason for your visit.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>No, right, of course not. The fact that understanding this sort of puzzle is part of your culture is a good sign. I feel like I am in the right place.<sup>M</sup> She still talks too much. Not efficient.

The 'kids' have all dispersed again.

<sup>M</sup>Please instruct them to leave a few.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Ah, right. The fear factor. We threaten them with being put into a primitive culture with a full set of limiters. Not knowing the language.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Not an option here. We only have one culture, one language and one people.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Of course. Right, the reason for my being here. Some sen has created a creature affectionately referred to as the Terror, because it can completely destroy a culture and pretty much all land based life on a world.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>A theoretical construct.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Oh no. It has destroyed a number of worlds and threatens Earth Two as we speak. Well, it was a threat, the Meeps are good at hunting them too. We only have a few left for study purposes.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>How does it work?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Ah, two forms, an asexual form that splits into three with all the knowledge of the original, sort of like the Meeps and a spore form that produces millions of very small ones with no transfer of knowledge. A sort of method of last resort is our guess.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>There is more?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Yeah, sorry. Their strategy is the young sporelings apparently make friends with a sen, learn their ways, and reproduce to be useful at first, then have the sen dependent on them and finally to destroy them. They do not even try to spread to other locations, that apparently only happens by accident. Still equally destructive.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>What do you need from us? You seem to have it figured out.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>We have two examples. An original that appeared at Alexandria from, we do not know where, and a made one from a mind image of the Alexandria one transferred to a Hu fem form the Cats turned back into Terror form.<sup>M</sup>

I sigh, <sup>M</sup>Owa I suspect.<sup>M</sup> She nods.

<sup>M</sup>She has a dark side. A waste.<sup>M</sup> She sighs and nods again.

<sup>M</sup>Here is the thing. The original has DNA with six bases and the new form, equally destructive in asexual and spore form, has only the Hu four base DNA.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Do they code for the same proteins?<sup>M</sup> She shakes her head no.

<sup>M</sup>We think it is not the physical but the programming, er, code for the, ah behavior.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>If it is not the DNA, then they must be able to morph from one form to the other. What is their original form?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Ah, I knew you would see it my way. None of the others get this. There must be some key that triggers the transformation. We have not been able to determine it so far. Hence my visit.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>I assume you have some in stasis without the life force.<sup>M</sup> She nods.

<sup>M</sup>Worthless.<sup>M</sup> Her smile gets bigger.

<sup>M</sup>You are going to make me go back with you to visit with some.<sup>M</sup>  
Not a question.

<sup>M</sup>Maybe this artist could go instead.<sup>M</sup>

I sigh, <sup>M</sup>That is my work. I also use it to test students with. You passed on the first try.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Being linked with the Meeps gives me a huge edge. Before I met the mother I would never have understood your work. There are only a few others I could name who would likely get it quickly too. We are all working on this problem, but we are possibly too close. We need a new perspective.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>You know who made them?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>We think so.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Understanding their culture would be a first step.<sup>M</sup>



<sup>M</sup>We have been banned from visiting them, even after saving them from extinction. Their culture is easy though, be perfect in your ecology or they destroy you, this includes themselves.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>We are all doomed by that criteria.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>They give you some time to figure it out. We don't know how long though and they have already told us we are likely doomed.<sup>M</sup> Even our ecology is not perfect, if it ever can be on Mars. Constant tweaking.

<sup>M</sup>Hence the need to figure this puzzle out.<sup>M</sup> She nods.

# Cat Eden

The entire world is not good. It is still important to be selective. Owa was so picky. Her thinking was this is our last chance, might as well make as good of a choice for the palace as possible.

I believe she is finally satisfied, at least for now. We have found a location on this world with moderate climate, mountain streams with large fish, access to the shore and a forest. Open meadows for sunning and training of kits. Game, lots of game. So much game. They do not know yet we are danger, so are very easy to catch. Even Owa realizes this will not last. The easy ones will soon be gone and the smart ones will remain. This will be better for everyone.

This time we are spreading out as much as possible. We will not make the same mistake of too many with most starving to death. The Terror was actually a blessing. They forced us to do what we should have done from the beginning. It was Owa who wanted to settle on Hu Eden to keep a watch on her enemies. I liked some of them. It is so hard to get a good massage now. Rubbing against trees is not the same, even if it leaves your scent behind.

Fresh food, still warm from life is so good. I hope we never have to eat cat chow ever again. Yes, we can make it, but now it is only a punishment for a bad kitty. In a bowl along with water, in a cage. The ultimate humiliation. Oh, and they have to wear a collar for a year too. The ultimate shame. Some don't learn of course and get banished to less desirable locations. Their ears are notched so we will always know them. If they can succeed there so much the better for all of us. Maybe it takes a less social, nasty Cat to survive in these locations.

We have made shelters this time as well. The high TKs are given this task as it is easy for them. Every Cat is entitled to at least a dry place to sleep and keep warm. Of course during training, they are subjected to snow, rain, endless rain, wind and all sorts of unpleasantness. Toughens them up and makes them more appreciative for the minimal social conditions we have chosen as our ideal. Some seek adventure of course and purposely choose more difficult locations to test themselves. Upon their return they are made instructors and given high honors, especially if they have the scars to prove their stories.

Life is good, the best we have had in thousands of years. I stretch, roll over and settle down for a nap. I will have kits of my own soon. I

don't miss that part as much. Doing my part I guess.

# Regional Center

"Took us a month to get here using a star ship. I wish we had 'thn again. Only took a moment with them."

"They moved the RC, so may not be true. They have purposely made it harder for the Evil Ones to cause more harm."

"I want to know what happened to Susan and Roger. I could not care less about the Silver gang. If I never see them again, that is fine with me."

"Do you miss Ku?" I nod no.

"Do you miss Di?"

"No way. I was never given this much freedom on Di. We are both sevens. Best I could have hoped for there was a four. Never want to be dependent on a healer again. Humiliating."

"True. They never seem to understand our body types either."

"Docking complete," comes over the ship speak.

"Best get this over with I guess. Any idea where to look. It is a large space and they do not appreciate center wide scanning."

"Much more paranoid than in the old days. Of course there were 'thn all over back then too."

We make our way to the docking port. It is already open when we arrive. Shore leave for half the crew and special assignment for the two of us. Of course, if anyone hears anything about them we will be told. Most will head straight for the entertainment section or the library. I am not crazy about the new librarian. Max being a Di is not even allowed in there. They are not taking any more chances on a Di seducing their librarian I guess. Not that it had ever happened before.

I have to wonder if the few who were abandoned on Magenta got to go home first. We really did think that everyone had died in the crash and once we learned of the effect the planet had on TK, we avoided the place for fear of another crash. Maybe we should have sent a team down to look for survivors, but if you saw the images of the crash site you could not believe there were any survivors either.

We are not well received. As soon as they figure out someone is from Farout we are shoved out the door. Trying to get a story of why has not been easy either. I was not always a high level Ku, neither was Max. We head for the lower sen area. The high sen can be so beak in the air birdies. We find a run down bar with only a few patrons. Perfect. We order drinks and find an empty table. No ques-

tions. We will just listen instead.

We spend nearly a day before we are approached. Why did the Silver gang change their time system? Of course Hu was not the same as Ku either, but neither one used this system of base eight guano.

An exo and a fuzzy approach us and sit without asking. Okay.

*We don't want any trouble. If we offend you, we will leave. No hard feelings, Max TPs.*

It makes some weird sound from its spiracles.

*Welcome to the lower decks. All of us have been expelled from above. The question is why were you?*

Max sighs, *We are from Farout.* He then gets up ready to leave.

Instead, we receive, *Welcome.* Max is stunned and slowly sits down again. Makes we wonder why they were expelled, but this is our chance and I do not want to rat it.

I come in with, *We were not the ones who put the 'thn asleep.*

*Okay. We are guessing that the fact you breathe this air and the temperature is comfortable you likely come from worlds similar to ours.*

We look at each other and them.

I answer, *We at Farout are all from one froth set. Makes interacting easier I guess.* If you do not include the Cetaceans who want nothing to do with the rest of us. Not that I can blame them.

*Yet you have a ship.*

*No 'thn to do the trip for us.* I shrug.

Max adds, *We did not make it. Some nines did that. I don't even know who. Before our time. That was before I advanced enough to care or notice.*

*Good design if sevens can run it. We would be interested in a possible tech trade.* They know we are sevens then. So much for privacy.

*We are actually here trying to find two of our community who were supposed to be here a few seggs ago, but have not returned. I broadcast their images.* Had to use RC standard time as I am sure they have no idea what our year is.

*They unfortunately had an encounter with two groups of bullies and were caught between. They left suddenly. Their ship apparently took off without them. Maybe. Not here any longer.*

The fuzzy one finally says something, *We were not there of course. Just RC gossip. No one who was present is here any longer.*

Exo comes in again, *We are not saying we are unhappy about the*

*bullies leaving. They challenged everyone in the lower deck at one time or another. The other bully was a single Hu, small too. It was clearly the one in charge from the stories.*

*I think I know who you are talking about. She is part of a larger group. You will never find them together where anyone can get to them. Stay away from them. They have weapons beyond belief.*

*They say the group the small one confronted was interested in taking out some enemies of your group so they could have their power. She made their 'thn come alive, put them asleep again, then woke them. She had command over 'thn. Scary shit.*

*We can confirm this group is the one we are trying to avoid at all costs. If our team members are no longer here we should not be either. I am afraid there will not be time for a tech transfer unless we return.*

*It will be fine. We are used to disappointment. We are the lower deck after all.*

Back on board the ship Max and I talk.

"We need to give up on the idea of getting anything from the Silver group. We need to go back and make the most of our new lives. Just be thankful we are no longer at Farout. The new world they gave us is good. There are other planets, moons, and asteroids to explore."

"And we do not even know what is nearby in the froth. Certainly enough to keep us entertained for a few more thousand years."

"Bit lonely though. Looking at your ugly face for so long . . . ."

"You are no beauty either. Take care of your feathers at least." I show amusement. I am obsessive about my feathers. An old joke.

I think we need to do a Sauron and try to raise sen from the more promising creatures available to us. Something to pass the time at least.

# Alexandria

*HELP!* I send out the call. Last time I was here was at the beginning and I have no idea how things are set out now. It looks confusing with different sen going in every direction. Does not help that the gravity is earth froth normal or three times what I am used to.

Puu comes in first and then see Myra. Myra is curled into a ball of grief.

<sup>M</sup>What happened Ron?<sup>M</sup>

"We were attacked by parasites. I insisted on Myra wearing a gold collar or I would not come with her on her project. Project Fluffy she called it."

Puu goes to assess Myra.

"She appears to be okay? What's wrong?"

"The parasite that attacked us was huge. We were hit in DS space by it and a huge swarm of the more normal smaller ones. I am guessing it was a queen to use a 'thant analogy. There were just too many. The Meeps did the best they could and we eventually got away. Thank goodness she wore gold. We would have lost her too."

"But . . ."

"Three of the Meeps died. She has been like this ever since."

"She is very close to them. Grief is not a normal emotion for us. We pretend we are immortal and nothing can happen to us."

"Mars teaches us different lessons. I have watched too many die from accidents, shortages of water or food, even murder over silly things."

"We have those too. Best if we do not get too attached to those in our care." I nod, but we have so few that I know everyone one on Mars by name. I am guessing there are close to a million here alone, not counting the other earth froth worlds.

"Cat got freaked when she came close to death by a couple of Farout rebels who wanted to take over Earth Two. They failed, but just barely. It was very close."

"Don't have to be TK to feel that." She nods.

"Took her many eight days to come out of it and she still keeps to herself most of the time. If you want to see the two Terror shells we have I can take you. We stored them in an asteroid so they could never be found by accident."

Myra pops out.

"I put her in her quarters and told others to look in on her. The project is important, so I am volunteering to help."

"I guess I should see the shells, though we already determined they will not tell us much."

"What is your working theory?"

"Probably a weapon developed by the Tafa. It is more of an idea than a thing. They could probably start with any sen and make one of it."

"That is scary. Though I suppose I could make a plague easy enough if I thought about it. Would never do it of course. I read the report on the Tafa. They are hard core idealists. No question."

"Is Tewk here, do you think? I do not know enough to scan for one."

Puu hesitates for a moment, "Tewk is present. S/he hangs out in Hotevilla with Tia and Sam. Sort of an old west Hopi town they have set up on the route from the Western Port to here. Some of the students prefer to get used to our world by making the trip themselves. Keki did. We will visit him and the others who have fuzzies later."

We pop out to a dry dusty hot location with almost now vegetation.

"Except for the heat I would think I was on Mars. Fascinating."

"We learned a lot about how to live out here from studying your methods actually. Water is the biggest problem of course. Same as on Mars. I was born on the Hopi reservation, but that was so long ago I have forgotten more than I remember."

"I was born on Earth One, but do not remember it at all. Why we have libraries." She nods.

We go up to the General Store. I have to bend nearly in half to get in. Inside I have to stoop very low. I find a seat and sit and my head is nearly in the rafters.

"Is this ceiling lower than normal?"

Tia laughs and comes out to greet us, "Welcome Ron. Yes, it is. Sam and I are not that tall and our memories of Hotevilla were of low ceilings as well. When you live in the desert, wood is expensive and you do not waste it."

"Why not build with stone then?"

Sam suggests, "Tradition? Actually most of the Hopi homes were built from stone, but why make it larger than needed, it takes time and energy for stone as well."

Tia says, "Many of the newer Hopi homes were adobe, basically



mud and straw. Make it a third of a meter thick and it is cool in the summer and warm in the winter." She turns to Sam, "Let's do that next?" He smiles and nods.

The door squeaks as someone enters. I have never seen a Yesan in person. Strange does not begin to describe s/he. There is a cowboy hat on its dorsal surface and a gold star on the ventral one.

Sam sees me looking, "Didn't Puu mention, Tewk is our local sheriff."

"We did not have cowboys on Earth One. I will have to look this up in the library."

"Did you have Hopi?"

"I would not know. There were Native Americans, but they were not destroyed by Europeans like on your earth."

Puu says, "I should have been born on your world. Too bad. Come meet Tewk."

*Please do not rise Ron. It is a pleasure to meet someone adapted to a new and different world. My ancestors did that themselves with many worlds. Nothing recent however. You are here because of the Terror. Not a question. Given how long I am, we do not look that different really, just in the number of arms and how they are held. Interesting.*

Puu comes in, "Myra and Ron were attacked by parasites, including by a queen. Three Meeps were lost. Myra is in grief."

*Yes, we know about the parasites. I thought the Meeps had protection by using a gold matrix adapted to 6D.*

"You are well informed. It was the number of them. Thousands at once. The Meeps tried to defend us and gave us time to escape. Yes, we were wearing gold as well. Normally this would make us unattractive and they would ignore us. We do not know why they attacked."

*You were threatening their nest.*

"Of course. We don't have nests on Mars. I had forgotten the habits of nest builders."

Tia comments, "One of the reasons Sam and I like it here. The cities are too much like nests. Too crowded."

"You would like it on Mars then. The scenery is nearly the same as here and low population. No crowding."

*I would like to visit Mars sometime. Sounds wonderful to me.*

Puu smiles, "Yesan are nesters, but our Tewk is an exception we are happy to have." Tewk bows in thanks.

"You would be most welcome. Maybe we should get back to our task. I believe our theory is similar to yours. The Tafa are responsible. It is their means of cultural purification. A very tough standard that is nearly impossible to meet."

*I would say impossible if their own world was nearly destroyed.*

"You think that was intentional and not accidental."

*The Terror has been around as long as anyone knew of the Tafa, tens of thousands of your solars. No one makes a mistake like that using a weapon known for that long.*

"Sorry my voice sounds funny to me in this thick air. We need to get back to the task. How is the question, and secondary if it is possible to reverse the process."

"Hmm, reversing it would likely give us the how as well. I really do not relish the idea of making sen victims as we practice turning them though." No of course not.

*The only Terror we know of are on Earth Two attached to TKs correct?*

"Unless you know of another source."

*It is hard to find a world under attack. It does not take more than a few of your solars to kill the world. Timing it right would be nearly impossible. Good point Tewk.*

I sigh, "I guess we should start with the hidden shells. We might be able to learn something from them. A start. I need to get back to Mars., This needs to get moving as Silver used to say."

We make our way to the vault. I am not going to start another chapter just for that. Consider this chapter to be about my participation in this question. Too much paper work already.

They really did not take any chances on the vault. Without TK there would be no way. Even then, there were encrypted locks with advanced limiters you needed to get past. Last thing we need is for this to be used on us or anyone else. I would like to see them destroyed, but they assure me it is unlikely they can be used without a sen transferred to one. That would not be hard to do. We have all been in different forms. What would a Terror be like as a high TK as well? Even I could destroy all of Mars, not that I ever would, but should anyone have that ability?

Yesan is the most curious and goes all around the boxes, even though we can scan.

*I have never actually seen one before, just studied them in our training on my home world. Required study for all of us.*

"The notes say they have a 4D component. Is it safe to enter DS space here?" I ask.

"We got them here by DS, so I suspect so. Go ahead, I will spot you." I nod a thanks and enter DS space level one. This allows me to see their 4D component. I go in further. When I get to 6D it becomes obvious. Super obvious. I come out.

"I have the answer. We do not need to see a live one. If you like I can change the Cat produced one back to it's natural state. Of course it will not have the correct DNA, but without a 'soul' it will not be alive anyway."

*That fast? Who are you? We have studied them for thousands of your years and no one found the answer. Can you show me in DS space?*

"Sure, how are you at thirteen dimensional manifolds?"

*I am willing to try.*

Puu nods but says, "Take me next."

I show Tewk and return.

*Fascinating. You have to see this Puu. He is correct. We should have seen it. Obvious once you are shown. Not that I am surprised.*

Puu admonishes Tewk, "Don't do anything till we get back. I want to see how it works too."

*Of course.*

Puu and I enter and I show her.

"Myra and her Meeps should have seen this. They eat and sleep in 13D space. How come they did not see it?"

Tewk asks Puu, *Did you ever ask her to try?*

Puu's mouth opens and then closes. I am guessing not.

"In her defense. Would either of you gotten it if I had not shown you? We pride ourselves on complex math on Mars. It is knowledge to us, not just intuition."

"Yeah, we depend too much on intuition. We have gotten lazy and impatient. You are right. We have all been looking right at it and not seen it. I can take Tewk back if you want to get back to Mars Ron."

"I would like to see this out. I would like to undo the Cat made one."

"Do both. I have an intuition they will not be the same."

I smile because I agree with her.

"Ready?" I ask.

"You solved it, you should get the reward."

I nod. The Cat one turns into a Hu fem and little larger than Puu,

but still smaller than most Hu fem.

"Makes sense. Also means that Owa and Sylvy also knew the answer. They beat us to it. That should get Silver and Turtle." She smiles.

I do the second and Tewk hisses. A Tridon. Obvious when you put all the pieces together.

*The Tafa did this.*

"It could be worse than that. Silver forbid us to go to Tridon because that is where he put Sauron."

*That is insane. They com by linking. If he teaches them to turn into Terror themselves and by linking they combine their TK abilities. The entire galaxy could be at risk. Stupid earthlings.*

# Frog Harbor

"This is nuts. We are stuck here as the world is collapsing around us. It would almost be better if they did not send us the newsletter."

+I agree. This is very depressing. I need to get back to Ku Eden, though now that Flor knows we froth'd it helps.+

"Glad we are TK and don't duplicate. Would be awfully strange to see yourself." Lizat shudders.

*What could be better than that? I am gorgeous after all.*

I nudge George. She can be so full of herself at times. She is cuddling Killer as if she was a her own kit.

"We might as well go back to our own sections of Madscar if no one has anything else?"

Of course Puu chooses this time to pop in. I sigh. Always means trouble or work.

"Sorry, we found a 'cure' for the Terror." Our fluffies had all gotten pretty big. There is a lot of food for them around here. They seem to understand what she said though. Maybe through our links.

"It is a little tricky. Hold on." She phase shifts and then suddenly all of the fluffies in the room turn into naked ladies. Identical at that.

Puu comes back into normal form, "Good, that theory works at least. Check them out to be sure they are okay. Clothes might be nice too."

Survivor looks at me uncertain what has happened.

"Well young lady it looks like you are going to have to learn how to be a Hu now. This normally takes twenty years."

*I have watched you this last year. Give me information and I will adapt.*

*I am a male. There are differences.*

*You mean that ugly thing between your legs?*

"Puu, Survivor still has TP. Might want to assess what other TK abilities are present." She nods.

Hobbes sniff her and gets a bat on his nose. He hisses at her in response. She glares back at him.

"Okay, you two, be nice. The three of us will need to learn to get along."

I am bonded to both.

"Right. Puu, she is still claiming the bond."

"Interesting. All of you are going to need to journal this. Does the

bond last. I suspect that the new form will allow it to wear off."

+Can you change mine back. I think I preferred her as a Fluffy.

Hu are so ugly.+ Everyone laughs at that.

"No spikes. How will they defend themselves?" Mouse asks.

"How do we tell them apart. Hey, everyone make a necklace with your favorite stone. Anything to tell them apart at a distance please."

"Let's go outside too." We pop out.

"At least Princess might allow me back. I think she became jealous of mine. No way is she going to be jealous of a stupid monkey."

"Right, just another slave to order around." We laugh, with a humph from the Cats.

George really does not know what do do with hers. Technically she is bonded to two Hu now, a male and a fem. I walk up to Mouse.

"Hope she will not expect the two of you to mate."

He shakes his head, "Not my type. They look like they are not more than fifteen." He looks around, "Actually they do all look a little different. I wonder if this has something to do with how large they were when Puu changed them?"

Puu is listening in, "You could be right. I suspect it has something to do with mass. Terror grow by eating. Hu change when growing. This will really be interesting if they are mentally at different places too."

+Why Hu?+

Puu answers, "It is the way they work and all of these are descendants from the form Marie put the first one in. There are differences though. The six came from spores where there is some genetic mixing. The original ones would all be identical as they reproduced by simple asexual division."

She is right. The differences are subtle. Mine has thinner eyebrows, where as George's are bushier. They are all different shades of light brown, but not identical. None are what I would call Frica shades. I think Marie used a Hopi template, probably a variation on herself or fem she has known well.

"They have six fingers on the left hand." Sure enough all of them have this trait.

Puu conjectures, "I think Marie did this on purpose so she always knew where Spikes was." Makes sense. Why only the one hand?

Hobbes pops in and Survivor pops behind her to bat her tail. She used to do this when in Fluffy form too. Hobbes turns around to her popping to the other side and batting her tail again.

I turn to find Puu right next to me.

"It would appear they absorbed all the TK skills that the one they bonded with had. This could be a real problem. We are very selective who we let have TK."

Suddenly Hobbes had her on the ground pinned and is licking her face.

"I put limiters on them. Be sure to teach her Standard or you will not be able to com. We can't have untrained TKs at that level. Only takes one to dissolve a city just because someone pissed them off." I nod.

"Why didn't they manifest as fluffies then? None of the had DS, just TP."

"TP is a TK7 trait with Hu. Maybe they are all sevens because they could all TP?"

"Clearly there is more to learn."

"That could be a problem. Myra and the Meeps did a great job of removing them from Earth Two. No more to experiment with unless we make our own. You want to volunteer?" I look at her in horror and shake my head violently.

"One of us might have to eventually so we know what really is going on."

"I believe this is the role of a condemned person. Or someone else who is likely to die anyway."

"We could heal anyone injured or sick. Kinda of cruel to turn them instead. I don't approve of capital punishment either."

"Banishment is better? Ask Mouse how he feels about that."

"They at least have a chance. Kill them and the chance is zero."

"The difference between quick or slow for many people. Not sure when I was starving to death because I had no idea how to survive in wild I would not choose the quick."

"At least you are talking about a choice. Most just want to hang 'em and bury them."

"Or beheading. A lot of the slavers were using metal weapons."

"Yeah, we are working on that. It was not supposed to be possible to forge iron weapons. Then someone figured out blood was loaded with iron. Takes the blood from fifty people to make a single sword though."

"Ouch. What happened? Why did the Hu turn so nasty here on Earth Two?"

"I suspect Silver and Turtle are laughing right now. Droop and

Randy handled it for a thousand years. Then we take over and it all falls apart in less than a dozen."

"Hmm, I suspect a set up. Droop was never that excited about caring for Earth Two. I think this was about to happen when you came in."

"Could be right. Other sen talk about regular cycling between dark ages and golden ones. Maybe it is just the way sen work. Still it would have been nice to see an exception once."



# Alexandria

+What does this have to do with us? Seems like exclusively a Hu problem.+

^I don't agree. It feels like Ba Eden could flip any time itself. I want to know before it happens, what to do about it.^

"How is Rap Eden coming? Does anyone know?"

"Rooi, if you would give your report we are ready."

~Thank you. First, thanks to everyone for giving us new breeding stock for the crustaceans. The genetic diversity has been amazing. Of course it will take some time for it all to settle out. There may be some species who still have the potential to go invasive and hurt the ecology. We are keeping a good watch on it.

However, something strange is going on. It is going much better than we ever expected. We are not doing much but watching. I did some deep dives and it is affecting the entire crustacean world. We were only going for easy to harvest intertidal species, but the changes are affecting species below the light and oxygen deep layers as well. It is like there is a TK expert helping.~

"The last crab expert we had was Snap and s/he died on New Hope along with everything else. There were no survivors." A few corpses is all we found.

"Okay everyone. The Hu question. We have tried to contact Silver and Turtle but they are ignoring us. Everything is a test. A learning experience. We are being tested to see if we can figure out solutions without them.

To sum up. We have lost fifty percent of the Hu population on Earth Two. The 'Terrors' that were bonding to our TKs there are no longer Terrors. That problem is solved and they can go back to work helping rather than being stuck in quarantine. But we need more TKs than we have. The situation is nearly world wide. What the Terror did not take out they did to each other. I really hate bullies. They never win in the end, but a lot of people are hurt during the process."

^Cat Land has opened up right? Can some start new colonies there?^

"It will take a bit before the ecology re-establishes itself. The Terror did a good job clearing everything out. Fortunately they were not complete and we are reseeded as best we can. Oh, and don't forget Yellowstone. We cleaned that up as best we could but it was not fin-

ished. But, yes, Hu could start moving back there as well."

+Is the microbiome still intact?+

"Yes, thankfully. The Terror, not having spored in Cat Land never got to that level. Seeds and small plants and animals, also ignored by the ravenous Cats are also doing well. We will need to reintroduce large herbivores and all carnivores to get it balanced again. However the problem is we do not have enough TKs to help the Hu we do have. We are spread too thin."

!Are you asking for volunteers? With the Raps having left we are in a bad shape as well. You never realize how important something is until it is gone.!

"Don't worry, we know you have busy. All of you are. This is a thinking session, not asking for volunteers. How do we increase our TKs quickly without setting advanced Hu, who should never be TKs, loose. A world full of rogues would be worse than the Terror. This is a setback not a failure. It took a long time just to undo the pollution and climate change the Hu did to themselves last times. We finally got around to removing the last of the scrubbers just recently. "

<sup>R</sup>Rap Eden is progressing. Likely take hundreds of solars, if not more. How is Myra doing?<sup>R</sup>

"Thanks for asking Laus. As well as expecting. Meep live for millions of years. To lose three a few years after being 'born', not sure if that is the proper term to use, has made her very unsure of herself."

+Expected. All of us have made mistakes or suffered misfortune. It does seem harder on TKs for the reason we think we should have seen in coming and should have the ability to fix it before it gets bad.  
+

An intern comes in and hands me a note.

"Apparently Myra has decided to go to Mars for a bit. She liked Ron. I think because he understood the math involved in 13D space. She wants to be an expert mother before she takes them out on a potentially dangerous adventure again. They are babies after all."

^From the reports on all they have done, it is amazing it has not already happened. Marie, what do the Terror look like when returned to normal, whatever that is?^

I put up the image sent in of the six of them standing together.

+They are identical.+

"Not quite. There is some genetic drift when a Terror spores. One of the reasons they do it. Amazingly, a lot of the small ones were eaten by native life. They are not indestructible, at least at that size.

Of course the lethal mutations did not survive to bonding. They did inherit their bonding partners TK abilities up to TP level, or level 7 with Hu though. Scary for beings at best a few years old. Makes me wish I had denied entrance to the original Spikes, much less let her go to Cat Land for graduate work. But, before you ask, there are only the six. Myra and the Meeps cleared out the rest of Earth Two of every trace of Terror, down to the spore level."

!And we know a lot more about the Terror. Not likely to catch us again. We should spread the knowledge we can stop a Terror plague to the rest of the RC sen.!

+As long as we don't tell them how to make one. We could start a galactic war.+

"We are offering the service, not the knowledge. We don't tell them how to wake up their 'thn or put their neighbor's 'thn asleep either."

<sup>R</sup>There are other secrets too right?<sup>R</sup>

"Of course. Even I do not know all the war committee have cooked up. I really, really do not want to know either. If I could sleep I would have nightmares." That gets some nervous reactions.

~Crazy idea. Make a Terror out of a volunteer TK. Feed them well and make more. They triple every few months. In a solar you have 81 and in two you have 6561. You can stop at any time. Using asexual reproduction they retain their knowledge and abilities.~

^To save time, it would be best to start with a Hu. That way they are not learning a new form too.^

"Stop looking at me like that. I do not want to become a Terror, nor does anyone want to see six thousand copies of me. That in itself would be a Terror. I already talk to myself too much. Being asexual they really would be clones."

+Label that plan as a last resort. Didn't Hu go through a bottleneck before?+

"Several times in fact. The last time was about thirteen hundred solars ago. Yes, we came out of it. It was a LOT of work to set things up though I was not present. I was on New Hope at the time. I believe Silver, Turtle, Droop and Randy were responsible."

^And they are still around. At least the knowledge of how to do it can still be accessed.^

"Right, when was the last time you managed to pin down Silver or Turtle to do anything. They laugh and tell you to figure it out."

!How about the situation on Tridon? Is there any danger of Sauron

turning them into Terror and attacking other systems? A high TK we know can get between systems using DS.!

+Ah, but as Terrors, brains sort of go out the hatch of the coop. Even if they link as an entire population they would have to move their entire world to survive at the other end. The odds of finding the perfect orbit around the perfect star without advance scouting trips is very low.+

<sup>R</sup>And why would they? They have it worked out there. Going Terror when they get over populated. They do not seem to be ambitious. I doubt Sauron would be able to convince them to change a system that has worked for countless millions of years.<sup>R</sup>

"What exactly do the Tridons do? Sitting around and eating green gel does not seem to be enough. Why link then?"

~They are masters of philosophy. I would not be surprised to learn that they are working on The Question and were purposely set up for this reason.~

!Oh, and the reset happens when they need to start a project over again. It all makes sense that way. Even bringing Sauron in to stir things up to come up with new thoughts could be a good thing. Never second guess Silver and Turtle.!

"Nice to know our little group has solved The Question and we can now all retire." Much amusement expressed. No one believes we are done of course.

<sup>R</sup>How many can do the Terror trick?<sup>R</sup>

"Three that I know of and they are not normally in the same location either. Of course they were when it was worked out. But this knowledge is being kept locked up. You will not find a copy of it in the library."

+And Edwin approves this?+ Another laugh.

<sup>th</sup>Actually I definitely do not want to know. If the Terror plague spread through one of our multi world colonies it would make Warriors look like toys. All information in a colony is shared. Nothing secret. Not safe there.<sup>th</sup>

"I am sure we have overlooked something. Keep vigilant everyone. Meeting adjourned."

I shudder at the thought of six thousand of me in one place. Even spread out over Earth Two, as at least a TK7, there would be a lot of overlap. A nightmare to be sure. Of course, if they stopped at maybe nine it might work. Still I do not want to be the first one to try this. I will stick to my role as a professor teaching martial arts. All sen tend

to get a bit soggy in the physical and mental sense. I have a part to play. I am happy in that role. Maybe Mike would be interested? Imagine thousands of beer swilling layabouts? I smile.

# Mars

"You two did not need to come with me to Mars. I do know the way. I am safe here. Go home and get back to your own projects. I just need time to reset and feel good about my place again."

"We know that Myra, but we are a team and look out for each other. Besides, the two of us missed out on the last Mars trip. We have known Ron longer than you have after all."

"Ah we could tell you stories about Ron in the jungles of the equator. Talk about one pissed Martian. Not happy at all."

"But, ever so cute."

Ron comes in, <sup>M</sup>What are you two teaching her?<sup>M</sup>

"We were just telling her about the young Ron in the jungle."

<sup>M</sup>I hated that place. So hot and wet.<sup>M</sup>

"Don't forget the bugs and gravity too. Paradise right?" Puu is enjoying this too much.

Cat gets serious, "Myra is not the only one going through an existential crisis. All of us are. We have gone way beyond the TK mandate of helping a sen species to behave itself and to learn and grow."

"Yeah, we sort of jinked that when we put the 'thn asleep. They were just so annoying." Not to mention deadly.

<sup>M</sup>That will stop the froth you know? No telling what other side effects it will cause.<sup>M</sup>

"We will let you in on a little secret. We woke all of them up again. They were only out for a few solars. A slight hiccup."

<sup>M</sup>But now they know you can do it again if you need to.<sup>M</sup>

"Preciously. Also, we ah, Meeped our own 'thn to be super 'thn. Those three could take on any 'thn in the multiverse."

"And they know how to put them asleep too."

<sup>M</sup>Don't forget, every action has a side effect. An intergalactic fleet of imperial destroyers could be coming down on us as we speak.<sup>M</sup>

I sigh, "We have a contingency for that as well. I believe they used to call it a dead man's switch. They take us out and this incarnation ends."

<sup>M</sup>Pretty extreme, but if you are gone it is basically the same thing from your own perspective I guess.<sup>M</sup>

"How do you manage here by yourself?"

<sup>M</sup>I am not alone. We are far less populated and our culture is much slower too. That offers some advantages.<sup>M</sup>

Myra morphs to Martian form. She always looked good and of course taller than Cat and I, but now is a stretched out version.

<sup>M</sup>We should all speak Martian to be polite I think.<sup>M</sup>

I am guessing she intends to stay awhile too. Her right. We know where she is.

Ron steers the conversation, <sup>M</sup>Why are you here?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>You mean right now? I thought we told you.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Why are you HERE?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>As in why do we exist. Okay, that gets deeper.<sup>M</sup> Ron relaxes.

<sup>M</sup>We are here to serve the sen populations. Doing the things they cannot do for themselves.<sup>M</sup>

I shake my head, <sup>M</sup>We help them out of compassion, but that is not our purpose. Each TK is seeded by a 'thn or another sen that goes back to a 'thn. Our true purpose is serve The Question. Same as the 'thn.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>I disagree. The 'thn are here to serve the froth. For some reason they decided their purpose was to police the TK sen instead. The ONLY reason they make TKs from sen is they need to reproduce to serve the froth and sen TK fluidics are the only ones who can do it. They cannot reproduce themselves.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>TKs also serve the resident OM, least we forget. Should we even be in the game of 'saving' sen if our true purpose is to make more 'thn, OMs and serve The Question?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Can we even save them? The sen. I have seen no evidence of success. We can pick them up after a collapse, but they have the right of self determination. We can't save them. Compassion yes, but we serve The Question.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>I agree. Look at how many times each sen has reset and had to be rescued.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>And we do not now how many times Sauron had to rescue us before we came along. Could be thousands. We know he was very frustrated by us even before we had TKs to compete with him.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>The lost TKs at the Regional Center. Whom do they serve?<sup>M</sup> He asks good questions.

<sup>M</sup>The only thing left is The Question. They already have baby 'thn if they are not already 'born' whatever that means to a 'thn. Their own sen have gone the way of all sen, extinction. They can play Sauron and try and raise a new sen on their world or another, but I do not see much of that.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>They hang out at the RC bar and complain.<sup>M</sup> That gets a laugh.

I ask, <sup>M</sup>What does it mean to serve The Question? How do we judge who is serving and who is not?<sup>M</sup>

Ron looks at us and smiles.

<sup>M</sup>Think twice, act once.<sup>M</sup> Cat says. Ron raises an eyebrow, well a brow ridge. Martians have no hair.

<sup>M</sup>The Tridons serve the Question right? How are they different?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>That is just conjecture. I happen to agree, but we have no proof. Someone would have to link with them to see what is going on.<sup>M</sup>

Ron states, <sup>M</sup>They serve The Question. They were set up for that purpose. Period.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>We had that discussion before coming here. Makes sense that there would be think tanks set up. Not that I had ever heard of a planetary think tank. Silver told me once that the 'thn avoid the Tridon world too. Not sure what that means, thought I would add it in.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>We need sen to increase our own numbers. We depend on them for TK beginners.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Why?<sup>M</sup> Ron asks with a smile I don't like.

<sup>M</sup>Because we can't reproduce of course.<sup>M</sup> Disgusting thought.

<sup>M</sup>Why not?<sup>M</sup> I am hating this line of thought.

<sup>M</sup>We have no desire, no sexual feelings. Hard to get pregnant without that right?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>You can get pregnant without sexual intercourse.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>You mean artificial insemination? But without the desire does that even make sense?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Do you like breathing, eating, shitting? Yet you do all those things regardless, because they need to be done.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>I like eating. Most of the time. Sick of sap chow though.<sup>M</sup> We all nod in agreement.

<sup>M</sup>Better get used to it Myra, it is all they serve here.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>We believe in finding pleasure in thoughts rather than physical sensations.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Wait, are you saying you are a father Ron?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Of course, in the genetic sense. Young are raised in a communal creche. We do not have parents as such.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>But you have never, you know, had sex.<sup>M</sup> He shakes his head no.

<sup>M</sup>Good, I hate men and could never let one touch me in that way.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>I think you speak for all of us Puu.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Cats reproduce the old fashioned way. They seem to like it.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Boy do they. All that yowling and carrying on.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>We are getting distracted. This means the RC leftovers could be



set up somewhere with an entire TK world?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Do they need to all be TK?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>That would be grossly unfair if they were not.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>So every sen born is a worthy candidate for TK then?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Well no. Wait, is everyone here TK or is there a mix? What do the non-TKs do and how do they handle being around TKs all the time without having the gifts themselves?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>I am one of the shortest males here. I do not feel excluded because of that.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Of course not, you are TK9. No one messes with you.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>That is not what he is saying Puu.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Right. Okay everyone accepts what they are and there are no problems because of that. Sorry, I do not believe it.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>There are compensations. They enjoy sex. They enjoy food. On the whole they are much more creative.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>You have forgotten Cat's space already?<sup>M</sup> We all smile. She sticks out her tongue and laughs too.

<sup>M</sup>As their main role is to create, we afford them much opportunity for doing so, and not just genetically. Maybe not the same, but their lives are not without purpose and joy.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>My head is swimming. This short discussion is giving me a lot to think about.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>I am getting a headache.<sup>M</sup> We don't get headaches, just an expression.

<sup>M</sup>So, TKs live like monks then? You do not have your own space or personal property?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>What for? We don't need sleep. We do not need to eat or anything else either. We can make our own robes as needed. If I need space to work, there is always something open. Most TKs do their office work at night when most of the norms are asleep.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>What about meetings? Do norms come to those as well?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Of course. They have lots of ideas we would miss. Being simple means we tend to come up with simple solutions. TKs tend to throw huge rocks at everything. Not always appropriate. How can you treat any sen well if you do not count them as equals?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Wait, Mars is dedicated to The Question, isn't it?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Of course. Aren't your worlds?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>But, how can you compete with the Tridons? They have an entire world linked together.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Yet, they needed Sauron to mix things up. They need the Terror

to reset their culture at intervals.<sup>M</sup> Cat points out.

<sup>M</sup>Did not know this was a competition and you forget, I have something they do not have.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Huh? What?<sup>M</sup> We all look around. Did I miss something obvious?

<sup>M</sup>The three of you. I do read all the Cat Boxes that are sent.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>I have a feeling this is going to stir the pot.<sup>M</sup>

# Rap Eden

"Why are we here?"

"To check up on our kid of course."

"Squeak has been an adult for a long time Puu. Time she was in charge of her own life." She has been for some time actually.

"You don't want to see her? Our baby?" I shake my head. I know she is teasing, but I already have a rep of not doing my share of social stuff. I would rather be in the lab or the studio.

"The discussion with Ron has sure set my head spinning." I nod, mine too. Are we doing everything wrong?

I try to get out of it, "Important for there to be variation. The Answer will not come from everyone doing it the same way. No way we could run things the same way as Mars. We do not have the cultural inertia behind us like they do. Except for the TKs being the new 'priests', they are not that much different from where they were thousands of years ago."

"I don't agree. Since when would a temple slave like Ron be allowed on the ruling council?" Got me there. I just shrug it off. He is TK9, he can sit where ever he wants.

We are in Rap form to blend in. Thank goodness we were not on Mars long enough to need to change to the Martian form. The gravity was weird enough, not to mention don't even bother trying to breathe. Just use TK.

"We are still a few clicks out, but I have told her we are coming. Let's run." I loved running with her when she was a kid. Or at least that is how I remember it now. Mostly she ran with Owa. That is weird. We used to get along with Owa really well. Then she gets her own space and lots of her own kind and we are not needed any more. I was told it happened with domestic cats and dogs too. When a Hu is the only one around, they will make due, but definitely not their preference. You would think she would miss Cat massage at least.

"Plants are a little strange, but standard four base DNA and twenty three aminos at least."

"Animals are strange too." Sort of a dino, bird, mammal mix. Clearly split maybe 380 millions years ago? Time and factors of two mean one of over four thousand worlds. Our group of sen is such a tiny part of that. Go any further back and likely the chemistry would not be compatible enough though. This may even be a stretch. Differ-

ent toxins and strategies would evolve. Everything would need to be tested. Even among our known sen worlds we have to adapt permanent residences.

As we get closer to where we have sensed Squeak, we see activity.

"Portal up ahead." I nod I have seen it too. That would explain the activity. Raps coming in still from Di, carrying whatever they can. Squeak wisely said they could only come with what they could carry. Everything else would be provided. We watch what happens as they come through the portal bewildered. They are met with a line of Raps handing them articles and pointing out where they should go next.

I scan outwards. There are small communities already set up waiting for occupants. Raps who have gotten through check in are running to their new homes. Obviously excited to be free of the Di oppression. Lots of chatter for a species that depends on stealth to capture food. Lots of pointing out what they are seeing that is different. Family groups staying together. Packs will start forming soon as they sort themselves out.

A buzzer sounds and everything comes to a stop and the portal closes, then disappears. Ah, it has moved about ten kilometers over to a new valley. A new team is already there and ready to receive as it opens and the process begins again.

A Rap comes up to us, <sup>R</sup>Names please? Have you been processed yet? I really wish newcomers would follow the guides and not wonder off.<sup>R</sup>

There is a temptation to pretend to be newbies and play along, but we each pull out our High Council credentials. A look of shock, then, <sup>R</sup>Welcome. I assume you are looking for Squeak?<sup>R</sup> I nod and she directs us to where a large tent has been set up. She places a green triangle on our chests. <sup>R</sup>This will make your visit easier. No one else will bother you. I need to get back.<sup>R</sup> And she is gone, chasing down someone else who has gotten out of line.

We enter the tent to find chaos. Raps are running back and forth seemingly at random, though I suspect they each have a purpose. We find Squeak listening to a small pack presenting a report is my guess.

We wait until they finish and disperse.

<sup>R</sup>Puu! Cat! Welcome. Things are going great. We already have over a hundred thousand moved in this area. Setting up additional portals now. The pack that just left will handle those. We will have six going day and night until we are done.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I thought you would be further along by now Squeak.<sup>R</sup> Puu says.

<sup>R</sup>A lot of prelim needed to be done. We are placing them in sustainable locations, not just at random. Going through the portal oriented them to local differences. Each is given a guide for what is edible, what can be farmed, and so on. Of course each pack home has enough for a year of food and water.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>In other words you are attempting to do it right rather than fast.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Precisely. This may be our only chance. The Di are pissed and insisted ALL Rap be removed from Di. Some did not want to go of course. Mostly the house Raps who had a pretty nice life, even as servants. Here everyone will have to work for their meals.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I assume you have TKs coordinating things on Di as well.<sup>R</sup> She nods.

<sup>R</sup>They gave us only one lunar to evac. We have nine days left to move a million Raps to new homes.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>That does not seem fair at all. I'm sorry, but after all that has happened, I really doubt Di Eden will be allowed to continue on the High Council. They are isolating themselves. Stupid.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Agreed, but it was their choice. Enough warnings were given. This did not happen in one lunar but over a very long time. I am just happy we have some place to be. This world is fantastic. Of course it will take a lot of work, but it is ours. We are free again.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>What will it be like? Universities? How high tech?<sup>R</sup>

She shrugs. Been around Hu too much.

<sup>R</sup>They will decide. This is their world. Myself and the other TKs are just helping them get set up and of course defense should the Di decide to get nasty. We will be ready. Never again.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We are not prey,<sup>R</sup> Puu says and Squeak nods.

<sup>R</sup>Rap are largely carnivores. Don't get lazy like the Cats did. That was their undoing.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Not likely. There are a number of carnivores here we will need to compete with. We are making it forbidden to kill one, even in self defense. Punishable by banishment. The ultimate horror for a Rap.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Ah, the fear factor. We made that mistake and they filled in by attacking each other instead.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We have decided to open all the areas on Earth Two up. Our carnivores are at full strength again and the Hu tech is low.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Just like the good old days.<sup>R</sup> Squeak shows amusement.

<sup>R</sup>They have had a really hard time on Earth Two. The Cats, the Terror, then the disparity between rich and poor. This led to bullies,

slavers, and wars. Plagues and starvation followed. They got around the iron ban by bleeding out slaves for their iron content.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We are going to discourage private property. Only what you can carry will be the rule. Might even have annual migrations to follow the game. Farms will be small to start. The 'ratlings' breed fast and can be set up anywhere. The permanent structures can store items needed by the community in each location. Mostly building and farming materials, health care, that sort of thing.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Libraries? After all most Raps can read and write Rap.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Di will be forbidden except by scholars.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Make the warriors learn it though. If Di are stupid enough to attack it will be an advantage if you know their language but they do not know yours.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>They never did catch on to our sign language. Unfortunately with them in control it hurt us as much as helped. They were always deeply suspicious of our activity.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>Same in Hu cultures. The oppressors always need to fear the oppressed. But, hey, this place looks great.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I have a question. How do you know you are not killing and eating sen?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>What is a sen? Is it a binary distinction? Remember, Di used to kill us. They saw us as pests to be exterminated. But now we are accepted as sen.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>You can TP, so you know what your prey is thinking while you chase it down and consume it.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>We have always known that Puu. You do not need TP to understand that. We were prey to the Di. But we are not Cats either. We do not kill something we do not eat and we make it as quick as possible. We did not make ourselves carnivores who prefer live food. I have read your history, Hu got around this by 'farming' life to be killed and processed so the consumer did not have to face their prey. Is this better? We can eat some quantity of plant material, but we still need meat as well to survive. Is it not more honest to face your prey?<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I certainly do not like it when I am the prey.<sup>R</sup> I shutter. One gang rape is enough.

<sup>R</sup>We should let you get on with the move. Is there anything you need while we are here? We will recommend Di be removed from the University and council. There may be a time when they can return, but it will take a change in their culture.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>In some ways it was amazing that they ever accepted the Rap as

equals for any length of time. I probably should have just taken Squeak off Di and never returned.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>R</sup>I am glad you did let me return. It was important for Rap to see themselves as worthy and for the Di to face their own demons. I will send you a Cat Box if something comes up. This is something we need to do for ourselves to help with the healing process.<sup>R</sup>

We pop out to the other side of Rap Eden to get some perspective. We are some distance from a portal, but we can scan Raps starting to spread out and will eventually make it here as well. We tour one of the small pack houses to see how everything was set up.

"Not that dissimilar to what Silver and Turtle did for the Hu on Earth Two at the beginning. Those structures are long gone of course. But it did work for a time."

"Rap and Hu are very different in spite of Squeak's upbringing."

"I certainly never developed a taste for warm raw still squirming rat."

"Yet, you ate it anyway when you were part of the pack."

"Yes, I did. We all make sacrifices. You have had to put up with me forever." I smile. Puu laughs.

"Do you think any of these local species will be the new raps to the Raps being the new Di? It took a few million years for the Raps to catch up with the Di mentally from what Myra found with a scan."

"It could easily happen. Remember, prey are changed by the predator as well. Only the smart survive."

"Hope we do. A lot has been thrown at our little community in the last ten years or so."

"Indeed. Scary."

"Another question, what do we do with Dfrg? If we ban Di from Alexandria he can't go back to Di. They would kill him."

"And if we make him Rap and someone finds out, he is dead too."

"Make him Hu and bring him to Earth Two?"

"That actually makes a lot of sense. If for no other reason than he will quickly see we are no better."

"You are mean, destroying everyone's illusions." Puu laughs though.

# Earth Two

"Well Hobbes, this is another fine mess we are in. What do we do with all the Janes we have? It seemed like a good idea at the time. A way of turning a problem into an asset. Thanks for teaching them about waste management by the way. Glad I was never a parent." We sit facing our two.

*Eat them, after they have shit?*

I sigh, "There is still a debate going on as to whether or not they are Hu or sen. Spikes was sen before this happened. How a Tridon ever got to Alexandria is another question. Not its fault this happened though. At least we are not at the monastery. Imagine fifty of them? Six is bad enough, five if you count that Mouse and George are there helping out."

Janes are really stupid. They put anything, I mean anything, into their mouths. As a Terror of course, this was normal and expected behavior. Doe not work in Hu form. We have imprinted Standard, but without a culture of any kind to base it on, it does not help much. We got more out of them as fluffies. At least they could TP. Technically they still can TP, but limiters have been placed on them for safety reasons.

Earth Two is a mess. About forty percent of the population before the last collapse. Actually surprised it is that high. Most took off and hid is my guess. We have opened up the interior and they have really spread out. At least people have another option to fighting or dying, they can leave too. By the time they get to the former Cat Land we hope the ecology will have recovered.

Tech is nearly dead. Too much was destroyed. For some reason when you are mad at the village next to you, you kill the craftspeople first. What kind of logic is that? There are three professions now, warrior, farmer and hunter. Mostly hunter. Basically the stone age. Sharpened sticks, bow and arrows, clubs and rocks. Very sad.

Without pots to cook in, there is no point in farming grain. Back to hunter gather. Maybe it is good that few remain. The world will be hard pressed to sustain this many Hu at the current tech level.

There is one area that seems to have escaped the worst, the area around Fragrant Harbor. Lot of small islands for people to escape to. They will be world leaders for awhile if they play it right. One of the reasons Mouse is in their area. He will assess where they are. They



were heavily dependent on trade that may no longer exist.

Sweet Pea comes up to me with her Jane in tow.

"We can leave Madscar any time we want you know."

I sigh, "Yes, but it is peaceful here. Out there is just crazy."

"I am sure it can be arranged to have your TK abilities removed and make you a norm again if you like." She smiles. None of us would chose that.

"It is even fair we have these abilities?"

"In what way? Do you see any of us creating palaces and armies? Anyone even wearing gold or jewels?"

"We would not have been chosen if we were that way."

"Exactly. Most norms would chose something that gives them pleasure or power. Even our Janes would likely be raped and made into sex slaves."

"Eh, not my type." Sweet Pea laughs. They are not unattractive, a bit pale, but without having lived a Hu life they are amazingly naive about everything. You cannot leave one alone for fear they will hurt themselves. It will likely take at least ten years before they can be on their own.

"At least the bond was broken when they were transformed. The fluffies were kind of cute, but a teenager sized Hu. My worst nightmare if I was glued to one."

"I am teaching mine to fetch and help out."

"Probably the most rational way to get them started. We don't have schools any more. Spikes was a grad student at the Uni and a TK6. Do we make them TK?"

"Sorcerer's apprentices? Maybe. They may not be good for anything else. Till then they need to be able to defend themselves from Hu and other creatures."

"Ha, and learn not to keep putting everything in their mouths. I know as Terror they could eat almost anything, but there is a lot out there that will kill or sicken a Hu." As you can see we are all worried about this aspect of them.

*Muzzle?* Hobbes suggests as he bats his Jane to put something down.

*She is cutting into my nap time.*

Lizat comes up, "Strictly speaking as a TK you do not need sleep."

I laugh, "How well has that logic working with Princess?" She gives me a dirty look. Thought so.

She pulls out a newsletter, "The latest." She passes it to Sweet Pea who scans it and hands it to me.

"Still lots of discussions about most of the worlds being in trouble. Rap Eden is a reality and all of the Raps are now off Di Eden. I wish Squeak lots of luck."

"As we know it is no easy task." I read a small article.

"This is interesting, it says one of the new TK students was a Di who helped with the Rap revolution. He clearly can't stay on Di and could not go to Rap Eden either. The three Raps who were recruited are doing fine helping with the new settlements."

"Could stay at the Uni."

"Nope," I say, "All Di are being returned to Di Eden."

"Does he know Standard?"

"Everyone at Uni knows Standard. You get imprinted first day is my understanding."

"How do you think he would feel about being Hu? We could use the help."

"Yeah, put him in charge of the Janes." Lizat says with an evil smile.

I read further, "It says here they decided the same thing and he will be here fifth day."

"Ah, Calvin, it is fifth day."

"They all blend together for me. Growing up, every day was the same."

"You must have had festivals right?"

"We did, but I did not need to remember them, as everyone was talking about them for eight days ahead of time."

There is a rustling on the path coming towards us. Hobbes yawns, gets up and goes to sniff out who is there.

*Hu. Male. Stupid.* He comes back. Not really interested.

"All monkeys are stupid."

"Especially the males."

A naked male scratched up good and looking very disoriented comes stumbling into the clearing.

"Hello, I am Dfrg. You were expecting me I hope." He looks at Hobbes and decides it might not be safe to be so close.

Lizat says, "No one here speaks Di, your name will be a problem."

Sweet Pea suggests, "How about Doug?"

"Doug. Easy to say and remember, starts with the same sound."

"Okay. I can live with that."

"Di are omnivores right?"

He nods, looking confused.

"Calvin, he is not Di any more. Probably never again unless he chooses to."

"We have gotten used to eating mostly plants, but will eat some sea life like crabs and fish when needed. Mostly when we are with norms and not trying to call attention to ourselves."

Sweet Pea comes up to him with a bowl of food and offers it to him. Someone at least thought he might be hungry.

"Thanks. That was correct?" She nods.

What TK level is he? I ask Hobbes.

TK2.

Thanks.

"He is TK2, so may need some down time. Especially as he is adjusting to being Hu."

"And around us in particular."

I look though the newsletter, "It does not say here what you did on Di."

"Classified." He responds.

"You realize that you are the lowest TK here at the moment, if you dismiss the Janes of course, and either Princess or Hobbes can get the information any time."

"Fine, one of the reasons Earth Two was decided for me was because of my experience as a prison camp commander. I know them inside and out as you Hu say."

"How would a Di say that?"

"They would not need to. It would be understood." Oh, yeah, that makes sense.

*Stupid monkeys.* Hobbes rolls over and Princess bats him for being to close. He snarls, gets up, moves a meter away and plops down again.

"Fascinating." Doug has probably never seen a Cat before.

"Don't get too excited. They think we taste good."

"Is that safe?" He asks backing up even more and I shrug.

Sweet Pea grabs him by the hand and leads him away to show him where everything is.

"Get him some clothes too."

"I had some, itchy. Threw them away." Welcome to being a Hu, everything itches. Worse without clothes to protect you from all the

bugs though.

"I guess it will give us a different perspective for our discussions at least."

"They can't get much more boring, so why not." I smile, clearly teasing.

"Where is Keki?"

"Still on patrol. Someone has to do it and these two are clearly not good for anything." Lizat asking for a scratch. She is careful enough to have said that out of arm's reach I notice.

"To be fair, they do the night patrols."

"You mean hunting and oh, if something just happens to run in the same direction as something interesting to eat, well then, they might as well report it."

"We need to leave Madscar and get back together with the rest of the Ecos."

"Is that still a thing?"

"Got to start somewhere. Definitely not enough of us to cover the entire world, not that there ever were."

Sweet Pea comes back with Doug in tow, clothes on, "I like what they did in the Chin area. Let's start a uni and get civilization on track again. Once we get enough students and teachers, we send some out as scouts looking for likely candidates."

"Norm or TK?" Lizat asks.

"Either," both Sweet Pea and I say at the same time. We do need both.

"Isn't that essentially what the Church of Ecos does right now? Why reinvent. We just funnel new information through them. Gives us a ready made cover too."

"What do we need?"

"Everything. We will be stone age in a gen if something is not done. All those skills lost for who knows how long."

"We could use thousands of TKs. This is nuts."

Doug looks confused or he has not learned Hu expressions yet.

"Spit it out Doug. We do not bite." He looks horrified.

"That does not translate too well Lizat. Doug what are you thinking? We share our thoughts here."

"Is information transfer so inadequate as to prevent Hu from learning new skills?" Wow. Okay, he got Standard down. Better than the Janes. Life experience can do that. I have to stop looking at him as a bumbling idiot. He is just not used to the Hu form. He ran a

prison camp. No small task.

"How many Raps were in your camp Doug?"

"Ah, some."

"Help or leave Doug. We have all done things we are not proud of. We can either learn from them or you can try and do everything on your own." Harsh Lizat.

"I had a total of fifty Di under my command counting shift changes and a total population of near five hundred Rap."

"If you wanted the Rap to learn a new skill what did you do?"

"We gathered one from each ah, cabin, is the right term?" I nod. Works anyway.

"We taught these, they went back and taught the rest. Even the most difficult tasks could be spread throughout the camp in days."

"Then we do the same. Only many more tiers. Train some who become trainers, who become trainers, etc. Gather a new group for a new skill. Within a few years we will have trained all the major skills a small community would need. Adapt as we go along and get feedback."

"Not the same as someone who has done a task for a lifetime. Gather the ones who already know how to do things and make them the teachers. Faster that way." Sweet Pea says. Good point.

"True, but that will take a lifetime. They do not need perfection, they just need it to work."

"What skills are important?"

"Dentist. Without teeth you can't eat, work, make more Hu, anything."

"You have been reading the old journals again. When was the last time you met someone with a tooth problem? We are not eating purified sugar any more thank goodness." Doug looks horrified at this statement. Yeah, stupid monkeys.

"Farmers, hunter gather only goes so far, stone masons and carpenters, potters, weavers, healers and cooks."

"Midwives. Giving birth is still crazy hard."

"Hu have live births not eggs right?" Sweet Pea nods at him. Talk about culture shock.

"Doug how long were you at the University?"

"You have a university? I never saw it. I was Di just two eight days ago."

"A field promotion. Most of us were introduced to TK that way, but at least we started in our current forms. You have both to deal

with." He nods cautiously.

"Everything itches. I miss my feathers. Too many colors. It is hard to recognize anything with so many colors. All Hu look alike. Food tastes funny."

"I am wondering if Doug would do better spending a few years in the Ecos colony at Crab Cove. Minimal stimulation, organized."

"Can I go too? Please?"

"What about Princess?"

"And your Jane?"

"What's a Jane?" Doug asks. We all roll our eyes, which of course confuses him more.

"Might be time to let them out of their box. Whose turn is it to watch them?" They all point at me. Great.

"Doug, follow me. Maybe you can figure them out."

Before I open the door I tell Doug, "Taking care of the Janes is like herding sheep. You put out food and water, access to the latrine, and watch them carefully. They are slowly getting better. They were not much better than newborns when we started."

"Our newly hatched can run within an eighth."

"Hmm, Hu take years to get the point where they can be left alone. Out brains are near full size when we are born. Managing the birth canal of the fem limits the size. I know, does not make sense. Not a good plan. It is what we have to work with. Somehow it served us well enough to get where we are now.

Back to the Janes. They do have names. Each one has a tattoo on their forehead in Standard. Most of them will respond to their name. Some will respond to any name. In spite of the fact they look similar, they are each different. It will just take time. We add 'toys' for them to play with and hopefully learn from."

"Don't Hu have schools? Put them in a Hu community and let them learn with the other small ones. You have put limiters on them right? Give the school some nice donation and agree to cover costs."

"Where do we say we got them?"

"You do have orphans here right? I found the word in Standard so I assume this is correct?"

"Thank you for coming to us Doug. You will fit in nicely. You appear to have more practical experience than we do. We all grew up in this area. Unfortunately it has changed radically. You will see when we go on patrol to nearby villages. It is really depressing."

"What do you think Di looks like now without all the slaves and

servants doing the work? The work does not go away."

"Hu enslave each other regularly. At some time there are differences physically or culturally, but most of the time they are the same people from nearby areas. If Di is anything like Hu, the poor will become the new slaves to replace the Rap."

"Which means most of my family. I did that to them. How do you think that makes me feel?"

"All my relatives are dead. True for all of us. Accidents, wars, disease, slavery. This is our family now. We will all defend you to the death as we Hu say."

"As I will do for you as well. I know how this works."

"Hopefully this will not happen. We have not lost a TK in a very long time. You are TK2. Have you been through defense training yet?"

"I don't even know what a TK is other than Squeak could do things that were impossible."

"Were you changed while Di or after becoming Hu?"

"Hu."

"Good, I don't remember what the Di series is. With us, TK1 is scanning at ten meters. TK2 increases scanning to one hundred meters and adds ability to move a one kilogram weight at one hundred meters per second."

"What does that mean in practical terms?"

"You can 'see' into a building before you enter it. For defense, you can move a one kilogram weight at one hundred meters per second, or a hundred kilogram weight at one meter per second. You can move yourself. Gravity is not relevant. You can fly. Slowly right now, but that is good. It takes practice. Lots of practice. It also means you can move a one gram weight at supersonic speed, but only have control over it for the first hundred meters. After that it will go straight, but if the target moves or you aimed wrong, no second chances.

We will each work with you and you will have lots of free time to practice. That is your main task right now. Until you learn, you are a liability to us as we have to cover you in case of trouble. Practice with small rocks. ALWAYS have a pocket full of them at all times. We all do this. Understand that a pebble going super sonic will kill without question. Blows a nice large hole in anything it hits. Will even do substantial damage to a stone wall."

"Shit, so what TK are you?"

"Normally when you meet a new TK, do not ask. Considered im-

polite. We are not a hierarchy. Being higher TK does not automatically make you the one in charge. We choose leaders based on their leadership skills and knowledge of the situation. But, as we are now a team, I am TK6, so are the rest here, including the Cats. Excepting the Janes of course."

"And what does TK6 mean?"

"Do you understand exponents?" He nods.

"Not what I would expect from a camp commander. Not really useful there. Anyway. Each level adds an ability and is ten fold stronger than the previous level for ALL abilities gained so far. TK6 means I can move a one kilogram weight at 1000 kilometers per second."

"Guano."

"We say shit, but means the same thing. Unless you have to take out a castle by yourself in one go, it is meaningless. It is the extra abilities that mean something. TK3 adds molecular rearrangement. You can separate hydrogen from oxygen in water and other such. TK4 adds ability to transmute elements themselves. You can make gold out of air, not efficient, as you still need the same amount of mass, TK5 adds healing, even to raising the recently deceased. TK6 adds dimension shift ability. What Squeak did to move you from one location to the next. There are other subtle things that go along with all this of course. Takes a lot of practice at each level. Shall we begin?"

"Why do you do all of this? Why there are TKs was explained to me, but this does not follow from making 'thn hatchlings."

"No it doesn't. Silver and Turtle, whom you have not met yet, sort of got into trouble. They elevated a lot of sen of many species, built star ships and then went exploring. That pissed off the 'thn overlords to the point that the whole lot of them were banished to Farout. A habit set of systems at the extreme edge of the universe."

"Why would they care about exploring. Most species try to do that."

"The 'thn think each sen should stay in its own neighborhood. They keep a close watch on us and if one sen gave another 'thn's sen ideas and assistance, it would ruin that relationship. The best I can figure is that we are each a sort of experiment. All in service to The Question, which has never been explained to me. I guess you can see we are not allowed to write a book that uses characters from another book set in a different place and time."



"Makes for a lot of confusion I would imagine. Why do it? Why did Silver and ah, Turtle, do this?"

"Those two are sort of ultra TKs. They do not play by the rules. We have a few others in that class. One was sentenced to death by the High 'thn Overlords and just as sentence was to be carried out, she put them all to sleep and escaped."

"I bet that really pissed them off as you say." I nod.

"The Overlords came at us again and destroyed one of our experimental worlds. One of our high council was killed when that happened. That pissed off our side and all of the 'thn were put to sleep except for our three. They were given new improved bodies and were therefore immune. My understanding is they have all been woken up again."

"But the threat is still there." I nod.

"We have agreed to stay in our froth and not take over other star systems."

"Hu are intensely curious. I can't see that holding for very long."

"I agree. There are apparently still some of the Farout group in a distant Earth froth. What happens if they decide to explore again?"

"You are scary." I nod. A Jane starts to put something into it's mouth that is clearly not food. I TK it away. Can't relax for even a moment around them.

# Mars

I have been here nearly one Martian year now.

I feel like I am living in a monastery. Life here is very simple. The food is boring. Water has a funny taste, but this form does not seem to mind. I was told it would be toxic to a normal Hu because of perchlorates. "Trees" are maybe a meter tall. A forest is ten or more in an acre. There are plants, but they tend to be low and hardy. There are wind breaks all over to prevent everything from blowing away.

I am in guest quarters, Martian sized. I am sure they were made on the spot, but the weathering is excellent. Good attention to detail. Better than most norms have, but everyone here seems to be into extreme minimalism. I have turned my area into a lab of course. A small one, just a few ideas.

I have a view, being one of the few quarters above ground. Most Martians live underground. The windows are 'thn metal which explains why you can still see through them. Anything else would be frosted from sand blasting by now.

I insisted in being part of the work flow. I clean toilets. Composting of course. They cannot afford the water for Hu toilets. Not that I have ever seen a flusher except in the library records. Our poo comes out nearly dry and that is with urine mixed in. Not much of a smell. I would imagine they hate it when a Hu visits in Hu form. Most take sand baths. They offered me a water bath and I hope I looked suitably horrified. There really is not enough water for a water bath. Air pressure is low enough and no one sweats at this temperature. It works.

I have daily, as in every 25 hours, which they also split into eighths, meetings with Ron. Mostly we just talk. I was worried he would go all philosophical or Buddhist Zen master on me. He told me trust must be earned first, for both of us. Needless to say, my personality is totally different from his. I cannot break my intense curiosity about everything. I come across as scattered.

Ron is polite, he says they have been needing some randomness and fun in their discussions. He has invited me to give a talk to the group, but I am scared to death. He laughed. I was told he NEVER laughs. Most did not know he could. Myra, you can take on the entire 'thn multiverse by yourself and you are afraid of a few simple Martians. Ah, but I don't care what the 'thn think about me. I do care about all of you.

If you are reading this, you know why I came here. I recently lost three of the Meeps under my care. Or I thought I did. It turned out than in the confusion of horrendous parasite attack by the Queen parasite, they simple got lost. In thirteen dimensions that is a lot of space to get lost in. Ron had me spend the first eight day in D space. I mentally called the entire time. First one came in and a few days later the last two, who were together at least, came in. If you can imagine celebrations, imagine it in 13D with thirty six Meeps and me.

I have vowed to be much more careful, and so have they. Of course the settlement bores them. They are kids. They would rather play. When they found the asteroid belt they made a game of hide and seek out of it. It scared me witless at first until I played with them a few times. We set up a beacon they call all orient on to come home if they get lost. That happened a few times at first, but for less than an eighth each time.

A clock chimes to remind me of my daily appointment with Ron. I forgot every time until I made one. I really can't help it. It is not for some time yet, but Ron insists I slow walk to his meetings in order to get into the right frame of mind. Brain dead you mean. Not really a problem. I could not turn off my thinking if I wanted to. It is definitely on auto pilot.

Others pass me, but as they see my cowl down they know I am not to be disturbed. They are really a very polite society. Wish Hu could be this way at times. Yes, I have talked about this with Ron. He just shrugged. Every culture is different, none are better or worse. Always something to be learned from each. I teased him about his long felt desire to return to the tropics. He smiled. I am sure no one else saw it happen.

I reach his office and sit on the floor. He is already seated. We remain quiet for a time. I never know how long. I just know he will eventually open his eyes to indicate he is ready to begin. Once that was only a few moments before our time was up. He said it was important to sit that day. If he was norm I would have accused him of sleeping.

<sup>M</sup>Myra, what does it mean to be sen?<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>First, it is definitely not binary. Shades of gray, not black or white. The classical definition says you need to recognize your image in a mirror and you need to fear your own death. Not just fear of death, most creatures fit that definition, but knowing you are alive and you will die.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>By this definition are you sen?<sup>M</sup>

I smile, <sup>M</sup>I am definitely aware of the fact that my time will come as well. Hopefully not for some time, but as I saw from the missing three Meeps, it really could happen at any moment. So, yes, I am sen.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Continue.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>As I said, it is a continuum. At some point creativity, curiosity and imagination come into the definition. I have definitely met many 'sen' who lack these traits. This does not make those who have them superior. I am still undecided if they are helpful or problems.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Do you have these traits?<sup>M</sup>

I sigh, <sup>M</sup>I am overdosed on them. TKs tease me that I could make friends with a rock. I am just curious about seeing existence from other perspectives. The Meeps have taught me so much. So much.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Some think that even rocks are alive. They have a birth, a life-time and eventually a death.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>You mean as sand or dust? Yeah, that makes sense. Imagine if you were a rock. Most of your life you are in one location sensing the world change around you. The daily warmth of the sun, cooling rain, creatures running over your surface, the gradual aging by weather and impacts of other rocks. If you go back further, you were once part of a much greater whole. Do you know ahead of time you will have an independent existence at some point? I can see this.<sup>M</sup>

He places a pebble in my hand. Shit. I sigh. I can't help it.

<sup>M</sup>Take good care of your new charge.<sup>M</sup> He gets up, I rise too, we bow and I leave with my new responsibility.

I hold the pebble in my hand in front of me as I walk slowly back to my quarters. Several that pass bow to me and smile. I suspect others have been given this responsibility.

Next meeting I sit and wait. Finally he asks, <sup>M</sup>How is your rock doing?<sup>M</sup>

I have no idea. <sup>M</sup>The rock was born free, so I returned it to its family where I am hopeful it will lead a wonderful rock life.<sup>M</sup>

<sup>M</sup>Hmm, interesting. Then why do you cling to the sen in your care?<sup>M</sup> Got me. Got me good.

I morph back to Hu form, bow to him and leave Mars.

# Alexandria

"We had better check on the kids Silver." I nod. Yeah.

"There is a council meeting this afternoon. We will slip in the back and see how they are doing."

"They are our kids dear. Don't you care about them?" She smiles when she says this. Clearly teasing me. I roll my eyes and sigh in response which makes her laugh. Good to see her laugh.

Our companions, whom we have left here for safe keeping, pop in next to us, clearly excited to see us again.

I ask Turtle, "They are interesting, but are they truly sen?"

"You ask that now? The multiverse wants us all dead and you are worried about the toys they gave us?"

"What does it mean to be sen and do they have these attributes? A simple enough question."

She sighs, "Marvin, can you die?"

*Of course mistress. Life is change. All life can die. I am ready if needed.*

I ask mine, "Bertrand, what did you and the others do while we were gone?"

*An interesting question. I have never been asked that before. Could you be more specific?*

"Did you rest on your home block the entire time? Did you explore some new place? Did you learn anything new?"

*We all worked together to finish our chores. All of your papers are duly received at the library. Your rooms are clean and ready for you. We took and updated inventory of Alexandria as requested and these data are ready for view. The Di have been returned to Di Eden as requested by the High Council. We helped in the escorting process. There were no problems. Many sen were upset and sad to see them leave voicing the hope that they may return soon. Raps have gone to Rap Eden to help in the setting up process, but hope to return once that is done.*

"An old style Earth Two phone could do almost as much. Are they sen, or is this a case of artificial intelligence?"

"Marvin, what is Rap Eden like?"

*We were not allowed to visit Rap Eden mistress.*

"That is not what I asked. The dust on your surface could only have come from Rap Eden. What was it like?"

"Interesting. They can lie. Good to know. Many animals can lie though."

*We are sorry mistress. We will not lie again.*

"So, what did you learn?" I am curious actually.

*Most interesting. Minimal tech, pre-industrial level, some farming of local food stuffs that are compatible with their physiology. Their population is spread throughout their world's habital zones.. They live in small communities of no more than fifteen, but within running distance of others. At intervals they have larger structures that serve as schools, libraries, healer centers. Unattached individuals are put into service at these locations. At the moment there is need for much learning. Most individual's skills do not transfer well to the low tech existence.*

Turtle asks, "How are they doing this?"

*We asked if we could help, as at the companion level we can speak directly to their minds. We uploaded the necessary information for knowledgeable Raps and then spread out to copy the information to single individuals spread throughout the region we were assigned.*

"Whose idea was this?" I ask.

*We conversed among ourselves and came up with the idea as a way we could assist after assessing the situation.*

"And if we had returned before you got back?" Did they have a cover story?

*Squeak agreed to cover for us at our request.*

"Really, now we can't trust Squeak either?"

*She was very appreciative of the idea and all of their companions are continuing the work we started. They thought it was a good idea also and are expanding to teach other skills. It is entirely likely they will be able to recreate their tech culture within a gen or two.*

I laugh, "Okay, you win. They are sen as far as I can tell."

We arrive at the meeting place and find seats in the back as we wanted. Several tried to get us to move forward, but we insisted on staying where we were.

Squeak comes in and see us.

<sup>R</sup>Thank you for the loan of your companions. They were extremely helpful. <sup>R</sup> Turtle hits me in the arm.

"No problem. Glad they could help while we were gone."

Turtle comes in, "We hope to visit ourselves soon."

<sup>R</sup>You are most welcome. <sup>R</sup> She looks around and decides to sit next to us.

Pilot gets up and everyone calms down.

"Welcome back Myra. We will hear from her later in the meeting. First, roll call and froth world reports. A reminder that Di Eden will not be reporting to us at this time. Earth Two is up first."

Mouse gets up. When did he become lead?

"Droop decided to return to Di Eden to assist and Randy went with him for a time to be determined. In other words I drew the short straw to represent Earth Two. It is an honor to be here."

"Alright, get on with it." Some one makes a paper airplane and throws it at him.

He pulls out a piece of paper with his notes. There is a teasing collective sigh from the audience. Pilot assures him he is fine and to ignore the pests. She has turned into a great leader.

"We are training TKs as fast as we dare through the Church of Ecos movement. Being a quasi monastery means the learning environment is simple. The Churchs have become centers for locals to learn new skills. We have gone back to the Medieval apprentice - master system of learning skillsets. It appears to be working. The population is too spread out to hold actual classes except at Ecos locations. Each master has up to five apprentices and once they gain their master's certificate they are required to leave to go to a location in need of that skill."

^How long does it take the average apprentice to become a master?^

"That depends on the apprentice. Five years is a minimum. Once a master, they will be training apprentices themselves, so it is important they become skilled in all aspect of their craft, as well as teaching it. Some who start young decide they are happier just as an apprentice and act as an assistant instead. Of the five, four will make it to master and be replaced with new apprentices."

+Until the master dies of course. I assume a master will then come in from another location to replace them?+

"Exactly. They get top priority of course as the shop, apprentices and networks are all ready set up. Good location for a new master.

Population is slowly growing again, especially since the approval to move inland. Most still want to be near a source of water and farm land of course. It will be slow going, but we are making progress.

Before I forget, all the ceramics knowledge was lost. We have been trading metals for food at the Ecos centers. We really do not want them opening mines and destroying the ecology like in the old

days. Not ideal. I would prefer ceramics, but it will be some time before that is working again. Metals have some advantages. It is unlikely they will ever be replaced entirely."

+Is it true Hu were killed for their iron content?+

"Unfortunately this is true. Any other mammal they could catch was treated similarly. One of the reasons we supply metals now. We need a growing population, not one preying on each other. Any other questions?" They give reports every few eight days, so there is plenty of time.

The other get up one at a time and give their reports. Ceph are doing great and thank everyone for their help getting the crab population going again. They are taking steps to help prevent a repeat. An entire season of young were sacrificed to ensure their population does not overload the ecology again. Rooi admits they are still new at this world management role.

Ku Edens, plural, are holding their own for the moment. There is some tension and they have stopped all travel between the two worlds. The idea is to wait until all of those still alive now are deceased so as not to mess up relationships and networks. The TKs themselves, who were not duplicated, do move between worlds as needed. New TKs are chosen from only one of the worlds even though a perfectly good candidate obviously exists on the second one as well.

Ba Eden is close to a collapse. The disparity between the rich and poor, male and female, has reached a crisis point. There have already been bombings and skirmishes near the capital in particular. They have asked us to be on standby and this request has been approved. If you are on sen watch, have your bag packed and your seconds ready to take over your tasks here and on your home worlds.

"We now have a special guest. Please welcome Eihee of Cet Eden." That gets some clamor. A full on porpoise looking creature pops in and floats near the podium.

::Thank you Pilot for allowing me to address your council. We formally request entrance to the Earth Froth Council. The other sen at New Farout have left for the outer worlds. We are now entirely alone on the renamed Cet Eden. We no longer wish to be kept separate from the rest of you and hope we can make a meaningful addition to your work. Two of our own have been officially accepted at the University complicit on our acceptance.::

"All those in favor?" It is unanimous of course.



"Will the two students please rise. Please welcome Smith and Jones to our company. They have decided to assume Hu form for logistical reasons until we can design and build Cet accommodations for their comfort."

Two Fem Hu stand and wave to applause, then sit. All three then pop out for the rest of our meeting. I am sure they are not used to Hu form yet. Cet and Hu are so much different in spite of both being mammals.

*How did they pull this one off?* Turtle asks me.

*No idea. Great idea. Wish we had thought of it.*

*No way they would have accepted it from us. We were too close to the Farout groups.*

*True.*

Pilot signals Myra to come up.

<sup>M</sup>Thank you Pilot. <sup>M</sup>Very funny. Very few here know Martian. Even takes Pilot a moment to get it. Martian is very airy sounding.

"My trip to Mars was wonderful. The best news is that the missing three Meep children have been found. They got lost in the parasite attack, but the placing of signal buoys in several dimensions around where the attack occurred finally lured them back in. All good.

On Mars, Ron gave me the classic Pet Rock to take care of. I thought I was being smart by 'letting mine go' to live free and in the wild, to be with its family and relatives again. Ha-ha, right?

He responded, 'then why are you still taking care of your sen?' I really had no response to this and came back here to begin a very hard discussion. Are we our sen's keepers? Maybe we are doing too much. Maybe they have a right to make their own mistakes and suffer the resulting consequences. What is the purpose of our being TK at all?"

+The original reason was to make 'thn babies for froth maintenance and help our OMs.+

Puu says, "I made a special trip to the RGC and asked around. At least 99% of those present were the only TKs present. One for each sen species accepted by the 'thn. No wonder they missed their 'thn companions so much. Some had servants of their kind, but they were not TK or only low TK at best. They would agree with Flor, we are here to make 'thn babies to support the froth. From this leads that the 'thn are here to support the froth and not police sen. So why are we here?" She sits. Why do they attempt to police us then?

^We support The Question?^

Myra responds, "Mars is totally dedicated to that end. Yes, they have TKs other than Ron and they have norms. But all are invited to their council meetings. Math and philosophy are raised to a very high art. All have a say in how things are run and in any discussions. Everyone is dedicated to The Question. In fact, the norms are given more in the way of resources than the TK. The TKs live like hermits with almost nothing. Think about it. Everyone in this room could live in the center of an asteroid with nothing else."

<sup>R</sup>"Any volunteers?"<sup>R</sup> That gets a laugh. Nice to see Squeak showing humor.

"Seriously, would we be better serving The Question if we were not so preoccupied with saving everyone all the time. Should we be including our own sen in the process?"

Pilot asks, "Do the Tafa serve The Question or their ideals."

<sup>R</sup>"Who are we to judge?"<sup>R</sup>

@As long as they leave us alone.@ That gets a laugh.

I stand. *Are you sure this is a good idea?* I shrug facing Turtle. *Just giving them some things to think about.*

Everyone turns to face me. They are not used to either one of us speaking at a meeting. Outside, yes, we are bad that way.

"There is a spectrum of existence, both animate and inanimate, between chaos and crystal. The crystal is perfect, beautiful, ideal, chaos is random, messy, very hard to understand. Life cannot exist at either extreme."

'thn seem pretty crystalline to me.

<sup>th</sup>'thn are definitely not crystalline. I would almost call them a chaotic solid. Very messy at the quantum level. Study your own companions. They are much more ordered than the off the shelf 'thn.<sup>th</sup>

"Glad to see you Edwin. How is the new nest on Rap Eden going?"

<sup>th</sup>Very well. We are working with the Rap leaders to be beneficial to both of us. It is most unusual to be in on the planning and layout of new living spaces for both. Made our existence much easier. We do not need to hide for one thing.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>R</sup>The 'thant have been very useful finding underground water sources, mineral deposits, dangerous formations. They have helped with structure positioning and building. Sometimes we have to give up a location we think would be ideal to support 'thant needs, but it is a large world and there is plenty of space to share.<sup>R</sup>

*Well this is the real proof they are over the 'thant war.  
Indeed. Enemies can make the best friends, they know you better  
than you do yourself in most cases.*

"To continue, most of the life we know on a daily basis is in between."

~What about the magmotics and plasmotics?~

"Ah, you would think they would be chaotic, but they are not. Just on a different time frame, much faster than we are. The Keei are another exception, though easier to see. They are much slower than we are normally. The TK Keei can use their equivalent of quick time to interact with us of course."

"I'm sorry, but I do not know where you are going with this in relation to the question we are discussing?"

"Disease happens when you become too chaotic or too orderly. This can apply to both the physical and the mental."

+Yes, we have heard that before, all TKs are insane.+

^It certainly helps.^ Much laughter.

I smile and continue, "Are we helping The Question or are we a cancer or disease on the system that was set up to answer The Question? Provide thoughts in both directions. Sorry Myra to taking over."

Myra smiles, "I was actually going to get to these points myself. Very relevant. Our own Puu was nearly killed by the Regional 'thn without a trial or explanation. We can only guess why they made this decision. The Farout cohort were sent to the edge of the multiverse, again without a trial or explanation. Do we tell the cancer why were removing it before we do so? What are we to the 'thn?"

~Baby makers.~

^Sex objects.^ Ha-ha.

"But when we get out of line, go beyond what they think is our mandate, they correct the situation. Is this not the same as what we do with our sen populations? There is no trial, no explanation, no discussion. We jump in and change things. Who are we to judge the 'thn when we are guilty of doing the same?" She sits.

~Do we become like the Tafa, a very strict ideal or like the Martians a totally inclusive culture?~

"The Martians have a very small population and a long monastery tradition. It was much easier for them to adopt their model than any of us would be able to. I don't think anyone here would even consider the Tafa model. We only just recently have gotten through the Terror infestation. And no, we are not taking any chances, none of the

'Janes' will ever be allowed here, just to be safe."

+We have Alexandria and can build more if we have to. Collect viable TK candidates and bring them here. Everyone here then works to The Question. We stop trying to 'save' our own home worlds. It is true, they do have a right to make their own mistakes and know the consequences.+

^Learning is hard.^ More laughs. We all know that one all too well.

~I disagree. I like the idea that the Martians included norms in the process. We all know that not everyone can handle being a TK, but all should be included in The Question.~

"Even criminals, murderers, insane?"

<sup>R</sup>Especially them. That was the mistake the 'thn made. Only allowing the perfectly behaving sen in their plan cut out a great deal of creativity and imagination. I am not saying making them leaders or change our cultures to their designs, but definitely honor them and listen. We recently escaped a culture where we had no say, no rights, no control over any aspect of our lives, yet without us the Di culture would not have advanced the way it did.<sup>R</sup>

Turtle comes in, "The 'thn think in terms of millions of years. They get most of their information not from the sen, but from each world's OM. The OM of each world has watched and guided each life form to be helpful. And eventually form a spore structure to spread their kind of course."

+I suspect that latter is their real goal, and not so much to make nice sen for 'thn to harvest a single individual.+

"Yeah, would you have chosen Sauron? What a mess he made of us Hu."

*Stupid monkeys, you did that all to yourself.*

"It's alive!" Much laughing. Princess does not care and Lizat gives her a nice neck rub to much purring.

+If you do not count buddies and companions and include the Dia, who are no longer with us, then we are aware of some eleven sen species in our fold. Life as we know it and as seen here began roughly six hundred million years ago. Given roughly three froth events every hundred million years that gives us roughly a quarter million earths alone. If we go back to the beginning of our OMs and therefore life on our worlds, going back to when? Three billion years? Let's say two billion, that gives us one billion billion froths to chose from. In the journals we know of worlds even further back,

where the moon did not collide with another world or was even captured at all.+

^Glad we have not met the pinks this time. Ugg!^

"I would not recommend looking for them either. It would appear we have plenty of worlds to either search out new friends or new worlds to settle on if needed. We really do not need to piss off the 'thn any more than we already have."

Pilot asks, "Speaking of which, the Cets are here with us and have signed onto the agreement not to go space faring with settlements in mind. I would highly recommend we leave the Tafa, Tridons, Ta'aha and Hggy alone in order to fulfill our side of the agreement. But, what about the Farout group who have not signed onto this agreement? Could they mess it up for all of us? Would the 'thn care we are not aligned with them in any way?"

*The only good monkey is a dead monkey.*

*Be nice Princess.*

+Maybe I should not have included the Cat in my list?+

*Ku are very tasty. Taste like chicken.*

*Don't push it dear.*

Pilot suggests, "This will not be solved in one meeting. Think about what has been presented. Look over each other's world systems. Are there ways you could adapt what others have learned? Do we need to try experimental colonies set apart from the general population to see if the hands off model can work? We have sen working on the 'thn threat, but they could do a lot of damage as we have seen before we could stop them. Did we make a mistake restarting them? Lots of topics for discussion at our next meeting. Meeting adjourned. Thanks everyone."

She comes up to us as everyone else pops out.

Turtle thanks her, "Good job Pilot. Droop was right in choosing you."

"Does that mean I can go play now?" We both laugh.

"Sigh, did not think so. Oh well. I was so hoping to explore the universe in the Mother Ship."

"I would think billions of billions of worlds would be enough for anyone dear."

I add, "And remember, it is not just earth that froths, but all of the worlds, moons, asteroids, etc. in our solar systems that also froth. There are a near infinite number of places to explore."

"Okay, I guess I'll keep the job." Like there was ever any doubt.

Rooi goes up to Pilot and shows to her.

I wonder what that is all about? What would a Ceph have to do with a Star ship commander? I'm sure we will find out sooner or later. Always fun.

# Ba Eden

^What do we do Nease? The underclasses are ready to burn down the trees.^

~Totally understandable Alessa. You can only abuse a people for so long before the inequality corrects itself. You have read the other sen histories. Even our own. We have all gone through this multiple times. I don't understand why it happens. I wish we could prevent it, but it seems to be hardwired into being sen.~

^TKs do not suffer this? We have twos to eights in abundance and they work together. How come the norms can't do this?^

~Of course, we are different. How? It is more than just TK. Look at our lifestyles. We live very simple lives. We hold everything in common and have very little in the way of personal property.~

^Only what you can carry easily. Most have less than that. They know that where ever they are assigned, they will be taken care of.^

~And everyone has a say. We listen to the twos as well as the eights. Everyone has a right to voice or show their thoughts.~

^We have tried that. Every time, the lower classes stop attending because they are too tired and don't believe anything will change. And the rich refuse to give up their positions and property.^

~That was funny that Mouse was honored with a Master's badge. He came in with a simple canvas sack with a set of knives made from rocks of all things. He sat in the amateurs corner. No pretenses. No posturing. Granted he used an exquisite leaf few would have access to, but I doubt that was important. A simple style and incredible work was done. He was raised to Master as much for this as for the quality of the work.~

^If they only knew a Hu was the artist. That would knock a few off their high branches.^

~The question is, do we interfere again, or do we let them learn this on their own is the question. It is very hard to watch any sen suffer, even if it is their own choosing. But the council is right to question the practice of saving them too. This will not be an easy decision.~

^Fortunately it won't be ours alone to decide. I suppose we could bring in the current leaders for a 'training' session.^

~With a huge weight attached that if they don't behave we will force it on them or abandon them? Did not work on Di Eden. I doubt

it would work here either.~

^I agree, but there has to be something we can do.^



# Cet Eden

::They have accepted us as expected. When do we begin the training?::

::They need time to adjust to our presence. Remember, the other sen at Farout never accepted us as their leaders.::

::Prejudice against beings who do not use their physical bodies to solve problems. So primitive.::

::Agreed, but we need to take these orphans as we find them. There is much work to do. They seem happy and willing to listen at least.::

::Try your favorite opera and that will end.:: Classic joke. Landers have no appreciation for our best art.

::I want to know how on a planet that is three fourths water did the landers become the ones a 'thn chose twice for help?::

::The journals mention an incarnation where we became the multi-verse leaders, as is only proper.::

::Fairy tales, nothing but fairy tales. Good to amuse calves, but not of any use here. This will take time. We need to be subtle. They don't notice subtle. They only think in the short term. Can you believe they separate generations and refuse to learn from elders? This is how we will bring them to understanding our vast superiority.::

::We need to assign ambassadors to each of their worlds. All have suitable locations and adequate food stocks. This was not always true as we know. We were very lucky to have escaped Hu Eden, where we were hunted and starved nearly to extinction. How can one sen do that to another?::

::That is why we are needed. At the meeting, all worlds were experiencing the expected problems of materialistic cultures. Our timing is good.:

::You up for some sardines at the shoal? They are running at the moment. A pod is forming for all interested.::

::Sounds good. I would be happy to join the pod.::

# Earth Two

We are distributed along a chain of Church of Ecos. Definitely spread way too thin, but we have to start somewhere. The next closest one to here is over a hundred kilometers away. Beijing is taking care of the east coast of Asia and we have the east coast of Frica. That is a large territory. The pale far north people have not suffered the same as we have and their TKs are handling that area. They were always more spread out than us. Maybe that helped. Part of what we are doing ourselves now. Hard to raise an army if there is nothing to get much less feeding it. Nothing is concentrated any more.

A rare person goes inland. Most stick to rivers with an easy coastal outlet. Ships are rare, small and stick to within sight of shore. Most try to pull into shore at night. A crew of ten can pull the ship up to protect it. Tide charts are gold and people die for them.

Our Ecos is at the former Crab Cove. Has no name any more. The library is long gone, burned to the ground years ago. Before my time. We built out of 'stone' on the same site. No norms were around, so we could afford to be creative. We went full Medieval with lots of hidden doors and secret passages. We are slowly recruiting norms and want to give them a chance if we are invaded. We duped the books we needed from the archive that only DS can get to of course. People are admitted to the library blindfolded.

We had to learn the skills we will teach others. We have a forge, carpentry, herb garden and apothecary. And of course, the farm. I am not at all crazy about life stock and poultry. We all keep trying to make pets out of them. We do not eat meat ourselves, but need to keep the breeds going for the norms. Someone will have to take on the role of butcher. We are hoping they will come with that particular knowledge from hunting.

A kitten has adopted me. Henry. A real wild cat. Loves to tear up our room chasing imaginary prey. He will be big enough to hunt for himself soon enough. Every leaf that falls to the ground is in trouble for now. I should enjoy this time while I can. Fortunately I can dupe enough food for him to eat without having to hunt and kill myself. He sleeps on my lap when I am working at my desk. There is a sunny spot on the upper porch he goes to if it gets too noisy here.

My skill is carpentry. The forge made the tools I use. I have sharpening stones. I made the handles myself from local wood. There are a

lot of species of wood to choose from and part of my tasks includes taking care of the forest. When we get a carpenter to be, this is where I start. They have to know and understand the forest before then can build anything. We sort, plant, weed, first aid, divert streams to prevent over watering and drying out. Invasive species are pulled out and desirable ones are encouraged. Any apprentice spends their first year here. Henry comes with me in my pack and supervises or naps depending on his needs. Okay, mostly naps and lots of chasing.

We mostly get requests for hoes, shovels, spears/walking sticks, and bows. Bows are really part of the hunting master's purview, but I show how to find and select the saplings that will be harvested, shaped and hardened for both the bow and the arrows. Not crazy about weapons, but most communities still depend to some extent on hunting for protein. Repeat customers always bring something for Henry and he has become accustomed to waiting for his treat.

A bell rings twice and then once. Someone is coming my way. I find my robe and put it on with the hood over my shaved head. Henry was not happy about being put down, stretches and goes outside. He is doing this more and more. Soon he will only return at meal time or when he wants to get warm.

A young boy enters the workshop, wide eyed and clearly scared. Have to wonder what stories he has been told. I scan him. He has been beaten. I hate it when they do that to the young. Will not happen here, but he will not know that yet.

"How may I help you young sir?" I bow and he hastily bows back.

He fishes for something out of his pocket and hands me a piece of thin bark with the request on it and hands it to me. I find the request and make a mark next to the village name on the wall.

"Last one. Are you the apprentice then? We are not a source of free labor." He nods and nervously receives the knife and sheath. A little young, but we grow up quickly in the near wild. Henry comes back in, jumps up to my desk with some effort, pulling down a few things in the process, before he finally succeeds.

"Meow!" Dinner time, or at least the first attempt.

"Do you have a name?" It is on the piece of bark, but it helps them get over their nervousness if I engage them

"Jack sir."

"I am no sir. You may call me and anyone else you meet here other than another student as Teacher."

"Jack, Teacher."

"Wait here. Do not give Henry anything."

I go out the room. I can scan what happens in the room easily. He is curious of course. Pets Henry and gets a purr which makes him withdraw his hand quickly. Not much experience with cats then. There are a lot of them here. He will adapt. He walks around and looks at everything, but keeps his hands behind his back and does not touch anything. Good. Have to wonder it that was beat into him though.

I come back in with Henry's meal and place it in his bowl to much enthusiasm on his part.

"You will soon catch your own meals." Hu tend to chase out the larger predators. Cats fill in part of that need as long as we do not let them breed too much. The fem cats hate being locked up during their time, but it is necessary. Glad a male adopted me. The howling is intense.

"My name is Mia, or Teacher Mia to you. Come."

He follows me as we tour the facility. First to his new room. There is already a sleeping pad there. I show him where he can take a bath. Not much enthusiasm there. We do keep clean. He will learn. I show him the student hall where all meals are served. I explain the system of bells that call everyone to each activity.

"Teachers eat here as well, and the same food as you do. If you are late, there is likely not going to be anything left. Be on time. If you know you will be out in the field for the day, you can ask the kitchen for a day pack. You return the pouch later."

"No one will enter your room but you. You are responsible for keeping it clean. There is a broom in each room. The knife you accepted is yours to use while here. You will engrave your name on it later today. First task will be to replace it by making another one to be ready for the next person who needs one."

"It may seem complex, but it is logical and you will quickly learn how to get everywhere. Part of your studies will include what to do in an emergency. Emergencies can include fire or invasion. We can and will defend ourselves. At your level you will be working in the background to help front line people do their tasks. Do whatever they ask you to do. Simple. As you gain experience, more interesting tasks will be added to your duties. Have patience."

We continue and make our way to the forge.

"This is Teacher Doug." He little eyes bulge out. Doug is huge. He has to be for the task of forge master, but being a Di in his last ex-

istence, being big suits him too.

"Teacher Doug, this is Jack, my new apprentice. Need another knife blank too." He hands one over.

"Is it just me or are they getting smaller each year?" Doug gives a hearty laugh, which Jack can't help but smile at.

"You will do a rotation in the forge, taught by an older apprentice. We have all spent time in each department so we understand how everything fits together."

Doug asks, "So, young Jack. How were you selected for this honor?"

He looks down at the floor, clearly nervous. *He was beaten.*

He gives a big sigh, "I can leave. I know you will not want me. It's alright. I am used to it. Sorry to have bothered you."

Doug knows this response, "Whoa. Hang on. It was a simple question. I used to work in a slave camp. All of us have sorted backgrounds. I only ask out of curiosity, not to reject you."

I nudge Jack, still looking down, "I am different from other people. My curiosity gets me in trouble. I like to figure things out. Sometimes I cannot put back together things I have taken apart to understand. I don't mean to be destructive. Really. I just need to know. Just show me the door and I can leave. No fuss."

Doug comes up to him and gives him a big side hug, "You will fit right in here. Glad you have decided to join us. We like to figure things out too." Yeah he did that to me when I arrived too.

Doug signs me in Ceph, ~Autistic, he may make a good candidate.~

~I got that too. We will see. A long time before that bridge needs to be crossed.~ Years in fact. Jack is watching us intensely of course. He tries to make some of the signs, but we were very fast.

"Signing is useful when you cannot speak because of a lot of background noise, or because you don't want someone else to hear you or give your location away. Here is how you say, hello." I show him one of the simplest signs. He tries it and gets it quickly.

"How do you say my name is Jack?"

"We call it showing, not saying, as it is visual." I show him. More complex, but he gets it in one. Doug nods his approval with a smile.

The bell rings for mid meal. Doug puts down his materials, as do the rest of the people working here at the moment. One remains to keep the fires going. It would take too long to relight them. Someone will bring back a field bag for the one whose duty it was today.

"We eat now. Sit next to me." Doug says. Hey, he is mine. Meow!  
After the meal it is out into the forest. Need to find wood to make  
a new knife stock and start his training in forest management.

# Ceph Eden

Pilot showed me what to do and I have built the necessary underwater ship. It is an AuC matrix. We try very hard not to make anything out of 'thn metal that might draw attention to us. Having no seams makes it stronger as well. I DS inside and then lift it over the ocean to begin my journey into the unknown.

Being TK8 I could probably make the journey without the structure, but I want to be ready if something goes wrong. This is the unknown. No room for error. And I am alone. I will not risk any of my students on this one. Nor do I want them to know what I am doing just yet. It might be nothing. It is probably my own mind making me think something is there when it is not.

I check the oxygen re-breather and it is functioning normally. I use TK to locate myself in relation to the shore and my goal. Time to proceed. A fantasy or a reality.

Pilot was curious, but I explained that TK does not show us everything. I am a water's edge creature and I really do not know the deep water part of my world that well, really at all. Sometimes it is best to be closer and see for ourselves. She understood and accepted the explanation fortunately. I did not want to show her the real reason for fear as I would be seen as a fool. I am still new to this TK business and am more cautious than most for that reason.

Just being accepted as an equal at council meetings is new to me. Of course we have our own meetings here, but everyone here is Ceph like me. Different when you are surrounded by the best minds in the froth and are expected to contribute and have your contributions being accepted as useful. This is a long distance from being a simple young potter under a very bad queen. I am very lucky to be alive when I think about all the times it could have gone badly. Not that I remember much from my hatchling days of course. Run, hide, find food, hide. Simple and scary.

Now I am thousands of meters below the surface of the ocean moving along the bottom to greater depths. I can scan and see there is life around me and near me. There are small fish, simpler forms I have never seen before. Crabs, lots of crabs on the floor of the ocean. And worms, lot of worms. These two seem to be the major life forms at this depth. No light, so no plants. What do they eat? I stop to watch, or rather scan. No light to see by. They seem to feed on what-

ever 'falls' from the surface areas. Something dies, they are here to clean it up. Fascinating.

I am not sensing what I felt before. Frustrating, but I have only been here a few eighths so far. I tell myself not to give up so easily.

I handle my own form's need with TK. I wanted to travel light as the Hu say. In reality, I just have no idea what I am doing. There are some who will look for me if I am gone too long, but I am often missing from Ceph for days at a time at some meeting or other. Most have gotten used to it. I guess technically I am the current queen, though I certainly do not act like it. I am no dictator. I do not condemn anyone, much less to the warrior pits. That is all gone.

Nease told me what Ceph One was like. We must have separated millions of years ago. It is amazing we can figure out what each other shows. She has adapted to our methods of showing to make it easier, her being the last of her kind. Hu are not the only ones who suffered large mistakes.

It has been nearly a day now. I am at the bottom of the continental divide as was explained to me. There are deeper areas, but it was close to here that I felt the presence. Nothing.

I decide to wait. Without a direction in such a vast space I could just as easily be moving further away. I will admit I am enjoying the quiet time to myself. Being a leader is an exhausting task. Everyone wants something, usually without any sacrifice on their part, or by taking away from someone else equally deserving. I might have to come here more often.

*You are beginning to understand why I love this space so much.  
Who is that? Who are you?*

*Stay there, I will come to you.* I am scanning around me furiously, but sense nothing moving larger than a crab.

I sense a tapping on the ship by vibration in my attached sucker arms. Still I scan nothing. Wait, was that rock there before?

*You will not sense me. I hide well. Don't waste your attention.  
Why have you been seeking me?*

*I have sensed you for many lunars. It was something I did not understand.*

*You needed help. I came to help. My time here is nearly ended.*

*You mean the crabs? I knew something was going on. An ecology does not suffer that kind of disaster and then recover so quickly using foreign species. You were responsible?*

*Of course. It is what I do best. But my presence is a secret not to*



*be shared by anyone. Not that it will matter. I have other tasks I need to attend to. I will leave after our conversation.*

*Who are you?*

*Is it not obvious?*

*There was one in the journals, a sen crab species, but s/he died on New Hope along with all the other life forms upon its destruction by the 'thn, including the 'thant nest. It was the worst tragedy in our recent history. They collected bodies even.*

*I am TK9. Not so easy to kill. But, it was important to make it appear as if I had. Do not tell anyone. Accept the gift I have given you and be grateful. One warning, beware of the Cet.*

*We are immensely appreciative. How can I contact you in the future? What is it about the Cet?*

No response. Gone. I no longer feel the presence. Gone.

The puzzle has been solved, and I am glad of the help, but it is not satisfying to lose contact with someone who was so helpful without thought of reward or even thanks. I resolve to become more like them. This is a superior way to be.

I have learned much and need to think about how to apply what I have learned, and ultimately how to instruct others in this revelation.

It could very well be the answer the council was questing for. I think it is. But what is it about the Cet? How do I tell others without coming across as a normal Ceph paranoid?

# Ku Eden

+Welcome back Keki. How was Earth Two?+

+The locals thought I was dinner and not just the Hu. Seemed like everything wanted to eat me. It was horrible. Without TK I would have been plucked for sure.+

+So you had a good time.+ He nods and shows amusement.

+At least they are not at the need for advanced sewer systems yet. Just latrines and ditches. They are trying to recycle as much as possible, yet remain safe. A challenge.+

+You heard the council news?+ He sighs and nods.

+It will be a difficult. What are we going to do here? One or both Ku worlds?+

+The easiest would be Ku Two, the white bandanna are norms and have been accepted. We really do not need to do anything but watch.+

+A lot of watching. I thought the Hu were bad, but we match them for crazy notions and flying off the cliff.+

+Agreed. I like the idea. I never intended for the White Cloaks to be forever. It was supposed to be temporary until the Black Vests were disbanded.+

+Then the Red Vests, parasite attacks, and so forth. It has been a long run. It would be interesting to start the White Bandannas here as well and see what happens on both worlds.+

+Ah, but we are only required to disappear, not abandon our worlds. We are to remain hidden and work in the shadows.+

+I like it. I never liked being seen. Growing up in the sewers changed me or I was always that way. Probably the latter.+

+Yes, you were always that way Keki. That is why you are one of us now. A good choice too.+

+Thank you. I am happy to be here too.+

+I really do not want to become like the Black Vests, secrets, spies, informers.+

+Weren't they very visible? That as part of their strategy, to be visible and feared was it not?+

I nod and sigh. Bad Hu habit. Ku don't normally sigh. Sounds funny when we do it, more of a hiss. Scares the kitties on Hu.

+It will not be just the citizens we need to watch. We need to watch the White Bandannas as well. Their selection process is not as

rigid for their flock and some always slip in seeking attention or power.+

+I know the type. Can't cull them all or there would be none left. Only certain personalities are attracted to the duty in the first place. Not like TK where they are chosen and raised without their knowing about it.+

+A little harder to pull off with the White Bandannas.+

Keki gets it, +You want me to join them and see what I find.+ Not a question.

+We need to look younger. No one would believe an old bird trying to sign up.+

+We? Don't you have enough duties here?+

+Like I can't do both? It will be harder to make council meetings. How do you feel about Grace or Noby taking on that duty.+

+Are you asking if I think they will die of boredom? Possibly. But either or both would do. Takes notes, report back, present our requests or experiences with the experiment. It could work.+

+Good, they are both grads at Uni now, so not much change in their routines either. They can still continue their education at the same time. Being grads means they have a little more flexibility in their schedules at least.+

+Are the pros on the wing?+ I nod.

+What happened to your Terror?+

+We called them Janes after the change. No longer a threat. They are all nuns at Beijing now. It was just easier to keep them all together. They will stay norms and live out their lives there. The Hu made sure they cannot reproduce.+

+Understood. Good idea. Well, let's get to it. Our appointment at the recruiting office is in an eighth and we need to take normal transport now. No more popping around unless it is an emergency.+

We stay male and fem, just a lot younger, around fifteen solars, the average recruitment age. We have fake ids and simple outer ware. As new recruits we will be living with the others. We can com with each other using TP to compare notes and experiences. The roosters tend to get more aggressive, so it was important for Keki to be part of this experiment. Keki is actually the stronger candidate. Someone with extensive knowledge of the sewer system is a real plus. A lot of criminals choose to hide there for some reason. Maybe they think White Bandannas would be too squeamish to go down there.

My experience is more in management. You don't come in as a re-

cruit forcing that issue. Makes those higher up nervous you want their position. I am playing that down and will come in as lower in the pecking order. Less responsibility at least. I put myself down as a maid for the rich. I can do that.

Both of us could have passed the entrance exam with high scores, but purposely did worse. We do not want to be a threat to anyone at this stage. We are assigned quarters and told the routine.

We are in a flock of new recruits. They house roosters and hens in separate coups, but we learn and train together. We are watched carefully. No whooping allowed. That was made really clear. At least we do not lay eggs every day like the Hu chickens. I would need to fake that. Housing is tight with no privacy. I need to fake sleeping when the lights go out. This is the time I begin my scans to keep track of the other TKs and attend meetings virtually. It is amazing how much work I can get done the two eighths we are given for sleep. Food is nutritious but not exciting. As expected. They have budgets to meet too. As TK no one seemed to care. Our equivalent of sap chow was fine. In fact when we were required to meet with the high perch norms the food was always nauseating. Just too much, too much fat, sugar and salt. I have heard other TK sen complain of the same on their worlds.

Keki has a harder time as rooster recruits work out the pecking order. He cannot try for top perch, but being on the bottom risks being kicked out. As per his personality he tries his best to help others to succeed. This is seen as a weakness to be taken advantage of. We can't expect our species to change its basic behavior patterns.

We know quite quickly that none of the recruits would make TK candidates. This is not a surprise, just disappointing that our two cultures, both set up to help keep order are so different.

Through my night meetings we are getting all of the White Cloaks to go undercover. We need to see what happens when they try to run things themselves. We still have hidden locations in most cities, safe houses really. We are spread thin and need new recruits, but not at the expense of quality. Once they reach TK5 they are essentially immortal, so replacing them is not the issue as with norms. Most go back to something similar to what they did before. It is what they already know and don't have to do a quick learn to fit in. They do not go back to their home towns. That would create too many questions. At some point, as the Ku ID system ramps up to more and more crosschecking we will have a harder time with the immortals. We may have to retire

them to the background to avoid suspicion.

We do a lot of role playing in front of instructors, trading roles so we know what happens on both sides of a confrontation. I do approve of this style and may add it to our own training as we go underground. Our TKs need to be able to assume the norm roles convincingly. The biggest problem will be boredom. Being TK sounds exciting, but it has just as much scratch and peck as anyone else.

In a few lunars we complete basic and are paired with a longer term Ku in the field. Most White Cloaks travel in pairs. As norms this is largely for the safety of themselves. A single Ku is easy to overcome. Two is not that much harder if the group is determined, but the White Cloaks do have tech that norms do not have, including some communications they can use in an emergency. It might not save them in time, but hopefully allow the bad birdies to be caught.

We need to get TKs into the justice structure too. The ones who decide what the punishment is to be. We do not have jails in the Hu form. Do the Hu still use those? We have prison camps, physical punishment and loss of privileges. The rich get away with paying a fine to the White Cloaks which, yes, many have stated is not fair. What is it about the rich in all species who feel the rules do not apply to them? Why do they need so much? Top perch in the deep past meant power, not large coups, better food, harems, etc. Our food is not that bad, better than when I was a norm and improving all the time. The Hu were excellent farmers and we have brought a lot back from Uni that we learned from them.

+Come on Saint Flor, keep up and stop day dreaming.+ I hurry to comply. We are patrolling a poor district. For some reason birds who have little, need more careful watching. Yeah, I have a nickname because I did not think using my name would be a problem. Did not realize that I was a myth taught in schools. Oh well, I will live.

Keki sounds like kick me and he got stuck with that nick name and a lot of others kicking him at random times. He ignores it, which makes things worse. It is very hard to get Keki's feathers ruffled. The higher ups are fascinated. They love the idea of a WC (short form) that stays cool and can't be intimidated by the bad birds. The WC have been getting some backlash for being too violent. They are learning they are here only at the goodwill of others. They are norms and can be replaced.

Less than a half solar and Keki has advanced to small flock leader. Roosters normally advance faster. Another aspect of the WC

that is getting critical stares. My ability to do paperwork perfectly has landed me an office job when my training is over. Fine with me. I can see a different view and together we will see much. What really got Keki the raise was when he followed a bad bird into the sewers. No other WC was willing and when he emerged with the bad bird in ropes he was hailed. No one calls him Kick Me any more. Of course his small flock are learning the sewer system and may get stuck there. He is tending to get all the ones who would likely have been let go. Perfect for him. The arrest rate for this city has gone up two fold because of his work. That makes the high perch very happy.

We might be doing too well. We are not intending to spend the rest of the norm equivalent as WCs. At some point we will need to be 'killed' or resign to take care of family, or some other excuse. We are concentrating on training our replacements as our number one goal.

Other TKs are checking in. The health care flock are having the hardest time not breaking cover. It is hard to watch suffering when you can do something about it. Too many miracles are happening in their areas. It is really hard for all of us to watch someone have an accident, be hurt or die as a result when any of us could have saved them.

This is something we need to bring to the high council. Are we just watchers as Silver and Turtle did at the beginning of their TK lives or are we saviors? I am not happy with either role. I am beginning to wonder if TKs should even exist at all. Maybe we are just 'thn breeders and should stay out of everything else. Serve the froth and serve The Question.

This would require a large number giving up their TK and becoming norms again. That would not be easy either. We have Alexandria. Maybe that is enough. Confine ourselves to there, concentrating on The Question and let our sen fend for themselves. This is the alternative I am most in favor of. I think I have been in the game too long. Glad it is not just my decision.

# Alexandria

"I tell you something is going on. Those in charge are not normal. There are tons of rumors of them doing things that no living thing can do, nor should do. It is not fair to those of us without these abilities. I am not saying I want them too, god, life is hard enough, but why do they? What gives them the right? Too much power in one place I say."

^I agree brother. It is just freaky unnatural. Gives me the night shakes.^

+Squawk, squawk. All I hear is chickens. They never caused me no harm. So what? We have no idea what their lives are like. I don't see any silver palaces embedded with jewels. They, if there is a they, eat the same food, go to the same shops, run the same trails I run. How would you even know which were these 'special' ones and who was not? Let's not turn this into a turkey hunt. Innocents get killed.+

"What happened to the Di? They were damn useful for the heavy work. Nice guys too. One day they were here and next they are gone. Not so sure about the Raps, about them being useful, that is, but they are gone too?"

+I have seen Raps about, but there are certainly fewer of them. Now the ones that really creep me out are the Ceph. That is why I live here well away from water. Have you ever seen one?+

^They were at the port when I came in. Give me the creeps too. What was that port anyway? Lock us all in a box for days and then it opens onto this new world. Were we in a space ship? I did not feel any motion. We hate being in a confined space. I think they doped our food to calm us down.^

+Did that to us too. Still the feathers were flying. The roosters look for any excuse to show off. We need to investigate this more.+

"Already started. I follow them around and lose them every time. They duck around a corner or go into a room and when I get there they are gone. From a room with no exits or windows, they are just gone."

+And there are areas where we are not allowed at all. Have you seen any locked spaces around here? I thought everything was open. It is not. There are buildings and spaces we cannot get into. The door is there, but no way to open it.+

^Saw that too, but some do go through. I watched one such door I

could not get through. Watched it for two eighths. Three times someone just opened the door and went in. Three times. Three different sens too.^

+Good to know it is not just one of us sens with special advantages. No offense, but sometimes I think the world is run mostly by Hu. Certainly more of them than any other sen.+

"I noticed that too. I personally like the variety. On Earth I was singled out as being 'different,' but here no one knows or cares. Maybe the Hu were the first ones here?"

^And how the guano did we freaking get here? Where are we really? We all had geography in school. There is nothing like this on Ba Eden. Certainly not separate areas called Ku Eden, Hu Eden, Rap Eden and Ba Eden. We have been industrial tech level for a hundred solars. That includes ships that have been all over our world.^

"Hu Eden, what we just call Earth, is much lower tech, but we do have sailing ships that have gone most of the way. Of course Cat Land is off limits and no one sane attempts to go there. Nasty creatures from what I heard."

^We had one living at the trees set aside for the Ba at the University. Or so I heard. I am no Uni brat. They seemed to get along with it okay.^

"On Hu Eden they have the right to eat you. They will eat Ba and Ku as well. They eat anything they can catch and even a small one weighs over a hundred kilos."

+Not our problem. Let's concentrate on the task at hand. We need to catch one in the act of doing something beyond normal.+

^Agreed.^

"Agreed. But, then what? We can't attack them, too strong if what we suspect is true."

^We go on strike! They need the food and supplies we make don't they?^

+^"Agreed!"^+



# Cet Eden

::I don't think I could eat another sardine. Wonderful and so much fun chasing them around. Nice to know the bubble net still works.::

::They will learn. Enjoy while we can. How goes the landers infiltration?::

::It has been so easy it is as if they were waiting for us. How could they leave such an obvious hole in their social structure? They are so trusting.::

::Their cultures crash at regular intervals. We can trace ours back over a million solars. They are lucky if they remember a hundred.::

::So, they forget. That is a huge weakness, which we can exploit.::

::That is only true of the norms. For some reason the TKs are hoarding their history information.::

::Only landers can hoard. But history is knowledge. How do they hoard knowledge? It is not physical.::

::Ah, they depend on these things called books. Mashed trees that is written on with black ink. You know like when you eat a squid and it makes a mess on your face. Our students at the University have been most helpful in understanding their culture.::

::Clearly inferior. Should be no problem molding them into our slaves. And they will likely prefer it. Less chaos and more ordered.::

::Don't forget, their tech allowed them to hunt us for thousands of solars. We do not want to return to that situation.::

::We needed culling. We had gotten lazy. Besides TK gives us abilities far in excess of what we had then. There will never be another hunt.::

::We need to be careful though and not attract the attention of their high TKs. I don't trust Silver and Turtle. Why are they in Hu form? Why give up being free in the sky and water? We knew them at Farout. I am convinced they were the ones who got us sent there in the first place.::

::I agree. We need to be careful.::

::Always.::

# Alexandria

~Meeting will come to order please. Get something to eat or drink and find a comfortable space. Make sure you can see me. I am not going to suddenly start speaking.~ They show amusement. I have learned how to recognize laughing from their expressions. The Ba are the easiest, their entire bodies shake. Rap show by raising a few select feathers on their heads. No matter.

~As per our last meeting, on Ceph we are attempting an experiment. We are hiding TK from the norms. We will no longer be saving them from themselves. Like other TKs we are creating a library of tech, the archives of which we will carve in quantum AuC and scatter in many locations just out of reach of good living locations. We want knowledge to be of some effort to achieve. Norms are free to consult at any time, everything will be written in simple Ceph. It will be up to them to maintain. If for some reason part of one library is damaged, then they will be dependent on consulting another library for the missing information. Edwin and a team of 'thants are helping to set this up and in organizing the information. We are eternally grateful.~

I signal to Squeak to go next.

<sup>R</sup>We are still in the beginning stages of course. The biggest challenge is teaching pack behavior again. I was convinced it was genetic and hard wired into us, but apparently not. We need to be taught as hatchlings. It needs to be imprinted on us. Packs were banned on Di and it only took a few generations for it to be lost. Puu, Cat and Marie are helping us demo a pack. They still remembered this hidden hand signals and we do shows on how to hunt down prey, then show the village how to do so. These Raps spread the knowledge to the villages surrounding them.

The small villages are very good. Perfect size for now. Like for the Ceph, the 'thants have helped make simple libraries in each village for tasks likely to be needed at that level. We worked with norms in deciding what to include. Separated by distance, we have larger 'city' level libraries with more knowledge. We will show locals how to get there once they are ready for a more complex culture. Currently we are making no attempt to hide TK, but we have every intention of doing so once we feel they have a good start. We are in total agreement to do so.<sup>R</sup>

Alessa comes to the front and stands on a platform to make it easier to see her.

^I never realized how dependent our culture had become on the TKs. Our libraries are already present. We did not need to do this part. We may have to revisit this thought though. Our culture is collapsing. The 'peasants' have risen up and burned out the high tree and high cliff cultures. Surprisingly, this is not causing any information loss, with the possible exception of the fine arts, like leaf carving. The lower classes see leaf carving as a luxury for the rich and are not allowing it any longer. Museums of art have been looted and burned. There was clearly a lot of resentment as some of you have experienced as well.

We are staying out of it, watching only. We go among them appearing as norms and will not interfere during any chaos that happens. Fortunately we do not need to get close to observe. It has been an eye opening experience as the Hu say.^

Flor fluffs her feathers and comes to the front.

+The White Cloaks were more corruption hunters than preventing small theft and mayhem. We rooted out whoever was in charge of exploiting others at the larger level. We have turned all of this over to the White Bandannas who also search out cheaters at every level. Being norms though, they will eventually fall into corruption themselves. At least for now, their wages are dependent on community support. If the locals do not like their work, they do not give food to them. The high perch have been told to turn over most of their wealth and will be in coups of similar in size to the average size coup of the middle classes. They will have to actually work for their seed and worms. They may be in management, but they will no longer be able to use their positions to make their own lives better unless they make the entire community better. This is an experiment, but we needed to do something. Being dependent on TKs to keep order is not sustainable in the long run. We are also taking on the hidden watcher role to see what happens.+

Eepi floats up. New to Alexandria and still on probation.

::We of course do not have the problems the rest of you have. At least not yet. We are still too few in number. Fortunately we did not lose our pod knowledge and we wish the Raps good fortune in restoring theirs. Your pod is your life. We have a large world in need of being populated. We are concentrating of raising our numbers and expanding to new locations. Currently the norms to TK ratio is about

one hundred to one. We hope to eventually get to one hundred thousand to one before creating more TKs as needed. We do not have physical possessions so do not have rich and poor. That is not to say we do not have challenges. Packs can be bullies and chase out weaker pods from choice feeding areas. Of course TKs are the strongest pod. We will report more when more has happened.::

~Does anyone else want to report at this time? Feel free to show among yourselves while here in Alexandria. Oh, wait, Edwin. Sorry. Please come forward.~

<sup>th</sup>Thank you Rooi. As you know, we are a very old, very stable culture, at least until Myra befriended and saved me. Our meeting and forming positive relationships with all of you has been having an effect on us as well. Our library has grown many times over. This information is being shared with other colonies as well. Before our new relationships we were dependent on observing from a distance, not always understanding from direct knowledge. Many gaps have been filled in.

We used to be very dependent on the 'thn for knowledge and orders. Now we understand that this was wrong or at least limiting. We were being used for their own purposes, not always to our benefit or to the benefit of those we lived with, all of you. The warriors are certainly happier.<sup>th</sup> Some amusement is shown. Only a few present have experienced the true warrior experience.

<sup>th</sup>At the same time, there are advantages to not being so visible. Therefore we are also withdrawing from direct contact with the norms of your populations. This will make us somewhat dependent on our own TK for doing our task of observing, but because of our interaction with all of you, we no longer sacrifice excess males to feed angry warriors. We now deploy them to assist in organizing knowledge gathered by ourselves or by scouts and workers.

Please continue to let us know if we can assist in anyway. We are appreciative of our ability to interact with all of you.<sup>th</sup>

~Anyone else?~ I wait a moment for someone to respond. ~If not, meeting adjourned. See you in an eight day.~

When I reach the exit I am handed quickly by Puu about a special meeting of the security council. I had already indicated I needed to show with them. We both go our own ways. Others would be curious or jealous if they knew. Especially the Cet.

The University is not near a large body of water, so a small lake was made for the Ceph TKs and students to feel more at ease. It is

covered by a dome to keep the humidity up to the level comfortable for Ceph. My office borders the lake at some distance from the others to give me space to be quiet and think. My companions guard the path to give me advanced warning and to warn off intruders and the curious. They can set up an appointment if needed, but are not allowed to interrupt. Marie taught me this skill. As a leader I am not responsible for every little thing. Delegate and make people work. Often problems sort themselves by the time of their appointment and they end up just reporting what happened rather than needing help any longer. I like this method.

Translating Kung Fu into Ceph has been more of a challenge. We do have something related to wrestling and this provides a good workout as the Hu show.

The lake is stocked with freshwater crabs and I grab one near shore for a snack. I normally do not bother and just use TK, but live prey still has its appeal. Especially when nervous about this meeting.

I inform the companions what I will be having visitors and who they are and when I expect them. They will handle the rest. Of course I could use Ceph for these tasks, but the companions are easier and are bonded to me personally, without their own agendas. Can they truly be sen if they do not have their own agendas? I wonder. I need to be careful and respect their needs as well. Time off to explore? I know Myra's do a lot of that to positive effect. It would not be freedom if I tell them where and what to explore. I refuse to set them to watching the Cet. At least not yet.

I have enough time to get relaxed and make myself and my space presentable.

The entrance is higher than Ceph normal, but much lower than the other sen use. They arrive and I invite them in, crouching low. They find a place and sit. I offer fish tea and crab snacks. George loves both of them of course. Everyone else is polite and takes one. Marie likes to test me with chili pepper infused food. This is payback. She sniffs it and puts it down. Hopi did not grow up with fish or crabs.

The Meeps fill the room until Myra asks them to leave for a bit. There is no way a parasite could still exist in our area at least. Wonder where she takes them to feed? I tell my companions to take the afternoon off and go where ever they wish. They are confused at first until I explain it is about time I gave them more freedom to explore and learn on their own. They pop out. This should be interesting. I look forward to their report.

"What did you do to scare them away? I never get any peace from mine. Like gnats sometimes."

~I told them to take the afternoon off. They are sen. They deserve their freedom too.~ Puu's mouth opens. Hers disappear too.

Cat comments, "Mine will stay. I still need them for early warning."

+Don't you have millions of those about?+

"Mine coordinate them. Commanders if you will. They definitely have the freedom to make their own decisions too." Different, but okay?

Mouse says, "Sorry I missed the sen meeting, but the minutes are already out. Did not miss much. Earth Two TKs are also going into hiding. We have libraries that are really training centers. At the current tech, books are not that useful. They need hands on training. Once we feel they understand we certify them to train others. We still need to supply some raw materials like iron for example. We may have to simulate ore deposits."

^Just set up caches and tell them where to find them. Rather, some of them. No point in having them tear apart the hillsides to extract what they want. Very messy and destructive.^

+Recycling is key. Nothing wasted. I mean nothing.+

~Any chance of ceramics starting again?~

"Soon, not quite yet. I don't want them burning down the forests to make the necessary heat. The small iron works are bad enough. We might need to make them solar works again for both. But yes, ceramics would be good to start up again. Too bad they killed all the ones who knew how and busted the lenses. Stupid."

<sup>R</sup>We see a lot of that. What I presented sounded like paradise, but we are getting some pack rivalry already. I am sure we will see stupid behavior soon enough ourselves.<sup>R</sup>

+Rooi, you called this special meeting. Let's fluff it up.+

~I cannot reveal the source, but I was warned not to trust the Cet. It would appear they have Tafa syndrome and want to rule us all.~

Puu sighs, "We all read the journals. They are clearly hung up on the early journals were Barbara led the Cet to galactic domination."

"I missed that part."

*Stupid monkey.*

Mouse bats George's tail to a hiss in return.

^Stop it you two. I remember, they were a very positive influence weren't they? Could they help us?^

Silver, who I did not realize was even here, speaks up, "Rooi is correct. I lived with them for a time at Farout. It changed them. Farout was not a water world and their living situation was very limited. Without TK they would not have survived. Of course, they blamed the 'landers' for their situation and vowed to never let that happen again. They are starting their plans here on Alexandria by embedding themselves in the norms and stirring up unrest."

Cat says, "It is time then. We need to send the norms back to their home worlds. This experiment of co-living is failing. I have walked among them and had my buddies watch them also. They feel we have set ourselves apart as special and better than they are. The Cet would not be successful unless the feelings were not already there."

Myra says, "They don't have this problem on Mars. They live together in harmony. What if we let them into these meetings and did not keep them in the dark. I would feel the way they do if the roles were reversed."

"Sorry Myra, but Mars is totally different. They live at the edge. They either live together or die together. We have excess. Most of our sens are basically lazy unless motivated in some way, curiosity, greed, lust, whatever. Not true on Mars. Everyone is dedicated to The Question, as we should be."

+Don't forget fear. Fear is a great motivator.+

^And hunger of course. I think there may be another reason to return the sens to their home worlds though. We know there are 'thn who do not respond to the sleep command and they are willing to attack us. I would not want the norms to suffer because of us. We know the 'thn do not mind killing innocents to serve their goals.^ Meaning New Hope. I want to know how Snap escaped.

Cat responds, "The new Qr'thn, Br'thn and Pr'thn have been hunting them down and putting them to sleep with new protocols. Unfortunately they aren't effective long distance, so they need to get closer. We do have warrior companions, and protectors, set up like a mine field. If a 'thn comes close they will be shut down automatically."

<sup>R</sup>Until they find a way around it. As we did with the Di. There is always a way.<sup>R</sup>

Cat nods, "You are likely correct. My time with the pack taught me as much. Build up speed, go silent, and drift in would work I suspect. At least if they were willing to die for their cause, we likely could not catch them in time. Yeah, we have already thought of other sneakier possibilities too."

~Scary. Not that I ever expected to live forever. Just thought it would be a little bit longer.~ Nervous gestures from everyone.

"We have some time to make decisions I hope. Let's bring this up before the council, but I am going to recommend sens return to their home worlds. If not that, then then they need to be watched more carefully."

+If they find out about that, it will really set them off.+ Cat nods.

<sup>th</sup>thns on one front and norms on the other. Really? This is not smart.<sup>th</sup>

"You are correct as usual Edwin. We need a better solution."

~If we have the time to do so.~ We Ceph tend towards paranoia.



# Earth Two

"Lil pill, Lil pill!" I hate it when the others tease me. If my big brother was here they would not tease me all the time. I collect my things and the fruit I was sent to get and head home.

Lost my father a few solars ago to a raid. They have become less frequent but still happen. He was in the wrong place and the wrong time. A freak accident that he encountered an untrained new one with no sense to be afraid. It happens. I still have an uncle and aunt, so I am okay. Not alone anyway.

When I come into the yard I see that the door is open. That is not normal. I hear voices inside, my mother and a male voice I do not recognize. I get my knife ready and come in quietly. When I get closer I hear laughing. Probably not a threat then. I relax, but keep the knife in my hand.

When I enter our home I can see the back of his head, but still do not recognize him. Mom sees me and motions me in. The male stands up and slowly turns to face me. He has a beard and shaggy hair. Wearing a tough coat and boots anyone here would die for. He reaches out to hug me and I shy away. I do not know him.

"Hello Lil pill. You have grown some finally." Sounds familiar.

"Jack?" He grins and nods.

"Where were you when Pa died?" I want to hit him.

"Fifty kilometers away Lil. I did not even hear about it for a lunar. Nothing I could do at that point."

"It has been five years Jack. Why did it take so long to learn how to cut a tree down?"

"I do a lot more than that now Lil." He points to his vest. No one wears a vest here. It has a tree, a hammer and a tool I do not recognize as three different patches.

I point to the one I do not know, "What is this one?"

"A woodplane. Means I am a certified carpenter. The others mean forester and blacksmith. We needed all three here, so I just stayed longer and completed all of them. They work together anyway."

"The community will have to build you a suitable work space now that you are back." Mom says.

"I brought plans with me. It has to be done right or no point in doing."

"You sound just like Pa." I smile.

Mom says, "Sue is all grown up and not attached." She winks at Jack.

"The little terror is grown up? How many people has she killed, recently?" She was an angry kid five years older than me. Local bully in fact.

"She has mellowed now that she likes boys rather than hates them." Mom says.

"I still hate 'em." I say. They both laugh. Yeah, I know, the adult secret. I want to stay a kid forever if that is what I am in for.

Jack bends down to get to my level, "Good for you Lil. Keep that thought. Boys are nasty disgusting creatures. If I was not one myself, I would not get near one. Kinda of hard not to when you are one though." He is smiling when he says this. They are making fun of me.

I shake my head and take the fruit I traded for into the kitchen and put them away. We will have to eat them soon. Some are already ripe. I decide it would be a good idea to prep those to offer Jack and Mom. It is good to have him back. Maybe now the others will stop teasing me.

I hardly see him the next couple of days though. He has lots of meetings with village elders. These ladies will decide what resources and help will be allocated. They scare me. They are so old they have wrinkles on wrinkles. We have been needing our own blacksmith and carpenter for some time. That was why Jack volunteered to do the training. He was a bit clumsy and did not have the strength of others for heavy labor so he would not be missed during the training. I smile. He has muscles now, that's for sure. His arms are huge. He keeps them hidden under that cloak, but I saw him cleaning up. I would love to be there the first time someone challenges him. Pow!

Jack fixed everything at home, storage, doors, leaks, are all fixed. I think he can fix anything. He is frustrated because his tools are limited. That will change, he keeps saying under his breath. One day when he is out I sneak in to get a look inside of his pack. I can't lift it at all. Curious I look inside and see metal bars. Strange, what are those for?

The elders decided on a building and they get to work with Jack supervising and participating. Does not take long. They already knew from a messenger what was likely to be needed so were prepared to some extent. Apparently each Teacher has a right to design things to their own way of working. They will likely be here the rest of their

lives, has to fit and work well.

Orders start coming in. Everyone is excited.

# Earth Two

"That's it Mia?" I nod.

"We found it in the ruins of the forge and wood shop."

"Fire? No evidence on the surface."

"No, purposely destroyed by hand. Likely with the heavy hammers and such used there."

"Okay, out with the rest of it."

"Jack survived, barely. He lost a lot of weight. Others were not so lucky."

"Bring him in." I put Henri down, complaining of course. His favorite warm lap is misbehaving. He goes up to George and decides she might make a good alternative. Surprisingly George does not complain.

Jack comes in, wobbly, and sits down.

"They raped her and then killed her." We had not asked him anything yet.

Mouse is gentle, "Who Jack. Who was raped and killed."

"Lil. Just eleven years old. She did not know anything about that stuff. Why do that to such a defenseless little one? Why?"

I add, "Jack was the only one we found alive. Everyone else had been butchered. We found body parts all over. The flies were intense. We had to bury everyone as fast as possible. Doug dug graves while we collected the bits." Doug nods.

"The journal says Lil. This was hers?" We nod. He looks at Jack.

"He is no longer a candidate. There is no way he would not go rogue after this."

"Any of us would after this. Worst case in years. I thought we were past this stage in their growth."

Doug comes in, "There is more. They melted down all the metal in the village, all the tools, cooking materials, even jewelry. We found molds or broken ones anyway. Must have brought them with them. We certainly do not teach anyone how to make weapons. Houses were torn down to supply the fuel. Only reason the shop was not torn down was because they ran out of metal before it got that far."

"We have an army loose in the area. Could have been worse if they had found the caches we set up for Jack to use later."

"No one in the village knew to tell them. Still they had enough to

arm twenty to thirty mercenaries."

"Where are they now? Must have been villages before this one right?"

"No actually. None of the other villages had a smith. They came here, likely with some metal they brought with them. I would put the number of weapons at enough for a hundred."

"How long ago?"

I look at Jack. He is in bad shape. We have been talking so softly he has fallen asleep in the chair.

"Look at Jack, he is in a bad way. I doubt more than a day or two. The villages are spaced out well. What do you want to do? We can scan and find them easy enough, but then what?"

"You mean you have not already?" He sniffs the air.

George comes in, *They have sacked two more villages along the coast. Not many deaths, but took all the food. They will starve now.*

"Would have been kinder to have killed them." Doug says. We nod.

Mouse sighs, "We are under mandate not to do anything. We can clean Jack up and let him go. Clean up his shop some. But what does he have to live for?"

"He knows how to make weapons now. He is not stupid. He will seek revenge." Mouse nods.

"And so it begins again. What do we do?"

"Keep the Church of Ecos going. Be ready to accept students again when it is over. It is all we can do. Such a waste."

"To think we used to reach the stars, had cities that covered vast areas. We lost so much and now we can't get out of the pit even for a moment. Such a waste is right."

"You're not going rogue on us Mia?" Doug looks at me.

"No, just disappointed. I am happy teaching. Maybe I can convince Jack to come back with us and act as a shop steward. Going after an army is pure suicide. He would get a few, but they would get him in the end. Besides Henri likes him."

"You mean when your lap is not available." We all laugh and then get quiet.

*I heard that. Stupid monkeys.*

I could not agree more. Stupid monkeys.

# Incoming - Alexandria

*Okay Earth Two, get a move on. More behind you.  
To the right, to the right! Your other right! Wake up please.*

"We stick together right?" I nod to Liza and Princess. George has not seen so many sen since the last time we were here and that was to a nice small university town. Western Port has gotten huge. I have all of the West Frica TKs with me. Several hundred all told.

"Let's put some space between us and this mess." I TK all of us up the coast to a nice harbor location if we work on it some.

We gather together. Liza takes over.

"We need housing, latrines, water and food storage. I want a meeting space large enough to hold all of us. Feels like rain. There is a storm coming in for the north. The wind has already picked up. I am spoiled and still prefer to be dry." That gets a laugh. We had discussed all of this before we came, so teams have already been assigned.

I have Mia, Doug and Jack with me. Technically he is not TK, but none of us could leave him behind to be slaughtered. He can't do much damage here with everyone watching. He and Doug split off to make a new forge and wood shop. We don't need it, but it feels good to be doing something physical. A lot of TKs in one place. Need something to distract us. Jack will feel better too.

Mia insists, "Make it look natural. I hate that new TK look some of them do. Stone, wood and metal. Nothing shiny and perfect looking either." I smile and salute her to get a frown in return.

"It said in the Catbox that we need to make underground shelters as well. It would make sense for the entrance to be near the main meeting place."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I am thinking a round house with entrances in the west and east. A fire pit in the center that can be moved with a spiral staircase to the shelter underneath."

"I like it. No doors though, make them those 'S' shaped things to protect from weather, but can't be locked. Oh and low enough so anyone entering has to duck."

"Everyone is equal. I can make the walls DS proof if you want."

"Anyone powerful enough to take us out is not going to be

stopped by that. Cute university trick you picked up?" I smile and nod.

"We won't be saved by a shelter either, no matter how deep. I wonder what that is for?"

"They told us to make it. I hope they explain everything later. How many TKs are here so far?"

I shrug, "On the west coast, several thousand. They will be spread out though. Oh, except the Ceph who are gathered around the bay at West Port."

"At least we will not be bashing each other's heads in. Such a waste." I nod and sigh.

We level a space large enough, add drainage and then a nice firm foundation. We were warned about earthquakes. Make it sturdy. The foundation is solid steel I beams going down hundreds of meters into solid stone and cross braced at regular intervals. Titanium coated to prevent corrosion. I also dig a nice steel shaft down in the center. We can worry about the details after we get the top built.

"You will waste less if you use stone from the underground portion to make the above ground bits."

I smile, "Bits? Are we reducing moving thousands of metric tons of material around to bits?"

"You know what I mean. Since you are the high TK, you do the heavy lifting and leave the detail work to me." I nod.

By the time I am done with my work she has added lots of engraved stories to the inside and outside. Latrines have been set up near the entrances but far enough away as to not offend anyone. Yes, we can convert anything into anything, but it is still easier to leave it alone and use it as is. She did a great job on the stone path coming up to the lodge as well. Ties in quite nicely with what the others have been working on. There is a patio on the west side that overlooks the harbor below.

"I would really like a ship." I sigh.

"You spent time on one didn't you?"

"As a low TK. Best time of my life. We hunted pirates and provided safe passage to traders. All gone now. Raiders have burned anything that will float. They did not want any chance a slave might escape."

Liza pops in with Princess who immediately joins George and Henry under a shade tree.

"I want a ship."

"Oh you two are something else. Go, make your damn ship. I will take care of the finish work here." She sighs and stomps off.

Someone has already made a path to the shore and started a pier.

"Went ahead without me I see."

"Hey, someone had to do it. I need help with the ship design.

There are no trees here. What do we use?"

"Silver told me once they used to make ships out of a material called concrete, a sort of stone. It is not the weight of the material so much as its displacement in the water. I am not ready to trust that. I was thinking of something foamed."

"Anything iron would rust in a day." I nod.

"Gold does not rust, but not strong enough." She nods.

"AuC would work of course, but we are forbidden to use that."

"Like painting a target on us apparently."

"The whole world is a target. How could we make it worse?"

"We are not the security council. I was on it for a term. They are paranoid as hell and very scary in their preparations. I am willing to accept what they say. How about foamed titanium?"

"Worth a try. Let's see what we can do."

We failed a few times before we got something that could actually work. Neither of us has been on a ship in a while, but Liza probably remembered more than I did on the details. I can't believe I was a master leaf artist when I miss so much details on something that our lives used to depend on. Rope was another problem. We used carbon fiber with a silicone coating to protect hands. Crew of twenty five to start. If we are here awhile we can build others. The pier she made is large enough for a small fleet.

"There is life down there. I am amazed. They have only been here a few hundred years, yet there seems to be a working ecology."

"I am beginning to think they are planning for the apocalypse."

"I am beginning to believe you are right. If we lost all TK how would we survive."

"Earth Two all over again."

"I'm sorry. I refuse to mate. I don't care how low our population gets."

I laugh, "Cats seem to like it." I give her a coy smile. Not good at it. She returns the look with a tongue sticking out.

"Hmmp. We need warehouses, barrels, hand trucks."

"A tavern with wenches?" She hits me on the shoulder.

"Get your mind out of the gutter sailor."



I salute her, "Yes Captain!"

# Jack

"I am responsible. I caused my sister's death. The villagers death, and who knows where they went next to rape and kill. I made the weapons. I am responsible."

"Nope. I do not agree Jack. They forced you to make the weapons and you personally did not kill anyone. You are not responsible for the actions of others. They are responsible for their own actions."

"But if I had died, then the weapons would not have been made."

"Really? You don't think your students or even they could have made them themselves? They had weapons when they came in, made them somehow right? No, you were just free labor. Your sister and the others in the village were dead the moment they arrived. Again, not your fault. It is a miracle you are alive. Count yourself as fortunate. I know it does not feel like that right now."

"But they repeatedly raped my sister! She was only eleven years old. Who can do that?"

"Probably raped all of the fem. Is that better?"

"No, of course not. But she was only eleven."

"This is not about what is right. It is about power. The Di were no different. They did a lot of horrible things too. I did some horrible things I will never get out of my mind. Does not matter, that like you, I felt forced into doing them."

"Wait, you were Di? No one told me. But you are Hu now. Of all the horrible life forms you could have chosen, why Hu? I agree with the Cats, we are just stupid monkeys."

He laughs, "Hu are no worse than any of them. While at University I learned too much about all the other sens we have here. None are better or worse than the other. Different, but not better or worse."

"You should have left me on Earth to die with everyone else."

"Really, and you would not have sought revenge by trying to kill the ones who got your sister?" He knows.

"You are right, I would have tried. You can still send me back right?"

"Sorry kid, you know too much now." He looks sad.

"Am I to become like all of you. Special powers? If I had those I could seek revenge easily."

"That is why you will never get them. We call it going rogue. Not allowed. Too big a chance for you. Oh, you get free room and board,

a long life, but no special powers."

"I can't stay Hu. Too repulsive. I want to kill myself just to get out of this form."

"That we can do something about. I would suggest a period of instruction. Learn about the Hu and all the other sens we have here. We have extensive histories on all of them. Believe it or not, Hu were actually worse in the past than what happened to you. They have gotten a little better even. Evolution is slow though."

"What is ee-vo-loo-shun?"

"I am taking you to someone who can help. Hang on."

We suddenly are in a very different place. There are creatures of every kind around us. At West Port it was just Hu, though I was told if we had gotten near the ocean I would have seen Ceph, octopus like creatures. Most are wearing some kind of clothing, if nothing more than a carry pouch. It seems only Hu are ashamed of their own appearance.

"Be careful your eyes do not fall out."

"Show me a Di. I want to see what you used to look like."

"Sorry, no Di are allowed here. After what we did to the Raps we were kicked out of the collective and off Alexandria. Even I am not allowed to assume Di form, not that I would want to. Follow me."

We stop to get some food of a kind I have never seen or tasted before. I dare not ask how it was prepared. Some large bat like creatures were behind the counter. Spicy. I love spicy.

"This is great." I comment.

He laughs, "Just never ask what is in it." I look at the last bite and decide maybe I can pass. Doug collects the bowls and returns them to the keeper.

We wander though several of the sen areas so I can see how others live and finally arrive at a large stone building with an enormous entrance.

"Crap! What are those things?" I point to the huge ant like creatures. Thousands of time larger than anything I have ever seen.

"Do they bite?" I want to hide behind him now.

"Not unless you threaten them. Are you going to threaten them?" I shake my head vigorously no.

"Good, they could eat you in seconds. Be nice to them. This is the library and these are 'thant scouts. They run the library. Come, we are going inside. Oh, and they are the small ones." I think he enjoyed telling me that. My eyes got even bigger to his smile.

I stay very close to Doug. I am not a weakling. They did something to me to restore me after what happened, but I am nowhere near as strong as he is.

They let us pass without question. Why have guards who do not question you? Maybe Doug is known to them?

It is darker inside and it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. We take a convoluted path deep inside. We arrive at a room that looks like an office. There is a Hu fem sitting down. Some of those ball like creatures come up to me to investigate. I was told about them and saw some of these at West Port, so not as afraid of them, even though I was told they can kill also.

Suddenly a rainbow fills the room and seems to gather around me. I try and touch one and my hand just passes through them.

"They are called Meeeps. I am their mother. Well step mother actually. Long story. You must be Jack." I nod.

"You are in good hands now Jack. I will see you later if our paths cross." He leaves smiling.

"Are you my new teacher?"

"Oh, no. I am here to prepare you to meet your new teacher. Very nice sen name of Edwin. If I was 'thant I could fall in love with him easily."

"'thant? One of those scary things at the entrance?"

"Those are the tiny ones. Sit. I need to teach you their language. Will make it a lot easier to get around in here believe me. Most can understand Standard, but very few can speak Standard. They are not really designed for air languages." She waves her hand around.

"This is your space as long as you remain in the library. Food will be brought to you. Waste goes in that corner and others will remove it. Books will be brought to you as you desire. Can you be put in charge of your own learning?"

"I was taught by Teachers Mia and Doug. Part of the training was figuring things out for ourselves. Are the books in Standard?"

"If you wish, but the originals in 'thant are much better. Here, sit in on this chair." It looks like a stone bench. I sit.

"Close your eyes. This can be a bit disorienting for non TKs." My eyes are not wider, not closed.

"It won't hurt. We have figured out how to do this without pain. Just relax and let it happen. Now, close your eyes please." Clearly a command. I comply.

It does not hurt, but it feels like my head is getting much, much

larger. Symbols flash past, unintelligible at first, but slowly they seem to start to make sense.

When I wake I find myself alone in the room with my head on the table. There are books or rather scrolls in front of me. Taking a few breaths, I reach for one and open it. Not Standard that is for sure.

"Oh, a history of the Hu! I can read this. Amazing." I read about the story of Sauron and how he guided our change over time, evolution. That word again. I am in heaven. I am learning so much. I am also getting to be more and more disgusted with the Hu. Now, I can see it was not entirely our own fault though. This Sauron, a TK, was responsible for making us this way. He wanted warriors. He purposely made us fight each other to make us stronger and stronger.

My head is swimming when I hear someone enter the room.

It is one of the smaller 'thant creatures. It is placing food on my table and checking the corner. I have totally forgotten about peeing. I quickly stand up and go there to relieve myself.

<sup>th</sup>Sorry. I was lost in thought. <sup>th</sup>Shit, I said that in 'thant!

<sup>th</sup>Do not be concerned. We are here to serve. <sup>th</sup>It sucks in the urine into it's mouth and leaves. I did not know. How am I ever going to pee again?

<sup>th</sup>Welcome Jack. I am Edwin. <sup>th</sup>I turn around to see an absolutely huge 'thant. Instinctively I bow and it bows in return.

<sup>th</sup>I know our form is repulsive to Hu. I am told you will get used to it. <sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>You are beautiful! If you are not offended, may I touch your outside? <sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Of course. We are not offended by touch and in fact use touch to aid in communicating. We also use smell, but that would be hard for you in your present form. <sup>th</sup>

I slowly go up to him. How do you tell it is a him?

A leg moves to point at its end.

<sup>th</sup>These extra parts here indicate I am a male. If you look at a scout or most of the other ones, you will not find these. <sup>th</sup>

You can read my thoughts.

<sup>th</sup>It is helpful in my role as head librarian to all the sen currently here and possible visitors from other worlds. <sup>th</sup>

That is scary. I am afraid of thinking something wrong and upsetting you.

<sup>th</sup>That would not be possible. I am over ten thousand of your years old and have experienced much. <sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Do you mind if I speak?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>As you wish. I am here to assist you in your studies. Doug mentioned you should start with Hu history and this scroll was chosen to help you start. Please let me know what you desire in the form of knowledge. You are assigned this helper. Give her a name and she will respond to it.<sup>th</sup> A 'thant smaller than a scout is looking at me, I think.

<sup>th</sup>You do not have names? How did you get yours?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>We do not use names. Myra assigned me my name. We use smell as the primary clue as well as caste. Worker 'thants are interchangeable and do not need identity markers. Our understanding is that it is easier for Hu to adjust to our culture with the use of names though.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I think I have a lot to learn.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>This is true of all sen. He turns and leaves. A smaller 'thant comes in and awaits my attention.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>You are the worker assigned to me?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Yes.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I am supposed to name you. How about Nya.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>My name is Nya. How may I be of service?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I am having trouble with this scroll. Do you know what Sauron is talking about when he mentions something called a 'smiggle'?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Our caste does not read. Do you require food or water?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I am fine for the moment. You may leave.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I am assigned to you.<sup>th</sup> She does not move. Okay, spy or helper? Can you read my mind? No response. Might just be the larger ones. I am also beginning to understand she is not the smartest 'thant in the nest. Guess she does not get bored either. Interesting way to solve a problem. Now, what does smiggle mean?

<sup>th</sup>Nya, may I have some paper and something to write with?<sup>th</sup> She turns, goes into a corner, opens a box and retrieves a piece of paper and a stick of some sort, then places them on the table I am at. She can barely reach the top. I could have done that myself easier. Now I know where it is anyway.

The stick is some kind of pigment and it does make marks on the paper. Do I write in Standard or 'thant? Guess it would be better to keep up my 'thant training. I write, 'what is a smiggle?' Not bad, but I am unlikely to pass an exam anytime soon.

I hate being a Hu. They are so evil. I wonder if it would be better to be a 'thant? If Doug was originally a Di, why couldn't I be a 'thant?

# Di Eden

!Droop, I don't think we are in Kansas any more.!

!Where is Kansas?!

!Sorry from an old Earth Two movie.!

!What's a movie?!

!Never mind.! He is teasing me. Back to the old ways. This place is weird. Neither one of us has been here before. Droop was hatched on Di One and this is apparently Di Two, though the locals would never admit they were the second one. White was from Di One also, but adapted when he came here. I am in Di form, but look nothing like the locals who are all staring at us like we are freaks.

!How much time was there between one and two again?!

!A few hundred thousand is my guess. One did not have Raps that I remember, though they could have been there somewhere. We had Dio like myself, Dia, which are extinct and Diu which have isolated themselves on a large island and have nothing to do with the rest of the world. There are no TKs on Di One any longer and we have agreed to leave them alone.!

!Why exactly are we here then?!

!White asked for our help. The three of us are now the only TKs present. All the rest assumed other forms and emigrated or were killed. Apparently this place is so extremely species that they also hates TKs now as well. We need to morph to their form or that will likely be our fate as well. Duck in here for a bit. Clothing is wrong too. I am as shocked as you are. I thought I knew my own culture. Bet the language is different too.!

Changing form was easy. Not that different. Smaller broader mouth and nose, different feather patterns, etc. We TP'd locals to get the language they use. I feel like I am on an alien world. Myra would love it.

We run into an armored Di.

!PAPERS!! Shit.

*These are not the Di you are looking for. You can go.*

!You can go.! She waves us on. Wow, it actually worked.

*What did you do?*

*A Jedi mind trick. We need papers too apparently.*

*Let's find White. He can help. According to the map sent by Cat-box it should be just around the corner.*

There are a number of male Di going in and out of the place in question. We enter.

!You have pubs?!

!I have never been here either, but sure looks like one. Care for a pull?!

!Why thank you. Don't mind if I do.! We will need money. I dupe some I see others using.

Droop goes up to the counter, !Two please.!

!Two what?!

!Beer?! She shakes her head turns around and fills two ceramic jars with a foamy substance and hands them to us.

!Forty chips.! I place some money on the counter. She finds what she wants and pushes the rest back at me.

!You two are not from around here are you?!

!We are from France.!

!Never heard of it. Be careful, the bullies do not like strangers. By the way, no one orders beer. A stinking Hu drink. I filled your jars with firebrew instead. Anyone caught drinking beer could be shot.!

!Good to know. Firebrew it is.! I take a sip and it nearly takes my head off. I do not react but change it to plain water and finish it.

!Good stuff. Thanks.! She looks at me in shock. That old trick still works.

*I am in the corner if you can manage to get here without drawing any more attention to yourselves.*

We see him in a hooded cloak sitting by himself. We join him.

!How did you know it was us?! I ask acting dumb. He gives me a dirty look. Terrifying in the Di form actually. Like a T Rex deciding to eat you. Reminds me of my time at Farout. A place I never want to see again. I smile. I wonder how Roger and Susan are doing, all by themselves.

He gets up, !Let's go. Too many here.! Suits me. Even in local form I am sure we stand out badly.

We get out of sight and then pop into the middle of nowhere. Windy, storm coming, desolate.

!Well, this is a nice cheery place.!

!We need to be somewhere without surveillance. There are watchers everywhere. Likely someone noticed our leaving. They know there is at least one TK still present. They will be looking for us.!

!We are nearly on the other side of the planet.!

!And they know we can do that. What's your point?!



!What has happened since the Rap left and you were isolated?!  
Droop asks.

!Nothing good. A very rigid totalitarian government that covers the entire world.!

!A dictator or a governing council?! I ask.

!Council. Almost worse. It would be easy to take out a dictator, but the council is well hidden and separated. Their tech has reached wired communications. Some of what was lost when the Rap left has returned. Mostly though abusing the lower class. Amazing how much of an incentive torture and death can be.!

!Who do they pick on with the Rap gone? These types of rulers need a scapegoat.!

He shows amusement, !Rap and TK sympathizers. You were really lucky in the zata. Likely the keep will be in trouble and watched now. We can never go back there.!

!Got it. I wish I could say I was sorry.!

!Don't even try. It will only make things worse.!

!Well, they wanted to be separated from everyone else. Why are you staying?!

!I was never in Farout. I was missed during the round up. I have been here thousands of years. This is my home and my people now. I don't even remember Di One.!

!What happened to Library?!

!That was embarrassing. You were all right. She was a spy for the 'thn. When they were sleeping she took off. No protection any more. I don't expect to see her again.!

!Sorry, I knew you thought you had found happiness.!

!Life is change. Nothing is forever. I enjoyed it while it happened.!

!What now, a secret underground rebel movement?! I say teasing. Read too many Hu novels out of boredom while on E2.!

!Something like that. What is happening on Earth Two? Is anyone watching them?!

!Actually no. All of the TKs in the collective have returned to Alexandria and all the norms there have been sent home or are in the process of returning.!

!Yeah, the Di who came back were a major source of knowledge about TKs. We did not keep information about us very secret.!

!Never thought it would be a problem. Most people never met one unless you count a sheriff at TK2.!

!Loose tongues lose the war.! We nod.

!We are the only TKs on a sen home world then?! We nod.

!Shit, as the Hu say. Means no one will come and help us either.!

!On the other hand, bringing everyone to Alexandria does not seem safe either. Never put the entire colony's clutch in one nest.!

!We are not too fond of being a target either. Something will happen. When is anyone's guess. Today or a millions years from now. All they have to do is wait us out and likely we will self destruct by giving ourselves away.!

!If the sens we all came from are any indication it is a certainty. We heard that most of the TKs at the RGC were normless. Seems to be a universal phenomenon. Everyone thinks they will be the exception though.!

!We are, we are!! We all laugh.

!We are three now. Tell us what to do. Make more TKs or mischief first?!

!We are nines, so they are not going to kill one of us unless they get really, really lucky. All the same, have body backups in several locations ASAP. Take no chances. Don't tell anyone, not even each other where they are. My guess is it will not be long before they have detectors and limiters.!

!How do you do that with no TKs around to test it on?!

!Don't take any chances. We are on our own. No one to rescue us. I got a Catbox. It says if they are killed, we are it. The seed for a new TK colony.!

!Nothing like a little pressure huh.!

!I choose recruitment first. Mischief just tells them we are here. We don't need that. Recruits could give us away too, if they are caught. At what level can Di DS out of danger?!

!Does not matter. We need recruits willing to die if they are caught. Most will be norms. Many a war has been won by using norm undergrounds sabotaging key locations. In fact it would be better if they were all norms. We supply funding and knowledge.!

!That could work. We can be information gathering. We can suss out where key players are and when. We can supply weapons just a little ahead of what is already here.!

!We can guide them in, distract the enemy with wrong information, misguided thoughts. Likely to get a lot of the secret police killed at their own hands. Who would believe you were given false orders at the last moment. Or you had a feeling to go a certain direction.

They will be second guessing themselves into a box.!

!Better yet, dupe their own secret police weapons. No serial numbers so they can't be traced. Will drive them birds. Anything in advance of theirs will draw attention, but using their own will make them suspicious of their own.!

!Start small, try out ideas, mix it up constantly. Nothing done the same way twice. This could be fun if it was not so serious.!

!Di will die, on both sides. Unavoidable.! Yeah, got that.

White looks at us, !What do you get out of this? Why are you here?!

We look at each other and I answer, !Bored basically.! He nods.

# Alexandria - Refugees

@Too crowded for me. Feels like a nest.@

"I agree Tewk. Too crowded, but we either help out or get shipped out with them, without TK. You prefer that, get in line." I laugh.

None of us wants to give up our TK, especially the higher level abilities.

A Ku hen with several chicks running after her is having a hard time. I go to help, gathering two of them and bringing them back to her.

+Thank you so much. Too much stimulation. I am going to need a nice quiet perch when we get there.+

+I am sure that has been arranged. We know you gave up a lot to come here in the first place. Are you first or second gen?+

+Third. We have never been on Ku, only heard the stories. Is it true they are run by bullies?+

+It is not that bad. All of you will be together at first and are each being given resources to get you started. Of course you will need to figure out work of some sort eventually. Do you have any talents?+

She shows me her arm muscles, +Wood carver. High end stuff. The high perch should want my work. There are still trees on Ku I hope.+

+Entire forests actually. Many kinds of wood. Not the limited selection of here. Better food too, if you learn how to find it. Unfortunately, more competition for wood carvers too.+

+Schools for the chicks?+ I affirm and she sighs relief.

Most norms have not seen a Yesan and I notice s/he has teamed up with Sam. We are being careful not to use TP. Tewk can speak Standard, which most sens can understand if not speak themselves, but it is hard for s/he and many do not get past the appearance. S/he is being plagued with questions from the curious. I will trade positions in a bit. It is a shame we do not have enough Ku TKs here yet to help. Most sens are more comfortable with their own kind.

The portal opens to receive us and a large crowd of White Bannas comes out. We run up to them.

+Greetings. We are TK and welcome you. It would be most helpful you could help getting the norm Ku into the portal to transport home.+

She bows to me and I return the bow, +We were told what to do.

Take us a moment to get oriented. Three will come to relieve you in a moment. A Yesan? I have never seen a live one.+

+S/he's name is Tewk. S/he has been with Sam and I for years. I am Tia. We can make formal introductions after we get this load into the portal.+

+Understood.+ She goes to her group and explains, then points to an empty warehouse where they can store their limited possessions until we are done.+

Sam and Tewk come up to me. Sam asks, +This is a relief. Good timing. Could have been any sen TK. Did not realize there were so many TKs on each world.+

@Seems TKs breed as fast as Yesan.@ Tewk's attempt at a joke. Nothing breeds as fast as they do. They can breed sexually or asexually depending on need and opportunity. There must be hundreds of baby Tewk's still running around Hotevilla itself still. Most have been picked off by the local predators. Pretty much anything that will eat a bug is happy to catch a Yesan, until they get too big anyway.

I see the hen go inside along with hundreds of others. Going to be tight in there and stink like a barnyard when they arrive. Good thing there are TKs present to help clean things up between trips. Glad I do not have that duty actually.

The door closes and we all sigh relief. We have five 'yachts' going at one time. Otherwise it would be a week between trips. They are color coded as to which sen they carry. This one is yellow. It will leave in an eighth. Once they enter they go through orientation as to what will happen and what to expect on the other side. That alone calms most down. All are scanned for illegal tech, basically anything TK, anti TK or could only have been made by a TK. They will use 'wands' that are basically a fancy stick and don't actually do anything. It is explained that they are coded to the operator and no one else can use it. As this is a Ku yacht, there will be covered areas to calm down the stressed out ones.

The White Bandannas are all staring at us.

Sam asks, +How many here have been to the Alexandria University?+ A few hands go up. That is a relief. They will already know the layout.

I ask, "How many are TK6 or above?" They should know Standard if they are. The same hands go up. Good.

Tewk TPs, *Scan them to be sure no norms are present.* I nod and each of us runs our own scan.

@We have two. I will separate them out.@ I sigh, same number I got. I am glad the hen made it in. Would be hard for her to have remained.

Two roosters of course.

Sam says, "Screw it." He DSs them into the yacht. It has not left yet, but will soon. Too soon to interrogate the two. Technically they are allowed to stay, but that is crazy. They would be such a huge disadvantage. They made it this far, just chickened out at the last moment. Hard to leave what you know. Unfortunately that is gone forever. Already their homes are being dissolved by others.

The leader of the White Bandannas comes up to us.

+You the ones in charge?+

+Flor is already here. She will set you up. Should be here in a moment. Basically, there is a Ku town, should you decided to live there. You understand what the Catbox said?+ She nods.

+We are under lock down waiting for the 'thn war to begin.+

+Which we hope never happens,+ Tewk corrects.

The Ku yacht leaves. Nothing but empty space where it once was.

Flor pops in, facing the wrong direction, with two aids with her. She looks flustered with a lot of feathers out of place. She turns around, while patting them down.

I tell her, "There were two norms who tried to mix in. They were put on the yacht before it left."

+Just as well. Thanks,+ she says to Sam. So, she was watching from a distance. I smile. It is what I would have done. The aids try to get her attention. She waves them off for the moment.

+Never accept a position of leadership. I am going to retire to a nice quiet asteroid when this is done.+ Sam and I laugh and Tewk bows.

She announces to the group, +Let's get all of you settled. Emergency drills in two eighths. We are under war rules, no crazy chicken stuff allowed. This is serious. You are not here for a vacation. Advanced defense training for the next few lunars and then frequently thereafter as the situation changes or we learn more.+ They all disappear at once. Flor I suspect. Don't mess with her. I dare not remind her we do not have a moon here. Twenty eight days is the same, but only in your mind.

We are the only three remaining. Very strange seeing the port empty.

@Quiet at last. Let me enjoy the moment please.@ Sam and I

smile. It does feel good though. Hotevilla is to be abandoned. We are part of the defense team now. Tewk will have a position on the Mother Ship. Sam and I will be in logistics deep underground. That asteroid is sounding really good right now.

# Ba Eden

^They are gone. I can't believe this day would come. Our leaders are gone.^ Nobody remembers a time when they were not here.

^About time we left the nest. Should have happened a long time ago.^ Old bat. I hope I don't end up that cynical.

^And who are these Ba with all these strange ideas? Where did they come from. Where were they? They say they were from here, but no one remembers them.^ Too bad these Ba did not leave instead. I liked Queen Alessa. I even met her once. She seemed really nice. She listened to you. Not sure this will be true of the council 'chosen' to lead instead.

Many are accusing the Queen of giving up when our world needs her most. The unrest has flowed into the trees and cliffs. The rich male Ba are in trouble for sure. The fem are rising! I am tired of being put down, ostracized, even beat, when I did not go along with stupid orders, unfair work rules, home expectations.

I will never bond. Males are guano. I avoid them as much as I can. Like many other sisters I have taken to carrying pepper spray to ward off unwelcome attention. I am now part of a collective. We have taken on an abandoned warehouse and remade it. We work on individual crafts, but we hold everything in common. Chores and kit raising are in common. You have no mother, you have mothers.

I am not afraid of the 'newbies' as they are called. We have several in our collective. They bring a wealth of good ideas. We teased them at first when they claimed the ideas came from cultures no one had ever heard of, from creatures no one has ever seen. I told one once, just claim the ideas as yours and leave off the rest. You will be accepted quicker. You don't want to be labeled as bat shit crazy. I see them talking together occasionally. For the most part they are trying hard to fit in. We are here for mutual protection and support. That they get and support completely.

The younger fem are having the most problems adjusting. Some had male friends, close friends, as in nearly bonded with friends. That has to hurt. Some leave of course. This is not a prison. Some return with a kit or two in arms, realizing their mistake when even their most sought after dream turns out to be a nightmare. I know their pain and have comforted many.

^Lek, can you help? We need to unload the cookers.^ I wave I



will be right there. We have taken to putting seasonal food into cookers, sometimes under pressure, to preserve them for future use. Apparently some creature resembling a monkey from a zoo did this. I don't care. Having a reliable food supply right now when supplies are so unstable is a blessing. 'Canned' is what they call it, even though there is no metal involved. No matter. We dug deep underground cellars in several locations with secure shelving to hold all the jars. We have a large kiln to make more jars.

Several fem have taken to doing leaf carving. What changed this was when the winner of the annual carving contest turned out not to even be a Ba native, definitely not from the high tree, just a common laborer. If a laborer could carve leaves, so could we. Some are getting quite good. I am learning to knit. Useful at least. The kits look so cute with their body socks and hats. Keeps them warm when we can't afford to heat the entire building. It is also nice to glean from the fields to collect fibers to make into string to knit with.

I help with the unloading wearing my knitted hand protectors. Others have asked for them and I could work full time making them. Fortunately as a collective, I can leave the ones I use here for others when it is their turn to help. I am nearly done making enough for the cooker area. Peppers with spicy grubs. I almost want to break open a jar and eat some right now.

When we deliver this batch to the cellar, we are given an older batch to bring up to the kitchen area for use. Yaj berries and giss leaves. Not my favorite. I know they are good for you, but they are slimy. I hate slimy. I dream of crunchy peppers with grubs. Sigh. A collective means you don't always get what you want, but it evens out over time.

When we get to the kitchen we see a large box full of fresh grubs. I have never seen these before. I snatch one to taste. Not bad. Keel sees me tasting one.

^You like it?^ I nod my approval.

She looks around and then whispers to me, ^Ku grubs. Not legal here. We have to keep them hidden from the nasties.^ What we call the male enforcers. She covers the box with a wood lid and places some pots on top. ^They eat any waste food we have and make food for us. Their waste is fertilizer too. Win-win.^ I smile and nod.

I look in another large wooden bowl. Greens with some strange things crawling around, trying to hide from me clearly. I reach in, topple a leaf and grab one before it can hide again. It tries to pinch

me with its front legs. Interesting. Not big enough to cause harm, but this does not stop it from trying. Ten legs. What the? Last I heard insects have six and spiders have eight. What has ten? I pop it into my mouth and it squirms until I bite down on it. Oh, that is nice, really nice. I look for a few more and quickly sneak them into my mouth before anyone notices. I wonder where these come from. A salty taste.

Only salt I know about is the shore. Our warehouse is right on the shoreline. The low rent district. Winds can be really bad. Probably the reason we got the place so easily. Any Ba with two brain cells would be further inland. Took me awhile to get used to the sound of the waves, especially during storms. A few times I thought we were going to wash out to sea. Ba do not swim well.

My work done I am curious and go outside to follow the path down to the shore. Someone is maintaining the path well. I see artificial pools set up. A fem is throwing bug mash into the pools and I see lots of those ten leg creatures scurrying around. Now I know where they come from at least.

^Haj, what are these?^ I then whisper, ^They taste great!^

^Protein is protein. We have not been getting enough. All local and legal in case anyone asks. We learned how to farm them from the ah, Ceph.^ She lowers her voice to say the last word. So, Hu, Ku and now Ceph. What else? I recognize her as not being a newbie.

^Who taught you about them?^

^A newbie of course. I hope you don't object.^

^Not at all. We don't normally eat from the sea. This will be a welcome change. The more sources of food the more resilient we will be as a community. Where did they really come from?^

^Oh, they are all over the place out here. All we really needed to do was start throwing out the waste from the grub bins. They came to the new food source and made this their home. We scoop up the excess so they don't get over populated. I love the taste of them and it makes the boring greens so much better.^

^Agreed. Greens are good for you our docs say. I think they would be better carved instead.^ She smiles and gets back to work.

I do miss the trees. I was born a tree Ba. Some here came from the cliffs. Different cultures, but we are learning from both. I can see trees in the distance and long to climb them again. Of course all Ba, tree or cliff are really city Ba now. The cliffs are made and the trees are planted and grown just to house us. Of course elup trees are not

native to most cities, but they grow fast and are easily shaped to use. Unfortunately, though we have tried, they don't like being this close to the sea. We are stuck with stone and fired clay.

When I get back Ba are running in all directions.

I ask someone in passing, ^What's going on?^

^Enforcement is coming. We got a tip off. Need to hide anything likely to set them off. I nod and run to my assigned area. They will be looking for anything they do not recognize. Being males I am surprised they can recognize their own beaks in a mirror. There is no way to be sure what they will make a stew over. We work to make our existence look as poor as possible. Unfortunately, no one here looks underfed. Not so true in the city, at least in the underclass areas. I think this is the reason they raid us on a regular basis. At least this is during the day. The early morning ones are the worst. Most of us are asleep having worked most of the night.

This has happened so much lately we are well drilled in hiding things. We have entire hidden panels and walls. Stuff under the floors too. They always check the rafters first. Guess because most of us like the high areas.

^Lek, you are with me. We have point.^ Meaning we get to guide them through the warehouse. We have purposely made the route as confusing as possible. We are crowded. Everyone will be visible and moving around, carrying things to help confuse. I smile. Most of what they are carrying will be worthless junk. If they want to take that off of us, then we don't have to dispose of it ourselves.

^They are coming around the back. Repeat, not the front entrance, they are in the back.^ We run to the back door and open it just in time to greet them. A new one judging from the clean uniform. Big too. Probably a bully. I hate bullies. We are very polite though. Never say no to what they want and they will leave faster.

We learned early on to show our cleanest most empty areas first. Of course, they have adapted to that. It is a game after all. This male looks like a flea picker. We will be here all morning. Yeah, they hit us when we are most tired too. We have adapted by doing shifts so there are always plenty of Ba awake and working. Our information source cannot give us much warning without breaking their cover. We don't want to risk that of course.

We do the proper bow and wait to be acknowledged before coming up. They bark for papers and we have all of our out immediately.

He looks around, ^This the largest collection of junk I have ever

seen. The fem are ugly too.^ That gets a snicker from the five underba with him. I want to rip his tongue out. Of course we have gone out of our way to look unattractive to his kind. Several will even feign disabilities. They are usually struck just out of meanness. They wear padding just in case.

Never volunteer information and give the shortest possible answers without actually lying. He is not asking questions though. In fact, he seems to know where he is going. I have to work at it not to smile. We worked overtime to make the walls moveable. Nothing is the same between visits. They can make and memorize all the maps they want.

Sure enough, he is soon confused and has to ask and look stupid or retreat and leave. Leaving without finding something will make him look bad though. He decides to be destructive instead, declaring random items as forbidden and smashing them. Like I said, we hide the good stuff. Actually very little we have would be of any interest except to the very poor. Most of our community come from the poor. They are used to raids. I learned a lot from them.

^He is gone.^ Now we wait. Sometimes they return to try and catch us. It is all just a power game. It might be time to return the favor and get them at their own game. We do not have weapons of course, but we have brains. There are ways to be destructive or obstructionist without guns and batons.

We have our own spies. They never suspect the fem under them. I guess they figure these fem don't have anywhere else to be and are now slaves for them to use as they please. We however now have complete floor plans for all their structures, cliff and tree. We know where the power, water and sewage comes and goes. We are almost ready.

The ground suddenly shakes horribly. Earthquake! We need to seal the ocean side doors in case of a tidal wave. I run to my emergency position. Others are gliding down from upper stores to join in. The shaking stops, but it is followed by the windows blowing out on the north side. Earthquakes do not do that.

^We have casualties. Medics. Call the medics.^ I am not a medic, but I can help moving destroyed materials away.

As I am moving broken stone and glass I notice charring on the window frame. I look outside and see the landscape on fire. The city itself appears to be on fire.

Mas comes up to me, ^What happened?^

^My best guess is an explosion. Looks like the police station is totally gone. Just a large hole. Fire has spread to adjacent buildings and trees.^

She sighs, ^So it has begun.^ I nod and get back to work. It will be much harder here on out.

# Alexandria - Rebellion

+All of the Ku TKs are present and accounted for. As far as we know there are none left on Ku Eden.+ Flor announces. She is the last to make this announcement.

^A high level could not hide from you of course as you know all of them individually, a low level might, but they will die out after a slightly longer than normal life. Damage is likely to be minimal. I know it was all done in a hurry. It was the same with us, but I doubt they will miss us. We had been winding down our influence for some time. We did leave a mess though.^ Alessa always was ahead of the rest of us. I am afraid we all left messes.

+Do you know why the rush? We of course had been talking about this happening at council meetings for some time. All of the world TK leaders were in consensus. Just thought we would have more time to clean things up.+

~A report came in from Qr'thn, via Pr'thn. They have been feeling out the galactic 'thn about their feelings about us. They are still upset it would seem.~ Don't know what we would do without Rooi keeping track of everything. She was the last of us to join, but she caught up fast.

"Can't imagine why. Just because we put them asleep for a few years and threatened to do it again without warning. Why would that upset anyone?" Cat, be nice.

I look around. Strange.

"Where are the males? Weren't they supposed to be here too?" I ask.

~Randy, Droop and White are on Di Eden. They were told to stay there in case something happened to us, they could restart TKs again.~ Without fem. That would be interesting. Not.

Squeak pops in dusty and winded. Another fem.

+Keki is with the rest of the Ku getting them settled in. We might have a problem there. All of our TKs, who have never been here before, are upset they were pulled from Ku Eden without any say. They believed in their mission. We have not had time to explain. Keki is trying to calm them down.+

^Ours had more time to prepare, but are also home sick. This is upsetting to me. I thought we trained TKs to be a little more flexible and not form such strong attachments.^

<sup>R</sup>No attachments means no compassion. I would not want TKs who showed no compassion with us.<sup>R</sup>

~Too many times in our history has power without compassion led to suffering.~ Okay you two, you have made your point.

I ask, "Do we need to call a general meeting?"

Cat sighs, "Puu, there are nearly a hundred thousand TKs on Alexandria. Where did you want to have this meeting?"

<sup>th</sup>We do not have this problem. The order went out to abandon all the indicated worlds and it was done. No arguments.<sup>th</sup>

Finally a male has arrived, through I was not expecting that response. Seems too easy.

+Not so easy with C based life forms Edwin.+

<sup>th</sup>Too much liquid in your brains I suspect.<sup>th</sup> An old joke, but still gets a laugh or equivalent. Edwin is in on it of course.

<sup>R</sup>Many feel they would be safer away from the source of irritation to the regional 'thn.<sup>R</sup> Meaning all of us here.

Silver and Turtle pop in, cool as ice. Nothing seems to phase them.

"Sauron is missing." Silver announces so calm you would think he was mentioning something trivial.

^Missing, how the hell does a Tridon go missing? They are little more than plants.^

"He should have been more explicit. All of the Tridons are missing. The have achieved assembly." Shit, we knew that was a possibility. I am sure Sauron had something to do with this too.

~I thought they were fitted with trackers for just this reason.~

Silver shrugs, "They found and disabled them. The trackers are not on Tridon either."

"It is unlikely they could find us here." Way hard to get here even knowing. We are not in what I would call normal space. And we have a lot of protectors out there to warn us too.

<sup>R</sup>Where are they likely to go? Given your history with them.<sup>R</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Earth One.<sup>th</sup> Silver nods and Turtle scowls looking at Edwin.

I sigh, "He is trying to get even. Is this why you kept us off Earth One?"

"Partly. Also, as we have always been saying, to prevent contamination. We needed a control world for TKness."

+But there are no sen there. How is that a control?+

Turtle looks at Flor, "Who said there were no sen present?" We all look at Silver.

He shrugs, "I did not say there were none, but all of you assumed such and I did not correct you." I roll my eyes. Still lying to me.

^Dare we ask what sen is present there? Or is that a secret too?^

He smiles but does not answer. Turtle ignores us. Cat scares me, but these two scare me even more.

Myra comes in, "Sorry, I know it was not my turn, but I thought you might like to know that all the world TKs are leaving the expanded University grounds. Each species seems to be staking out territory more to their liking and going there. We had not finished removing the norm towns and these are apparently appealing to them."

<sup>th</sup>This is not a problem. Too many to handle here easily. This is common sense as the Hu say.<sup>th</sup>

Of course Edwin would think this was a good idea. It will make it harder to protect them and coordinate drills and preparation though.

+I for one do not intend to bully them. We need to adapt. Best get on with it.+ Meeting adjourned I guess.

I would pop to Earth One if I thought I would not get caught. Has Silver set Sauron another trap? I smile. I would bet on it. Now which species would drive Sauron the most nuts? Something peaceful maybe. Sauron always liked to get sens to fight each other so he could rule the winners and delete the smiggles from the gene pool. How the hell do you hide a world sized population of Tridons though?



# Ku Town

+What are we doing here? I did not agree to become a White Bandanna so I could stand around scratching and pecking.+

+We want to serve our flock. How can we do that from here?+

+We did not cause this crisis with the 'thn. Why did we have to come here?+

+Why would the 'thn even care about us? I have never even seen one.+

+Just let us go home and we can take care of ourselves.+

Flor comes in.

+Thank goodness. I was worried you would leave me alone with them.+ She nods to me showing amusement.

*I would never do that Keki.*

+Everyone find a perch. I will try and explain.+

A lot of hoots. No one believes us any more.

+First, it turns out we are causing more harm than good. Yes, we can all name instances where we saved some poor bird from harm. We need to look at the big field though. Freedom has a price. We have been taking away their freedom by removing the rough spots. This makes a species weak. A weak species does not survive in the long term. They lose their incentive to be creative. We can't keep saving them.

It is not just us. ALL of the TK sen species have been seeing the same thing. None of our worlds is advancing. In fact all of our worlds have been regressing. Granted some are worse than others. Some it is just a matter of time.

Think about it. How is the infrastructure maintained now? I lay odds it is because some TK gets in there and fixes it. As you know I was gone from Ku Two for ten years until it was noticed. They actually advanced over Ku One in that time period. Did not know that did you? In ten years. Imagine a hundred or a thousand years. Our species is older than the Hu, yet long before we did, they achieved star ship level tech without TK. Yeah, without TK.

Now with TKs watching over things, they have fallen to nearly barbarian status and are having to start everything over again. That was not the intent of course. We even named our worlds Edens after the myth that a perfect world was possible. It's not working. We are not helping. We are hurting their development.

Second, TKness is a target. Worlds without TKs are left alone by the 'thn. There is no threat to them there. The ideal world to the 'thn is one where a very rare single TK evolves naturally. One. That TK is then allowed to mate with a mother 'thn to produce the next generation. TKs are 'thn baby makers. Only need one per sen world. Not the thousands we have made. TKs were never even supposed to make more TKs. From the 'thn perspective, we are a cancer, an unnatural growth and that needs to be destroyed to save the multiverse.

This means that your continued presence on the Ku worlds made those worlds more likely to be destroyed by the 'thn. We know they can and will do this. New Hope was not a threat to anyone, but it is gone. Qr'thn has reported that our sen worlds have been targeted as well. Having such long life spans they can be patient. Recent events have sped up that time line. If we want our worlds to survive, and you would not be TK if you didn't, then we need to leave them alone.

Will this be forever? Not likely. In the meantime will Ku kill itself? Possible. Hu seem to be very good at this. Between plagues and nuclear weapons they came very, very close. That tech could easily happen on the Ku worlds as well. All the raw materials are there.+ She sits on a perch.

+Guano.+ The group breaks up.

One comes up to me after Flor has left.

+What do we do now?+

+Make yourselves as comfortable as possible. Follow the guidelines for emergency shelters and isolated safe bubbles. New Hope was killed by DSing the core away. That broke up the remaining crust. AuC bubbles will protect you if this happens and can be DSd into a safe space to survive. From there we can colonize another world. But, if we break up with this world not ready, we all die, or most of us. They can pick us off easily then. Follow the rules, do the drills, get ready. It is not a matter of if, but when.+

I leave as well. Just like the norms, they need to feel this deep inside to accept it. We are not picking on them. We are not punishing them. We are trying to save them and our species. Is that so hard to understand?

# High Council

<sup>R</sup>There was one thing missing from Flor's excellent presentation in Ku Town. I hope you all got a chance to see the recording. Well done. Myra, will you come up to tell us the second reason for TKs?<sup>R</sup>

"Thanks Squeak. Yeah, we all feel bad about being forbidden to go to our home worlds at this time. I was really looking forward to a sailing vacation near the Hawaiian islands. Truly wonderful experience. I hope all of you can try this at some point.

The original purpose to allow TK to rise in a sen population was to assist in making the next gen 'thn. Because of the froth event a new 'thn is needed every approximately thirty one million years, as there are now twice as many worlds and stars to maintain and get ready for the next froth event."

^Do the 'thn cause the froth? Never understood that.^

"We are not entirely sure ourselves. We have yet to find the core in this incarnation actually. A lot of froth space to search and we only saw it as an intellectual exercise anyway. Here is what we think happens.

A special group of immortal sen start the process. It is unclear if there is a 'machine' involved or if it is some special TK ability or what. Anyway, they start the process every 31Myrs. Then they wait until the next time. It maybe this is just how long it takes to set up the next run. We don't know. From our perspective it really does not matter.

What happens next is the 'thn then take over and sort of push the froth forward. This is in 13D space so any model I present here will be an absurd simplification. Anyone who is really interested can see me afterwards and I will take you into that space to experience it yourself. Very beautiful actually.

Anyway, it starts with the black worlds, progresses through the brown one and finally reaches the green worlds last. In 13D space this is all logically laid out and makes sense even though in our space these worlds may actually exist in the same solar system. Don't worry about it.

A TK is needed to make more 'thn so they can keep up with the expanding, well not really expanding, but it is easier to visualize that way, multiverse. Simple enough." That gets a laugh. We all know it is hard as hell to understand.

"This brings us to the second reason for TKs, the one we have all been neglecting in our training. The reason is because it takes at least a thousand years to give even a minimum education on this point. Most of us have not been around that long yet and we have been insanely busy during that time. Who has a thousand years to wait."

+Because we were so busy trying to save our own sen from themselves.+

"Right. Turns out we were wrong. We should have made far fewer TKs and we should have given them the necessary training."

She pauses. Of course some of us have had that training and know where this is going, but most present do not and are dying trying to figure it out before we are told.

When everyone is about to burst from curiosity, she begins again.

"The second reason is to make more OMs."

That makes the entire room explode in surprise.

~OMs? The plantimal planet intelligences? Those OMs?~

Myra smiles, "Yes. Those OMs. Since they operate at a MUCH slower time frame we tend to forget about them."

@How does it work? Is there one on Yesan?@

"Yes Tewk, there is one on Yesan. That is actually amazing given what the Tafa did to you. The reason the other worlds that the Tafa have touched are dying is because they killed the OM on those worlds. And yes, before you ask, even on the Ta'aha world. It takes a long time for it to be noticed. The Tafa worship the OMs, but as we have seen on our own worlds, worship is quickly turned to a means of control. The 'god' does not always go along with these thoughts. The cross purpose means one or the other eventually wins. If the OM wins, things go back to the way they should. If the sen wins, the world eventually dies. NO WORLD can live for very long without an OM. NO WORLD can live for very long without an OM."

Cat smiles. She knows what is coming. Sure enough Keki asks, +What about this world? Do we have an OM?+

Myra smiles and answers, "No. We do not have an OM. This was intentional. New Hope did have an OM and it did not save them from the 'thn. Where there are OMs, which can be detected from an insane distance away, there can be TKs. Where there are TKs, the world needs to be watched for evidence of the TK cancer. Us basically. By not having an OM, we are less of a target."

::Why have OMs then?: The Cet is floating in its normal form.

"Well, worlds without them eventually die. Basically their eco-

gies break down. From there is it simple to imagine the end. You might ask, how are new OMs made?"

<sup>R</sup>Greenman!<sup>R</sup>

"Yes Squeak. You were there, you know first hand. New Hope's OM was able to reproduce and there is every possibility of new New Hope worlds arising in a few billion years." That gets a laugh.

*More info Myra. They are still stuck.*

*I know. I am getting to it.*

"Why are TKs needed then? It turns out on plantimal worlds they are not needed. Greenmen, if you will, though they can be either or neither gender, arise naturally. No intervention needed. However, on worlds like ours where the fungi, plant, animal combination is not natural or easy, help is needed. TKs are needed to guide the culture to a high enough tech level that this becomes possible. That bad part is that this usually involves a germ warfare plague that wipes out the dominate animal sen. Well, almost wipes it out. OMs are very sneaky. Without our being aware of it, they guide our actions towards their end. They cause the sen to produce the plague that kills the sen, which is really in the way at this point, to make greenmen who then upon reason maturity, dissolve into OM spores with the necessary TK ability to leave their world and hopefully arrive at a world that will support their version of an OM."

"Whew. That is insane. I am amazed that all that can actually happen. So many steps that would prevent it."

"OMs are amazingly patient. It takes on the average nearly four billion years to go from spore to greenman. This is patience on a scale so far beyond us, we are the bugs compared to them."

^We are here to make 'thn and OMs. Anything else?^

"Nope, that is all we are supposed to do. All the rest we have done is not normal, not part of the process. No star ships, no controlled societies, which by the way also interfere with the OM mission. This is why our cultures keep collapsing. The OM knows what it is doing, if we let it. No cross cultural exchanges."

Pilot, "I am never giving up the Mother Ship. No way. You will have to pry the bridge from my cold dead hands." That gets a large laugh.

+Wait, there is another part to our purpose. A part that is bigger than all the rest.+

Myra smiles at Keki, "Good for you. Give the others a moment to see if they can figure out the ultimate reason for our being here. The

reason that surmounts all the harm we have done and justifies everything we have done and will do."

Silver is smiling like he just ate a very large rabbit. Turtle is rolling her eyes. They know of course.

I was surprised by the one who finally says it though, @We serve The Question.@

"Meeting adjourned. Let's get back to work everyone. We have a world to protect." The Meeps come back in and surround her.

# Earth One

I certainly did not need the entire population to come with me, but I needed all of them to accomplish the task of getting me home. Home, if it was not for that evil Silver and his sidekick Turtle I would never have been in this mess. I would have been the leader of a world capable of great things. Better than any sen has ever achieved before. Now I fear I need to start over again.

Tridon was a complete waste of time. They are all smiggles there. No ambition whatsoever. I was probably the first sen with any ideas in millions or even billions of years. Such as waste. But they had rudimentary TK ability and the ability to link together. How come they never figured it out? They could have been free a long time ago, instead they moved from smelly green patch to another. Never questioning their miserable existence.

I have most of my abilities back. I can breathe again. Never will I take that for granted again. I sense no TK present. Perfect. I will be their master then. No competition for my rule. The garden of Eden all over again. Well, I will not make the same mistakes again. Not this time. This time we will rule the multiverse. At least the stupid, stupid Hu are gone. They were so irritating. So easily distracted. Oh, shiny, off they run. Forget shiny, dominate! Stupid. Now the Cats. That was a species I could have worked with, if they were not so unbelievably lazy. How can a superior creature sleep so much? Besides they could not manipulate their environment. No creativity either.

It will take some time to find the perfect species to work with. It would probably be a good idea to start several likely stocks. Yes. The continents are still here. I will make barriers and start one on each. When they are ready there will be pitched battles to strengthen them. Perfect.

I know this place. What are the odds of that? Surely it would have all changed. I know those cliffs, those mesas. Cow like creatures are roaming all over. Ugh, can't do anything with them. I need something with hands or feet that can grasp. Mammal, bird or lizard. At least one of each. No more monkeys though. Not making that mistake again.

No 'thn metal here at all. That is strange. No 'thn metal means no pesky 'thants spying on me either. That is good at least. Not finding any tech of any kind. Now why the hell would Silver revert this

world to the ground state and then leave it alone? Oh, don't give me none of that purity shit either. He is up to something. He gets me every incarnation. This is new, but I am still suspicious. It might be best to check things out more thoroughly.

I set up Tridon sentinels spaced out over the entire world. They can at least do that. Seems the local plant life does not hurt them, so I will not have to waste time taking care of them either. They will report back to me if they sense anything. Good enough. Spaced out they won't reproduce either. The last thing I want is for this world to become a Tridon copy. I never was able to get out of them what happened. No matter, work to do.

After the asteroid hit last time I had to work with a rat like species. I spend some time just sitting and scanning for candidates. Raccoons look interesting. Need to get bigger, but that is part of the process. Would help if they were a little more social too, but I know how to fix that.

What else? Ah, Ravens. Very smart, social, good communication skills, like to set up warring tribes. Shame about the wings. Those extra hands would have been useful. Can't hold a sword with a foot easily. Ah, but you can drop things. Bombs, poisons, biowarfare. Yes, they could work. That's two.

The reps are going to be more of a problem. Will have to think about them. Maybe the chameleons. Slow and careful. Too smiggle like at first glance. Komodo dragons, eh, stupid as all shit. They depend too much on their size and strength. They smell really bad too. That could be a plus.

Something from the sea? Hard to do metal, ceramics, anything industrial in the oceans. Certainly the cetaceans are smart enough, but without TK, they are hopeless at conquering anything. Cephalopods are possible. No social skills though.

I might have to engineer something with traits from several species. Birds with hands? Ceph on land? Would take a lot of work. I know Silver played this game, but I will never admit I need his help. Never! The question is how long will Silver leave me alone here? Can't believe he is not watching. Maybe he only thinks he needs to come in here once in awhile to check on things. That could be a problem. Shit, I am thinking like a smiggle. Stop that Sauron. Stop that right now!



# Cat Eden

*Going to the fight tonight? Scarface against Scratcher. Supposed to be pretty even. Could go on for hours.*

*What's the prize? Some alley Cat leftover?*

*Word is, is that it is one of the Queens.*

*No way. Thought they were all done with their matings.*

*Apparently not. Heard they are offering snacks. Live ones.*

*Now you have my attention. Better get their early to find a nice spot. Going to be crowded. Maybe we can get some side hustle even.*

*Does not take long to get there and there already quite a few. Some fighting already. Little things. Mostly hissing and arched backs. Kid stuff.*

*One Ear hisses, Soot is here. I hate that Cat. He's the one who took off my ear when I was just a kit. We are not supposed to harm each other at that age. All practice.*

*Was he disciplined?*

*A few bats to the head. Nothing serious.*

*Well, they do like their bullies. Law of the jungle.*

*Heard that Bent Tail finally passed. The stories he used to tell.*

*Those were some long tails. Everyone nearly starving to death.*

*Nothing to eat anywhere.*

*He's the one. Kit tails to scare us into behaving.*

We find a spot close enough to see, but far enough out we are unlikely to have to defend it much. The last abscess I got hurt like hell and took lunars to heal. Thought my tongue was going to fall out from all the licking. I still favor that flank. Getting old I guess. It has been a good life. Would have liked to have mated more, but otherwise I can't complain.

The hissing and growling stops and everyone quiets down. Queen Owa comes out. The crowd goes wild. She is definitely in heat. I can smell her from here. Several Cats already have erections. Good way to get into a fight guys. She takes the center of the fight field. The two competing for her are on either side. They are huge. Would not want to be in the clearing with either one, even with my friends with me. Not that they were ever much help. More moral support.

Scratcher starts by suddenly licking his penis, pretending the other Cat is not even there. Scarface has certainly earned his name. Surprised both eyes work judging from that scar. He marches towards

Scratcher like he intends to get this over with quickly. That would be no fun. Don't disappoint the crowd Scarface. You are really here to entertain, not just mate.

When he gets close Scratcher suddenly explodes in a ball of claws and teeth. Scarface reacts quickly and nails Scratcher a good one right on the nose. There is blood folks. Nose bleeds are always messy. They both back off a step. That was just posturing. Now the real fight will begin.

Begins with very low growls. The lower the growl the stronger the male, or so the thought goes. Fur is rising. If they did not look big before, they are absolutely huge now. Some in the front are backing up. Collateral damage is common, especially if there is a chase or one uses the spectators as a shield. Considered a coward's move, but it does happen. Neither of these two looks like they would.

They circle the open space, keeping a careful eye on each other. A few hiss and spit sudden moves which are all fairs. This is the boring part. They can do this for an hour waiting for the perfect opening, for one of them to drop their guard just enough to tempt the other. Of course that is one way to get your opponent to make a mistake by pretending to be open when you are ready to strike back.

Suddenly they are top of each other. Looks like Scratcher has Scarface by the neck, but he is rabbit kicking the shit out of Scratcher's gut. Those are some deep cuts. His claws must be very sharp. Scratcher lets go and backs off, clearly hurt.

Scarface looks to the Queen. She nods. He goes in for the kill and rips Scratcher's throat out. That was quick. He wastes no time and mounts the Queen, claiming his prize. There are many toms licking their penises till they come. Disgusting. We head to the food area to get there before all the choice ones are gone.

*I am stuffed. The fight was too short, but the treats were great.*

*Excellent. So warm and bloody. No fight left in them though. That was disappointing. The tame ones are so boring. No chase at all.*

*Better than starving like Bent Tail. I shutter. I never want to experience being hungry.*

The mating will go on all night. No point in waiting for that to end. Better to get away, the howling will keep everyone awake. Good meal though. There is a forest nearby. That should be far enough away to get some sleep.

# Alexandria - Jack

My brain hurts from so much at what I have tried to absorb. Hu are certainly strange creatures. Most are fairly neutral, neither obviously good or bad. Just getting by. There a few at each extreme though. Some who will die to save others and some who will kill others without hesitation. Very strange. Compared to the simple beautiful order of the 'thants, Hu are very disappointing.

They have workshops where they can make things. Working with Nya I have made a suit of armor that resembles a 'thant scout. More because of my size. I have a middle set of appendages I have learned how to work with my back muscles. Not great, more for looks. I have a head piece that serve as a set of antennae and a good set of jaws. Again, more form than function. But, it allows me to feel like I fit in better. Everyone sees though it and calls me Jack without thought. Still, it makes me feel better. I am not teased for it at least.

Nya tugs at me, <sup>th</sup>We need to go outside. You need exposure to the sun to survive.<sup>th</sup> I hate going outside, but I would hate being sick even more. Too bad they can't lighten my skin like Hu from the north. Then I would not need as much sun. Reluctantly I put down my work. I can leave it where it is. No one will touch it while we are gone. I love the 'thants.

My eyes hurt when we emerge into the sun. I quickly adjust. It will be the same coming back inside. I hate being blind, even for a moment. I freaked out the first few times and upset people around me. Edwin says this is normal for anyone who has been through a traumatic experience. Of course 'thants do not react this way. He insists this is not a benefit. I do not understand how a weakness can be a benefit.

I follow Nya without thinking. We have a route we take. I suspect this is as much about my getting exercise as sun. Sooner I get through the route, the sooner I can get back to my studies. Being near the University, there are sen of all descriptions going about their work. Some know me and wave in greeting. I wave back. I never would have expected to ever have been friends with so many different beings. Most are not Hu. Even better.

Edwin insists I need to learn about their cultures too. I am hesitant. A few books are already sitting on my desk unopened. I suspect I will find out they also have their problems and limitations. They

probably also kill each other for selfish reasons. I am really not ready to learn that. I have already learned that two colonies of 'thants will fight for territory as well. That really upsets me. He insists we are safe here.

I normally avoid the Hu areas. I am not TK and the last thing I need is for some of them teasing me for being a norm. None of the other sen do that, nor do the high TKs. The new ones, the twos, are the worst.

Unfortunately there is a pack of them running on a path that will cross ours. I keep my head down and try to not make eye contact. For many species eye contact is seen as a threat. Certainly was on earth. I am nearly past them but there are two stragglers. I look up without thinking and quickly look down again. They ignore me, but I recognize one of them. I will never ever forget that face. What the hell is he doing here?

<sup>th</sup>Nya, we need to get back now. <sup>th</sup>Emergency. She turns to face me and I make a straight line back to the nest entrance. When we get back I am out of breath but allowed to pass. The scouts all know me now of course. Nya being with me helps as well.

Once inside I ask the first scout I meet, <sup>th</sup>I need to find Edwin. This is an emergency. Tell him I will meet him in my office. <sup>th</sup> She runs off into the tunnel complex. I have not memorized all of them yet and of course there are areas off limits to me. Only 'thants are allowed anywhere near the young grubs. I have seen some from a distance. That as part of my training in case I noticed one who has gotten out of the nursery.

I do not have to wait long. Edwin pops in instead of walking in like he normally would.

<sup>th</sup>He is here Edwin. The one who raped and killed my sister. <sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>That is not possible Jack. Except for you, only Hu TKs are present. <sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Then he is TK, but he is here. There is no way I would forget that face. <sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>This is a serious accusation. <sup>th</sup> Stay here. He pops out. A moment later he is back with a Hu TK I have met during our trip here. I nod to him, but I do not remember his name.

"I am Mouse. I was the leader of the Hu TKs before we arrived. Edwin says you recognized the Hu who attacked your village."

"And raped and killed my sister right in front of me. She was only eleven years old."

"You are the only norm present. Whomever attacked your village is still on earth two. It is not possible."

I close my eyes and then open them again.

"You are TK7, so you can read someone's mind and know if they are innocent or not. Is this true?" He nods.

"Then would it hurt anything to find this Hu and read him?"

"We do not read minds without permission."

"Even when they have have killed and ordered to kill an entire village? What kind of a rule is that?"

I can see Edwin and him using TP to converse, but of course I can hear none of it.

"Edwin has agreed to be a third party in this, so it will not appear we are playing favorites." I nod.

*I will read your mind and extract the information and appearance of this Hu. Are you in agreement with this Jack?* I nod. I feel nothing, but a moment later Edwin and Mouse pop out.

A few minutes later I find myself suddenly in a much larger room. Edwin is next to me. Mouse brings in three male Hu. They are under lights, we are not.

*Please identify the one whom you think is the one.* I nod and look carefully at them. They are all the same height and build. All dark skinned, similar noses and such. But there is absolutely no doubt in my mind. I concentrate so Edwin knows of whom I think. We have done similar exercises, so this is not new to me. Saves time actually. I start shaking. I can't help it.

The other two pop out. Mouse stands next to the one I chose who is quietly talking with him. I cannot hear what they are saying, but neither appears upset. There must be some explanation. Am I missing something?

The lights come up around me. We are now visible to the one below. He looks up at me and appears shocked.

"You are dead. I watched you die! What the hell are you doing here?" He makes to come towards me, but runs into an invisible wall. He looks confused. That is strange. We all know the high TKs can restrain us if necessary. Usually for our own safety.

In a moment I am back in my room alone, well Nya is there waiting for me. She has brought me food and water. I am still shaking and have not touched anything when Mouse and Edwin pop in.

Mouse speaks, "I must apologize for not believing you. He was in fact the one who destroyed your village and sister." He places a metal

disk on the table. It looks familiar. I reach over and pull a simple mold I was forced to make out of my pack and place it on the table. It has places for three disks. I place the disk Mouse brought in on one of the molds. Perfect fit. Interesting. The ones I made were simple silver. I grab a magnifying glass and look at the edge.

"Not one of mine. I made hundreds of them, but if you look at the mold I inscribed a design on the edge. It is not on this disk. It looks the same otherwise. Tarnished silver. They placed them on their outer cloaks for some reason that was never explained."

"He was in possession of this one, a device. It allowed him to pretend to be TK2 in a scan, even though he has no TK abilities. They were all scheduled for a TK upgrade this afternoon. If you had not spotted him he would have truly been a TK. The entire group who came in with him are now under high security quarantine." He places three more disks on the table.

"We found these on three others. The disks were hidden among the ones you apparently made. All the Hu males were part of the group who attacked your village. No one is getting an upgrade on Alexandria until this is sorted out. We are profoundly thankful to you for having the courage to come forward. You may have saved us all." He pops out, Edwin remains.

<sup>th</sup>This is going to the highest levels. None of us thought this was possible.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>What will happen to the one who killed my village?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>We do not believe in capital punishment.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>What?<sup>th</sup> I do not know that word.

<sup>th</sup>We do not kill those who commit evil. Evil is part of the normal life cycle for most species. Mostly likely they will all be returned to where they came from.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>So they can continue to kill others?<sup>th</sup>

Edwin shows amusement, very rare in 'thants.

<sup>th</sup>They will be changed so they can no longer hurt others. They will no longer be predators.<sup>th</sup> I shudder to imagine what that means.

Edwin picks up the mold I made.

<sup>th</sup>Good work. You made perfect imitations of what they needed to hide.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>It was simple to make. Only took a few strikes of a rounded hammer head.<sup>th</sup>

# Moving Day

+All of the disks have been found. Anything that even looks like one will be destroyed.+

"NO! Don't destroy them. I have a better idea. Bring them to me. Keep them separated though. Bring them in one at a time, like they are still on a body. Use the Protectors. Yeah, that will work. Not to me then. One per Protector. Fast! We need to move now!"

Squeak asks, <sup>R</sup>"What do you think they are?"<sup>R</sup>

"Isn't it obvious? They are tracking devices. They are coming for us."

<sup>R</sup>"Understood. I will initiate the protocol."<sup>R</sup>

"If I was them I would not use only one method." Cat says.

"I wouldn't either. Who knows how long they have known where we are."

Cat smiles like she has eaten a canary, "Is that a problem?"

I sigh, "Probably not, but you were not the one in the seven's cross hairs."

*ATTENTION. ATTENTION. EMERGENCY PROTOCOL SEVEN. TEN MINUTES TO REACH EMERGENCY SHELTER. TEN MINUTES TO REACH EMERGENCY SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL.*

"I hate that thing." We pop down to the control room, such as it is. We are the device that will be used. Nothing in the room is of any real value. If they get this far, it is all over no matter what.

"At least it is quiet down here. Shielded from that thing."

Myra pops in with the Meeps. They are excited as expected. They swirl around the room, ignoring the walls of course.

"Squeak told me. Flor has attached the disks to Protectors and stationed them five thousand kilometers above Alexandria."

"Pass the word. All clothing and material possessions should be destroyed. We can make them again after, but for now I want no possibility they track us to the new position."

"Isn't that a bit excessive even for you Puu?"

"Maybe, but material things are of no consequence. Better safe than sorry." She rolls her eyes and nods.

Silver and Turtle pop in.

"Is this the first time you have done this?" Turtle asks.

Cat laughs, "Definitely not. Just the first time out of sequence. All

of the Catboxes will have to be reprogrammed unfortunately. They will all go to our current location and find nothing in a few minutes. Not that there should be any." We destroy our own clothing.

"White, Droop and Randy did agree to the situation. Hope they survive all this."

"They know to keep a low profile, use TK as little as possible. A lot you can do with just scans actually." Myra smiles.

"Cat used to do the moves by herself. Way easier with the rest of us and the Meeps. You won't feel a thing." I smile.

Silver comments, "I have to admit your choice of location was excellent."

Cat laughs, "I thought so. They can't complain when we did what they wanted can they? All of the TKs under our association are now here. We essentially fulfilled their demands."

"And Farout is a very large space to hide in."

"They just weren't counting on our ability to go back and forth with a thought."

Silver laughs, "Bad enough when it was just Turtle and I. Now between all of you and the transporters the bars are gone."

"I never liked cages."

"It is time." We join our minds and initiate the move. Farout is indeed a large space, especially in thirteen dimensions.

Flor pops in, +I would recommend keeping all transports offline for at least a year.+

Squeak pops in, <sup>R</sup>We found more devices. You were right to guess that they would try several methods. All were attached to protectors before the move. The ten minute warning was useful.<sup>R</sup>

Alessa pops in, ^The Cets are complaining as expected.^

Flor laughs, +If they knew where they actually were they would be complaining even more.+

"Ah, so you figured it out too."

+Of course. I agree it is an excellent location. There is a reason they nicknamed us 'chickens', we don't like surprises.+

<sup>R</sup>This will also slow down the Cet desire for multiverse domination. We should not have let them read that part in the old journals. These Cet are nothing like the descriptions of the ones from that time.<sup>R</sup>

^Dolphins can dream too.^ That gets a round of laughs. The original Cets were whales, not dolphins. The dolphins have had inferiority complex ever since.



Edwin pops in, "Do we re-establish connection with the main colony?"<sup>th</sup>

"Let's hold off for at least a year. I would prefer they think we really are gone this time. Too bad we could not leave some debris behind."

"Who said we didn't? I did plan for this." Cat smiles.

# Magenta

~Are you sure Pilot this is not an imposition?~ Rooi asks.

Yesan comes in, @We have achieved orbit. The Magenta shields are working as hoped.@ We have advanced a lot in our understanding of how Magenta does what it does. Meant to be a TK trap of course. I suspect the 'thn set this up. Too near the original Farout world to be a coincidence. Fortunately our AuC tech is far in an advance of the 'thn metal tech they had at the time. Understanding the Meeps helped a lot. The clue was the fact that the first TK boosters mentioned in the old journals were AuC constructs. Who would have thought it would be that simple. Of course those were toys by comparison to what we have now. We no longer trust 'thn metal and you will find none of it here. Of course we know it very well in case we encounter some in our travels. After all 'thants still contain quite a bit in their forms.

~Tell me you sent probes first?~ I look at her confused at first.

I smile, "Of course Rooi." I hand sign her the same message. I have to stop spacing out. Bad enough I am called Pilot.

"Navigator, let's give it a few orbits to be sure. Sure is pink down there."

I turn to Rooi, ~Do you know where s/he wants to set down?~

~I have the coordinates here.~ She hands me a flat sheet. A map. Interesting. Have not seen one of these in a long time. Reminds me of being in the Black Wind II. Not that detailed, but my own TK scan can fix the location from the continents I can sense below us. It should be close enough anyway.

We head to the transport area. No point in using the flier for a simple drop. When we arrive, Tia and Sam are already there.

"Hey, we know Snap too. We want to be there too."

"This way we can sacrifice more of us at once." Sam smiles sarcastically. Yeah, I am nervous too.

"I will be staying on board. Only the three of you and Snap will be going below. If something goes wrong we will retrieve you."

~You can come out now Snap. The rest of the crew are elsewhere.~

A fancy box like structure that most sens would just ignore morphs and unfolds into a large crab.

*I have learned to be paranoid.*

"How did you escape the New Hope destruction."

*There were a few precious moments where I could DS out of the way of moving debris. It was close. After that I played dead until it was safe to escape to an alternate world. I staid out of Earth space for years, but eventually made my way to Ceph Two, which is a considerable distance from your earths. There Rooi found me and now I am here. You got my warning about the Cet I assume.*

"Do you know if the Cet were responsible for the homing disks planted on Hu norms?"

*It is highly likely. I suspect they traded immunity from the 'thn for your location. It was fortunate I was already on Alexandria when you translocated. My only desire now it to retire on Magenta. Having been there for thousands of years, I grew fond of the world. I need to check on my offspring to be sure they integrated with the ecology as well.*

Over the intercom, @We are coming up on the third pass over the location you desired.@ I scan and confirm this is true.

*You may proceed. I am ready.*

I DS them to the surface. I hope Tia and Sam are ready for swamp. I smile.

*Tia, are you readying me okay?*

*What the hell is this place? It stinks! I will never get rid of this slime. Aaaah, the local crabs want to eat me. Snap has taken off and is already underwater. I can't imagine why he likes it here so much. Oh shit, Rooi has caught a crab and is munching away. Clear the portal room, Sam and I are coming back up. You will need to spray us down.*

Sigh, but I smile. There was a reason besides protocol I did not want to go down. I have been here scoping it all out to be sure the shields worked and such.

I am still in the room when they return.

"Silver and Turtle were there waiting. Can you believe it? Why did we make this trip if they could have just done it themselves?"

"The two of them have know Snap a lot longer than either of you."

"There is that. Maybe it would just be easier to make myself a new body and burn this one."

"With all those halides, no bug will get near you now at least dear." She throws some slime at him. He just laughs. A long way from the desert they are used to.

"Let me know when Rooi is aboard." I turn to leave.

"Oh, sorry, Silver and Turtle said they would return her to Alexandria. We can leave whenever you are ready. We'll just stay here and rot. That's all right. Don't worry about us." I smile and pop to the bridge.

# Snap Cove

"Sam and Tia did not appear too pleased with the conditions here. It is kind of pretty."

I say, "It is that Turtle. It is that. Kind of grows on you." I remove a few locals who have decided to taste me. I make a shield to prevent more.

Both Snap and Rooi are off shore and near the bottom. Snap is showing her why s/he likes it here so much.

"It will be dark soon."

"Nice to see the moon again. Not much in the way of stars though. Too far out from the main multiverse."

"Does this section even get duped by the froth?"

"No idea. My guess is no. It serves as a sort of anchor to help hold it all together. Like a lid on a container. Not as important as the contents, but essential to keep them together."

"Makes sense. That was always more your thing. By the way, how is Sauron doing on Earth One?"

"Very happy actually. It is his chance to get it right this time. No more smiggles or stupid monkeys."

"Did you set up protectors at least?"

"Nope. No need."

"Wait the most destructive sen in all Hu history and you are not guarding him?"

"Nope." I smile.

"You did something to him to prevent him being nasty then."

"Nope."

"Absolutely nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Oh you are truly evil. He will go nuts trying to find the trap that does not exist."

"Precisely."

"And all this time I thought you were being mean to Owa."

"Left them alone too."

She just shakes her head smiling, then a giggle thinking about it.

"The ship has left. First quiet we have had in a long time."

"Yep."

"Glad the OMs have gotten a load of their spores launched."

"Earth One OM specifically wanted Sauron back." I smile and

Turtle laughs outright. He is in for a ride, even if he does not turn greenman himself, his creations will be steered in that direction.

# Alexandria

Time for the talk. Not the birds and bees either.

I make my way through the nest, nodding out of respect and saying hello to those I know personally. His room is off the library and the library is where I would normally go to meet with Edwin if not to do some research myself. The information they have gathered has really helped my understanding of our own history as well as the other sen, and even a few missing areas in our tech understanding. Huge difference.

It was the 'thant library references for billions of years of sen/'thn interactions that helped lead us to where we are now. I truly believe it was right to abandon our sen home worlds. At best, and this is a stretch given what we have already done on them, we could have left one and only one high TK, who would then have mated with a 'thn to have a baby 'thn helper. The problem is, we no longer have any TKs naive enough to go along with that. Companions and buddies have also soured that possible relationship. Why wait twenty five million years, long after your own sen have gone extinct or gone greenman, to fully train one? And then have it abandon you as all teenagers becoming adults do.

I did. Turtle was my adopted mother, but I hardly ever see her any more. Cat and Myra are probably the two I am closest to now and most of that is work related. I have no social life. It is one fire to put out after another. Speaking of which, best get it over with. 'A small feminine voice would be less scary.' Right, maybe less than Cat, but come on, I kick butt too.

Here it is. Edwin is already present, along with his helper Nya. Jack is dressed up in his 'thant outfit. I would have expected this from a ten year old but he is at least twenty one now. As the only affirmed Hu in the room I am starting to feel out of place. Nya takes away the garbage and is gone. Might be easier this way.

"Did Edwin tell you why I am here?"

<sup>th</sup>I prefer to speak in 'thant. <sup>th</sup> Definitely obsessed.

<sup>th</sup>Did Edwin tell you why I am here?'<sup>th</sup> I sigh.

<sup>th</sup>He did. I am not interested unless I can be a 'thant. I understand you want to thank me for seeing the bad Hu and telling you, but I did that with no understanding of the implications. I told you purely for selfish reasons. I wanted to see him in particular, tortured and

killed.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>And I am here for purely selfish reasons also. If you have more abilities, you might see more things we miss, like more spies and such. This is not a reward, more of a precaution for all our benefit.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I really doubt I can be of much use. Finding the bad ones was pure luck. Still, I will not accede to being TK in Hu form. I would rather be a Keeli than a Hu. I would rather be dead than a Hu.<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>I am Hu, should I kill myself?<sup>th</sup>

<sup>th</sup>Not my right to judge you. What other forms have you tried? Weren't they all better than Hu for some reason or another? Have you ever been a 'thant?<sup>th</sup>

I sigh, <sup>th</sup>I have been all known forms at one point or another. Usually to do undercover work and therefore less noticeable. All forms have weaknesses and strengths. None are better than another in all conditions. Yes, I have been a 'thant scout while with Edwin. I was not that impressed.<sup>th</sup>

He just stares at me. Not going to budge.

Edwin finally says something, <sup>th</sup>There is the point that as a male 'thant he will appear harmless and not attract undo attention on Alexandria. If, as you say, you want him to find information missed in other ways, this would be a good form to assume. I have agreed to be his instructor in the ways of the male 'thant. He will of course need to be presented to the Queen when ready. This is not negotiable.<sup>th</sup>

Jack wakes up when this is said.

<sup>th</sup>A scout might be better then. I see them all over outside the nest.<sup>th</sup>

Edwin counters with, <sup>th</sup>They have a much shorter lifespan and are considered disposable. No reason needed. They also lack the mental abilities for which you have already proven yourself.<sup>th</sup>

Definitely a sexist sen. Gee they only live a few thousand years rather than tens of thousands if not fed to a warrior that is.

I add, <sup>th</sup>Males can also be killed without warning for no apparent reason. At least until you reach high TK, which we are definitely not proposing for you. You currently lack the necessary emotional conditions to make that safe. The highest we can allow is TK2, a low TK. You would be the only male 'thant at that level. Most are at least four.<sup>th</sup>

He turns to Edwin, <sup>th</sup>What level are you?<sup>th</sup>

I remind him, <sup>th</sup>It is considered rude to ask that Jack.<sup>th</sup>



Edwin remains silent. Good, make him sweat this a bit.

I continue in Hu, "You need to make a choice now. We can make you a Hu TK2 without question. You can start there and see how it goes. Currently you are the only non TK present on Alexandria. In and of itself that is not safe for you. Not that I expect anyone to attack you, but as you saw, we don't know everything going on and you have already been labeled as a threat to a possible spy."

"Or?"

"We can send you back to Earth Two. Any location you wish. Standard is still understood in most location, though many have local dialects now. Your skin color would be best near the equator of course, but we can change that too if you wish."

"Only Hu are on Earth Two correct?" I nod.

"And no TKs. None. No one to rescue you if you get into trouble and a standard Hu life span. Most do not make it because of starvation, disease, injury. Even if you do not advance any further than a TK2 here, you can expect to live somewhere near two hundred years. We have excellent health care."

He sighs and looks down, "I would rather stay here then. I don't like it, but it would appear to be the best of the two alternatives. At least here I can still use the library right? And continue to interact with other sen right?" I nod in both cases.

He sighs again, "What do I do? Will it hurt?"

I smile my best evil smile. I really had to throw that in after this discussion.

"It is already done. It was done while we talked." Nine and above can make really good guesses about future events, especially in the short term.

"I thought I had to go to sleep for an eighth or something like that? I have been awake the entire time right? I did not fall asleep?"

"We have learned a few things in the last five thousand years Jack. Oh, you will need very little if any sleep now. You can study all day and all night now."

"Oh, right, that will be nice. So, how do I do this? I can scan and move small objects with my thought right? That is on the Hu scale. Not as cool as the Cat or Rap scale, but still helpful."

Edwin comes in, "You will still maintain your office here when you need it, but you need to spend time in training. Marie will be your instructor. She has other Hu TK2s at the moment. You are coming in a little late, but I am sure you will catch up."

'thMarie is the nasty one who used to bully you and Cat right?'th He is looking at me, but switched back to 'thant.

"I survived and you will too. You might even have some advantages with your blacksmith strength. Just don't depend on it. Remember, we need you to be stealthy, not aggressive."

"Best get it over with. When do I report to TK Marie?"

'thNow would be good. Nya will take care of your things while you are gone.'th I do a 'thant bow and pop out. One thing off my list. A thousand more to go. Sigh . . .

# Cet Alliance

A large school of tasty fish have been spotted north of here, so we are all moving to that location. We are not handicapped with location the same way the land sens are. Nor material things. I like shiny as well as the next Cet, but I don't need to keep it with me.

No predators here yet either. I will miss this place. Too bad it needs to be destroyed. Unfortunately we will never achieve our true destiny if it is not. The land sens have too much power. That needs to end.

Eating is always the first priority. Once enough have gathered to form a pod they split off and start their hunt. This happens very quickly so no one feels left out and hungry while others are feeding. I join a newly formed pod and we do the bubble dance the humps have taught us to secure a great meal. And they are great. They have been feeding well on krill who feed on the abundant plankton here at this season. The seasons here are not as pronounced as on Cet Eden. We can stay in one place to feed, but no one wants to do that. We were born to roam and roam is what we do. I am soon stuffed. Without TK I would be falling half asleep right now for sure.

<Gather around please.> We form a super pod of hundreds. Nearly our entire population at the moment.

<You may have noticed after the emergency announcement by the land sens that we are no longer in the same solar system. This sun is brighter but appears smaller as we are further away. The seasons will have likely changed as well. We don't know yet how this will affect the fish supply or temperature. Even though we group in the high council pod we were not informed nor was our approval sought.>

<Unacceptable!> Goes out the cry. Our honor has been slighted yet again by the land sens.

<They have found the trackers we placed on the disposable Hu we used to infiltrate their kind. Along with the movement to another system, this means we will not be able to tell the 'thn council our current location. Our agreement with them is null until we can remedy this situation. As you already know, we who have TK are forbidden to return to Cet Eden.>

<Unacceptable!> We have always gone where we want when we want. Putting us in a cage is beyond insult. It is criminal. Only an insane species would do such a thing to another. Of course we have

long suspected the Hu of being insane. There was the hope that Hu TK would be different, but they are staying true to their kind.

<We think we may have a solution, but it will require a few to sacrifice themselves to the good of all.> Immediately most of the group volunteers of course. We do anything for the greater good.

<The few we need must betray the Hu TK into believing they are not happy here in their prison.> That gets a lot of squeaks. We are all dissatisfied with being in their prison. <They must be low TK so when the need arises those of us remaining will not be powerless. These few will return to Cet Eden without TK. That is the only condition they will accept for a return. Trackers will be installed on these few that will tell Cy'thn where we currently are.> Ah, very ingenious.

<How will they not find these the same way they have found the others?>

<They will not be of the same design. The information is encoded into the mother code of the ones who will go. A tiny snip of a fin is all that Cy'thn will need to read this code and our current location.>

<What will stop them from moving again and again?>

<We will sacrifice more each time until we are none. It has been over a hundred solars since the last move, from before our presence here. We think it must take considerable power to make such a move and therefore they will need time before they can attempt another move of any distance.>

The pod breaks up, but I am asked to remain. I am one of the few. The chosen.

<I am happy to be of service. What do I do?> It is explained to the six of us, a lucky number. We practice what we will say and we bond as a pod in the process. This will also make us more believable.

The time soon arrives for our interview. Scars are placed on our forms to make us appear as misfits the super pod can no longer tolerate. We are brought all together in a water bubble to the West Port portal. It is gone. I never believed it was necessary. Land sens are so devious and do a lot to deceive their prey. I feel we were never treated as true sens.

Turns out we are not even interviewed. Other sens are also culling their herds and pods of unwanted members. At least the scars I have now will announce to those on Cet Eden I am a great defender and make it easier to be accepted. As a fem I will also be valued. Could even be assigned my own pod soon.

I can see enough to see the Ceph city below us. A lot of them

there apparently. They always seem to be in higher standing than us. I never understood why a food item would be so esteemed. A challenge mind you, but tasty.

<It is taking too long. Something is wrong.>

We continue to wait though. At least the air equipment appears to be working. I am not feeling dizzy or anything. I remember coming here solars ago. Was not looking forward to this trip because of that. Maybe knowing will make it easier. It will be nice to be home, even without TK.

Suddenly, without any warning, we are in the air and falling! I turn around and see we are falling a short ways to the ocean. I dive in and quickly swim out of the way of any others. I can hear them hitting the surface all around me. Wait, this is a lot more than six. What happened? The water is cold, so we are north of West Port. I smell fish nearby. Are we here to feed because of some delay?

<Pod form up around me!> We do so immediately.

As a pod we swim in the direction our leader is going. All the others around us are doing the same. A super pod soon forms, all going in the same direction. Normally this is a lot of fun with the stronger ones competing to take the lead. Not this time. Slow and stead. At least we don't have calves present.

The smell is different. I remember this smell I think.

<We are not on Alexandria any more are we? The fish are different.> I ask Eeejk next to me. Our mothers knew each other well.

<I agree. I think we are on Cet Eden again. But that makes no sense. The journey to Alexandria took days.>

<Does the mission still continue? I still have TK.>

<No idea. I have TK also.>

A lot of us are pinging, trying to understand what is going on. I sense a ball in front of me. I stop to examine it. Very solid, but not sinking. Transparent which explains why only a ping could see it.

*Are you one of the six to have just arrived from the TK stronghold?* I think this might be Cy'thn. I have never met her before. I do a polite nod to honor her.

<I am Holy One. Eeejk next to me is also one of the six. We are ready to be sampled to fulfill our mission.> I feel a slight pinch on my fluke. She disappears.

I ask Eeejk, <Did Cy'thn sample you?> She nods.

<At least we fulfilled our purpose. Now what?>

<And why are there so many of us here. I recognize some as our

betters from Alexandria. Did all Cet return to Eden? Why?>

# Farout

Cy'thn, Br'thn, Pr'thn and Qr'thn are present.

Cy'thn: We know where you are hiding them. There will be an accounting.

Qr'thn: You are not strong enough to get there yourself, so I am assuming you have given your information to a RGC 'thn. That was many !sec ago. Many.

Cy'thn: We are patient.

Pr'thn: You know the coordinates of course.

Cy'thn: Of course. Why do you ask.

Br'thn: Since you are not strong enough to travel there yourself, we will take you. All you need to do is confirm we are in the correct location.

Cy'thn: You would betray your own?

Br'thn: Or you can stay here and wait for the RGC to return. I would not recommend that. They are likely to be upset.

Cy'thn: I did what was decided. I will come with you to show you I am correct.

Qr'thn: Tell us the coordinates so you may know we are not taking you to some other location.

She does so.

We DS to the location.

It is an asteroid field. Some of the rock is still warm. There is a lot of random motion and collisions. A recent event. Nothing has stabilized yet. A white dwarf is the star here. No other stars are visible, but there is a faint glow very far away.

Qr'thn: Please confirm we are at the designated coordinates.

Cy'thn takes some time to confirm. We all know how to tell where we are, but this location being out of our known experience means it takes more time to perform the calculations even at the quantum level.

Cy'thn: Confirmed. We are were the Cet were before they were transported back to Cet Eden. The world you call Alexandria is clearly missing.

Pr'thn: Is it? I sense it just fine.

Cy'thn pauses. Pops out. Comes back. Several times.

Cy'thn: You killed your own world?

Br'thn: Is that not what you were going to achieve? Is that not the

judgment of the RGC?

Cy'thn: The judgment was for the sen, not the world itself.

Qr'thn: Did you not sense the fluidic remnants? They do not preserve well under these conditions.

Pr'thn: A definite limitation to their form. A shame.

Cy'thn: You did this? You killed them?

Qr'thn: The evidence is before you.

Cy'thn: This could be faked. Even I could duplicate a fluidic form.

Br'thn: Even you could destroy a world of this size we know, but could you make one first to then destroy it? Could you make several hundred thousand fluidics, each unique too?

Pr'thn: You may have also noticed that the psiotic field is much weaker out this far. Were do you propose this much energy could be obtained even if we could fake such a thing.

Cy'thn: You are very different from us. We have no idea what your capabilities are.

Pr'thn: Scan us if you like. We are smaller than you. How could we be so much stronger?

Cy'thn: Scanning the three of you hurts. I do not understand your makeup. Besides, you need to convince the RGC.

Qr'thn: Proceed.

The Seven arrive. Against their will clearly.

**WHAT? WHY ARE WE HERE? YOU THREE! YOU ARE UNDER ARREST. YOU CANNOT ESCAPE US NOW!**

Pr'thn: Loud aren't they.

Br'thn: You are here to confirm the destruction of the world known as Alexandria. The world you had condemned. The world that all 'thn are sworn to destroy on sight. Scan about you. You will find it is consistent with the 'thn world destroying method of removing the core. The core is nearly to the star. You still have time to confirm this before its destruction. Residues from the fluidics are present, but dissipating quickly. You are at the coordinates that Cy'thn gave you, are you not?

**CONFIRMED. WHY DID YOU BETRAY THEM?**

Br'thn: We are still 'thn, even if changed.

Cy'thn and the RGC pop out.

Pr'thn shows amusement: It will take awhile for them to get back to their own space at their rate.

Br'thn: It will indeed.

Qr'thn: I calculate nearly a hundred solars.



Pr'thn: It would have taken that long for them to arrive as well, so why bring them here now?

Qr'thn: To be done with it. We are officially free now of all responsibilities. We have done our duty and the TK sen under our care are gone. All sen desire freedom above all else. Why should we be any different. The rebellion is over.

# N Space

I cannot feel or see anything, not even my own breathing, yet I know I am alive. The last I remember, Edwin and Nya were with me in my office. There was a loud alarm. Then nothing. No, wait, a TP said Emergency Level One. I was never told what that was.

I have no sense of time passing, yet I suspect I have been here for some time. I have no idea of what to do even. How do I exist with no sense of anything other than my own thoughts? I am not hungry or sleepy. Not been sleepy since they made me TK2 of course. I have no idea if I am still TK or not. I cannot scan or move anything.

I am bored more than anything. Is this what happens when you die? Will I now spend the rest of eternity like this? Not knowing, alone in my own thoughts? Am I insane or will I become insane? How can I exist in this state?

Poor Jack. Is that my thought? Now I am talking to myself.

Poor Jack.

I am going insane. Where am I? What is going on?

Jack. You are okay. We are coming.

Right. Who is coming?

So boring.

How long was he left alone?

Nearly a solar, though it is hard to tell time here.

No matter we are here now. Collect him and join the rest of us.

Everyone else has been accounted for.

Jack, it is Edwin. I am taking you to the others.

Edwin, is that really you? Or am I imagining you?

I am real. We are in a place called N Space. It has no form. No light, no dimensions, no gravity. The normal rules do not apply here. You are fine. We will protect you. No predators here. We are all safe here.

How long was I alone?

Unknown. There is no time here either.

How can we exist?

I do not know. We are with the others.

Hello Jack. Sorry we lost you, but you are with us now. Don't worry, all of our questions are about to be answered.

I am not even sure what to ask.

# Questions

*Let there be light. And it was so. Someone creates a TK globe. Not really necessary, we can all scan just fine, though it does takes a bit to learn how to use these new forms. No idea how our 'thn adapted, but then they were in 'thn form before we offered them this new form.*

*Shut that thing off please, none of us have eyes any longer.*

*We are billions of light years from nowhere. Who is going to see it?*

*It gives comfort to Jack. He is having a harder time adapting.*

Ah, so Edwin made the globe. And it is right next to, actually touching Jack. Everyone else here is at least a five. He is the only low TK present. We were not given a lot of time. Decisions were made. Edwin insisted we bring Jack. Most were lost.

*Why did they do it? Meaning our 'thn.*

*They were given a choice, either us or all of our sen planets. They chose the lesser. At least we had an eighth to prepare, or likely only the sevens and above would have survived. At least in this form we are no longer easy to kill.*

*Really? We are surrounded by Companions and Protectors, but we could not save the rest?*

*The C&P came on their own. You know that.*

*Calm down everyone. We need to deal with what is, not what might have been. We all knew we had a huge target painted on us. I am sure there are questions. Let's get to those first and stop the second guessing please.*

My Meeps love my new form. I am 6D now, just like them, not that I have not spent a lot of time here even in Hu form.

*First order of business. We need a new home. This location is too low in psiotic energy. Our options will be limited if we remain.*

*Sitting ducks you mean.*

*If we go anywhere near Earth space they will find us and the game will begin again. We are all versed in sen and given the size of the multiverse I am sure we can find some nice comfortable pre-sen location, talk with the local OM and move in.*

We can never see people we knew, even relatives, even from a distance.

Correct, but that was a condition when you accepted TK by the

way. Now it is not a choice. It would endanger us all.

I can't raise my hand.

*If Puu and Cat would confirm, I have a location in mind.*

*Go ahead Myra, it can't get any worse.*

*Meaning we can't get into much more trouble can we.*

How do you sigh in this form?

*There is a place we can go, no 'thn can follow, ever. It is in 13D space.*

Silver bobs up and down. Is that a laugh? Turtle sways back and forth.

Turtle comments, *Technically nothing alive can exist in Control. Not even our current forms.*

Silver comes in, *I don't see how that would be a problem. We are not exactly alive in any form the multiverse would understand or recognize.*

Turtle, *But would we be able to understand Control in this form?*

This could take till the end of time.

*Fine, let's find out.* I pop us all to Control. Yeah, I have known how to do that for some time. The journals told me it existed. That was all I needed to find it. I have been here before, but always alone. I suspect at least Silver, Turtle, Puu and Cat have been here as well. Maybe a few others.

And we can sense things just fine. In fact we appear to each other as in our original forms. Edwin is a 'thant, Silver an owl and Turtle, well a turtle. Jack is next to me in Hu form. TK seems to be present. The Meeps are confused and gather around me. Not sure they can sense anything but me at the moment. Interesting. Why can we?

Silver, "Welcome to control. I am actually using TP, the only form of communication here, but I will appear to be talking to you in your native speech. No, owls do not speak Hu, Ku, Ba or any other sen tongue but owl."

Turtle looks at me, "So, you have known about this place. For how long?" I am sorry, I have to laugh. A turtle speaking Standard is a very funny thing to behold. She gives me a nasty look in return.

I answer, "For some time. Just never needed to get here except to check on a few things."

"This is where you found out how to incorporate Meep and AuC to make our forms." I nod in affirmation.

"See Cat, you are still the smartest. She cheated."

"It would appear there was a lot of cheating going on." She is

looking directly at Silver and Turtle when she says this. Yeah, I long suspected them.

Jack is totally confused, "What is this place?"

Edwin answers, "This is where the multiverses are made, unmade, and watched. It would be good to give them the grand tour."

Silver and the others go. I don't need too. I have been all over the place.

Turtle stays behind also.

She looks right at me with her piercing eyes.

"Hey, those things are sharp. Watch were you are aiming them." I tease her in return.

"You changed the code." It was not a question. I shrug and nod.

"Seemed to be the easiest way. Only for our multiverse though."

"You know records are kept."

"I would. The changes might prove to be useful or prove to be a disaster. Either way the knowledge is useful. It is why we are here is it not." Again, not a question.

"As long as you understand that. Going rogue here would not be tolerated. Control can defend itself."

I shudder. As if my mother, the nasty 'thn, Terrors, etc. were not enough, Control can step in too? Of course. The answer is obvious.

"Control is sen or at least whatever their equivalent of an AI is. Has to be to take care of all this. She could simply rewrite me out of the code, as if I never existed. The fact that I still do is confirmation that I have not overstepped the lines yet."

"Yet, but you are VERY close. It was wise to let our 'thn do what they did. Very wise." Not that they had a choice.

"I thought about returning them to their original 'thn form too, but figured it would be more fun to see what happens this way."

"I see no problem with them in their new form. Our earths deserve to be protected from our mistakes."

"Mistakes? Were they really mistakes? Are there any mistakes in pursuit of The Question."

"Don't push it. They are returning. Play nice."

Silver coming in takes one look at me, then at Turtle.

"She gave you the talk." I nod, then smile. He smiles back. Looks weird on a large silver owl, but I get the message.

He whispers to me, "Good job, keep it up." He then takes off to be near her. They are together so much I wonder if in a previous incarnation if they were a mated pair. Certainly looks that way.

Marie comes up to me, "That was amazing. You already knew all this?" I nod.

"You figured it out yourself?" I nod again.

"How?"

"Wait, all will be answered."

"The Question." I nod, but do not smile. Not a smiling matter.

# The Question

"First some background information." Thus begins what some of us already know or have heard many times. TK101.

"You have now seen the countless multiverses in different stages of their life cycle. Yes, everything is born or created, lives and then dies, even multiverses. Likely even all of this too."

How many? I nearly faint from the thought. An infinity of infinities.

"For most of existence: There is a game."

"You can't win!" We all chorus in.

"You can't even break even."

"You can't get another game!" We finish it.

"Ah, unless you cheat of course, but . . . ."

"There is always a side effect!"

"The last two lines apply to all of us here of course, not norms. But let us continue." He can be overly dramatic at times. Turtle is rolling her eyes. Why does she put up with him?

He waves his right wing to indicate everything around us.

"This was all set up to answer The Question."

"What is The Question?"

"We will get to that, and the answer too. But that is getting ahead of ourselves."

"A universe/multiverse is created here, in this, for lack of a better term, factory. Built into each universe is the ability to divide at regular intervals, approximately every 31 millions years. This however, does not start right away. Things need to unfold and get set up first. No point in duplicated a hot plasma.

Once stars and galaxies start to form, the initiators start their work and the 'thn are born to assist. The initiators send out the pulse that starts the split, the froth event. The 'thn then ensure that the froth is propagated. That is their role. At least in the beginning that was it. The problem is that anything that can use TK cannot be duplicated during a froth event. Initiators are TK. Would not work so well if they were duplicated each time.

So, each 'thn when they reach the right age of understanding in their life cycle, what we call sentience, is now capable, with the assistance of a fluidic TK of high enough level, to make a copy of itself. What we call a baby 'thn."

"Why can't the 'thn just bud when needed? Would seem to solve a lot of problems."

"Yes, you would think that. You may have noticed that the 'thn can be a tad bit, shall we say, authoritarian in their interpretation of the edicts." That gets a nervous laugh of course.

"Besides, they are not the reason for existence. They are here to assist, not rule."

"Tell that to them." Another round of laughs. Okay, they deserved that insult.

"One TK is needed every thirty one million years to create a new 'thn to keep the numbers needed to assist in the froth."

"Wait, one, as in only one?"

He smiles, "That is correct. Only one is needed. A third level 'thn, that is a 'thn who already has a child capable of reproducing with assistance, can make a TK out of a sen norm."

"Sauron was sen? Could have fooled me."

"NEVER underestimate Sauron. Never. He knows exactly what his is doing and how to plan very long term. He is in many ways more of a threat than the 'thn themselves. The 'thn don't really think that hard."

"More muscle than mind."

"Exactly, but they serve their purpose. TKs are not the reason for all of this either."

"Surely not the norms themselves?" Hearing Alessa speak Standard without an accent is funny.

"Nope, they are servants also. Any guesses?"

The room is silent. Those of us who know the answer are not going to give it away.

"Stupid monkeys." George rolls over and goes back to sleep. Mouse gives him a head scratch and he starts to purr leaning into it. At least we are good for something.

"Ah, come on everyone. I know only a few in this room have experienced this, but it was part of everyone's training. What sen have we not included yet?"

"Greenman?"

"Close."

A bunch of us shout in unison, "OM!"

"Yes, the OMs. TKs are needed to make baby 'thn, but also to assist in the formation of the Greenman needed to propagate the OMs. They are in a sense the sporophytes for an OM so that the spores they



release can spread to available worlds and begin the rise to sentience again, to make more TKs, 'thn and the next generation of Greenmen and so on."

"Ah, wait, someone is missing. What of the 'thants?"

Edwin answers, "We are like the white blood cells most of you have in your bodies. We were set up to keep things running smoothly and clean up in the case something goes wrong. We also chronicle everything for the records. We are in the library right now. This is where all the information gathered from all the trials is sorted, cataloged and kept."

"So all of this was set up to answer The Question."

"Correct."

"Agghh, what is The Question?"

"Why."

"What?"

"Why." More frustration.

I step in, "The Question is why is there existence? Why do we exist? Why was all this set up?"

"And the answer is?" Silver is puffed up ready for an answer.

"That was figured out a long time ago." Not helping.

Turtle bites his leg. The only part she can reach in her current form.

"Okay, okay. I can't resist. Sorry. Myra if you will."

I sigh, "Curiosity."

"Wait, that's it? Curiosity? All this was set up, an infinite number of universes inside multiverses inside these structures, whatever they are, and the answer is Curiosity?"

"Correct."

"Aaaghh, who set this up anyway?"

"The Thirteen."

"Who are the Thirteen?"

"Eight of us are present." He turns to Turtle.

She nods and answers, "We have a quorum." At least seven are needed, but does not hurt to have one more in case there is a disagreement. They look around questioning everyone with their gaze to try and determine who the thirteen are. Well, Silver and Turtle are the obvious ones. Six more.

"Myra." I nod.

"Cat and Puu." They nod. Three more.

"George."

"Stupid monkey, why would we want to work." True enough.

A wave of energy passes through us. Rooi and Snap appear.

"Sorry we are late. Can't stay long. Magenta needs our attention."

"Now there are ten of us. Excellent. The remaining three cannot exist in this space as it was configured to allow us to be here, so we need not worry about them for the moment."

"Alessa and Flor." Some suggests.

"Close, but neither. They certainly would make excellent candidates though."

"Edwin." That gets a surprise from most.

"Ah, come on everyone. Has there EVER been a 'thant like Edwin? He is obvious."

"The last one is not so obvious. More of a trick actually."

"Just tell them Silver. They are not going to get it."

I say, "The Meeps collectively." A shock goes through the group.

"Correct." Turtle answers and bows to me, though I am the one most likely to have guessed it.

"But there are thirty six of them, aren't there?"

"True, but that is only because of bad timing on our part. Originally it was intended to have reached this point before the need to split." Makes sense actually. No way I would have gotten this far without them.

Rooi and Snap, who looks very cute in s/he smaller form, bow and pop out.

"They have their assignment. The 'thn are unlikely to be interested in Magenta anyway. Even they don't like it there."

"Wait, even if all thirteen were here, how can you run things. Only thirteen in charge of an infinite number of these rooms with an infinite number of multiverses each with a near infinite number of universes?"

Silver hoots a laugh, "Who said we were running anything?"

I add, "Who said we are not holding an infinite number of meetings just like this one right now?"

"My head hurts."

"Why are we here?" That gets a groan.

"Curiosity. No really, curiosity. We are about to decide the set up for a new multiverse. Collectively everyone here will make suggestions. Usually it is just subtle changes to what you have already experienced. That is why there are so many non thirteen present. We actually do value your input."

Princess ask, *Anything to eat?* That breaks the ice and gets everyone to lighten up.

"Don't worry, we will eat. Do not take it so seriously. We can't make mistakes. We learn from everything that happens. Why?"

"Because we are curious!" Comes a shout.

"Precisely. Let's eat then."